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# Mundiales

A South American History  
of the World Cup

Foreword by  
David Goldblatt

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## **The Battle of the River Plate Among the Tulips – Amsterdam 1928**

NINETEEN TWENTY-FOUR saw Uruguay not only crowned champions of the world but also lauded as the blueprint for all other teams to follow. Writing for *L'Equipe*, Gabriel Hanot furnished lavish praise on *el celeste*. He famously remarked that Uruguay had 'showcased both the beauty and effectiveness of a unique South American style'. Their performance was undoubtedly revolutionary and contributed to the global recognition of South American football. From 1924 onwards, all of Uruguay's energy goes into defending this reputation and a transition begins from the mesmerising flair and grace of the 1924 side to the dogged determination not to be defeated that will, perhaps, be more familiar to the reader.

From 'Arabic thoroughbreds', to borrow the metaphor of Hanot, to a less elegant but nonetheless still formidable animal – the *garra charrúa*, which has become synonymous with today's Uruguayan teams.

Fascinatingly, the charrúa were an indigenous people who inhabited parts of what is now Uruguay, as well as regions of Argentina and southern Brazil. They were part of a broader cultural group known as the Charrúan peoples, which included related groups like the Minuán, Bohán and Yaro, who roamed the land before the fateful arrival of European 'modernity'. There is significant irony in the way the charrúa grit (or claw, as *garra* literally means) is central to Uruguay's almost entirely Europeanised national identity, symbolising the resistance and resilience of the country's football.

After overcoming significant financial difficulties that even threatened to jeopardise their chance to defend the title at all, Uruguay made the trip to Amsterdam, where they would face all of

the difficulties attached to defending a title. A number of countries were taking aim at the champions, not least Uruguay's River Plate neighbours Argentina, whom many even made favourites for the tournament.

There was evidence for this from the 11th *Copa América* (still known as the South American Championship) in 1927 in which Argentina had triumphed in Lima against Uruguay. Without the talismanic Nasazzi at the back, Uruguay succumbed to the odd goal in five, with Nasazzi's replacement, Canavesi, scoring a decisive own goal in the dying minutes. The tournament was annual at the time and officially played under a league format but the decisive games tended to pit the grandfathers of South American football (Uruguay and Argentina) together, with occasional cameos from an emerging Brazil.

The Argentine press, in particular, delighted in circulating the idea that the Uruguayan players' legs had gone, that they were past it and that they would be unable to cling on to their title. Such was the interest back in Uruguay, *Mundo Uruguayo* ran a public survey as to who should lead the line for them at the 1928 Olympics. For a country with a population of just over 1.5 million, well over a tenth of the population went out to spend their hard-earned money to send a telegram to the publication and add their twopenn'orth to the crucial debate. They largely divided their votes between the main three candidates; René Borjas of the Wanderers Club in Montevideo (52,134), Pedro Cea of Lito (47,037) and another hero of the 1924 triumph, Pedro Petrone of Nacional (46,931).

The seriousness of the Uruguayan public was matched by the Uruguayan federation and the players. The organising committee took advantage of a short stop in Rio de Janeiro to practise on Vasco da Gama's pitch. Further along the trip, they docked in Madeira, once again taking advantage of every minute. Finally, once on the European mainland, they stopped twice more, in Lisbon and Le Havre, laying down their credentials with an impressive triumph against the French club, winning 6-0. Petrone bagged a hat-trick, albeit unbeknownst to the survey voters back home owing to the low profile of the friendly. They repeated the feat the following day, winning 8-1, with Santos Urdinárán taking his turn to score three times.

When they finally arrived in Amsterdam, no one from the host delegation turned up to meet them. Diplomats from the Uruguayan Embassy knew about national priorities, though; the consul was waiting to take them to the strategically chosen base in neighbouring Velsen, again sufficiently close as to be convenient but distant enough to allow the players some peace from the frenetic atmosphere of the games.

Within days of arriving, the draw was made. Uruguay were given a baptism of fire against the host nation, who had given them problems at the last tournament. The Dutch, for their part, were obviously looking for any advantage possible. They had learned that Héctor Scarone was playing professionally for Barcelona in Spain. The Dutch lodged an official complaint, to which Uruguay's defence was that the list of players they had supplied had been accepted and that it was only later that it had been deemed problematic. In any case, telling of the winds of change, the FIFA president, Jules Rimet (1921–54) argued that football had long ceased to be merely an amateur concern restricted to well-heeled gentlemen and that, given the development of the sport, the issue of professionals ought to be treated practically and realistically.

With the Dutch attempts to have Scarone thrown out of the tournament, the first match began. Just minutes into the game, the Uruguayans were bemused to see a 12th Dutchman enter the field – it was none other than the Prince Consort, Henry of Mecklenburg-Schwerin. Not noted for his self-control, he was so excited by the occasion that he decided he wanted to get right in the thick of the action.

The Uruguayans maintained their calm while this was going on. After numerous attempts to ingratiate himself with members of both teams (something he was presumably good at, having married into royalty), he was persuaded to leave the field and the game continued. Marked man Scarone managed to escape for a second to score after 20 minutes. Despite not shining, Uruguay were never unduly worried and eventually added the decisive second through Santos Urdinarán in the dying minutes.

Not long after the match, they learnt that they would face Germany in the quarter-finals. This was considered among the most

difficult draws, as the Germans, despite being rooted in amateurism at that time, were a completely unknown quantity due to their forced exclusion from the previous two tournaments as a punishment after the First World War.

When the match began, the German performance was outright rugged. They had obviously done some homework on the Uruguayans, as they appeared to deliberately target some of the main flair players with a systematic range of cynical fouls. It is to the Uruguayans' credit that they seemingly didn't get too drawn into this.

The pivotal moments came just after the hour mark. First, Uruguay broke through with a Petrone goal. Following this, it can only be assumed that the German goalkeeper Maximilian Kalb committed not just what in modern-day football we know as a professional foul but that he actually assaulted the Uruguayan forward Pedro Cea in a manner every bit as heinous as the infamous 1982 Harald Schumacher challenge on France's Patrick Battiston. Kalb was dismissed, leaving the already technically superior Uruguayan side with a crucial numerical advantage. Whilst the Germans pleaded their case with the referee, the Uruguayans engineered another opportunity and Pedro Petrone slotted away a goal that ended the match as a contest.

What didn't end, however, was the German brutality. Clearly piqued at the perceived injustice of the sending-off, the Germans continued laying into the Uruguayans with as much gratuitous violence as they could. Eventually, the leader of the team, José Nasazzi, was drawn into this, throwing himself into a particularly ill-advised challenge, which left both him and his German counterpart, Richard Hofmann, struggling to get to their feet before hobbling off the field. They were involved in a running battle all game. Nasazzi had accused Hofmann of unsporting behaviour, though how much of this was lost in translation is open to question.

In those days, official suspensions for foul play didn't exist. Nonetheless, the Uruguayan delegation were sufficiently switched on to realise that showing some remorse to the authorities wouldn't be a bad thing. Neither player had covered themselves in glory; to use a cliché, they had 'brought the game into disrepute'. The Uruguayan

FA offered to leave Nasazzi out of the next game as an internal punishment for the player.

The next opponents would be Italy. Once again, after facing the hosts and a dangerous wildcard, the feeling was that the draw had been somewhat unkind. Italy were considered not only to be a strong team but a particularly determined one. Since the previous Olympics, when the country was teetering towards fascism, the country had officially declared itself so and was, thus, keen to achieve national triumphs that would justify some of the lofty rhetoric coming from Il Duce.

It may have been a savvy move to show contrition for the behaviour of Nasazzi in the quarter-final, so as not to lose favour. Uruguay were greatly appreciated across Europe, particularly in France, who held the FIFA leadership under Rimet. However, being without Nasazzi was a considerable blow to the team on a couple of levels. Firstly, he brought balance as Uruguay's only right-footed defender at both the 1924 and 1928 Olympic tournaments, with Arispe, Canavesi and Tejera all being left-footed. Perhaps more importantly, he was the moral and spiritual leader of the team. His respectable but essentially demotic background gave him credibility with the rest of the players; crucially, his strong personality imbued the rest of the team with belief.

It is greatly to the team's credit that they prevailed without him. It is probably no coincidence that the semi-final was the only game in which the defence was breached twice but a rapid salvo from Pedro Cea, Antonio Campolo and Héctor Scarone saw the Celeste pull through 3-2 after conceding an early goal.

Before arriving on European soil, Nasazzi had shared his wish for an all-River Plate final against '*nuestros hermanos argentinos*' (our Argentine brothers). By dint of avoiding each other on the way through, Nasazzi got his way. The most played *clásico* (derby) in world football would be played out on European soil. The two teams' routes through to the final couldn't have been much different. Whilst Uruguay had shown the first signs of the gritty *garra charrúa* they are now famed for, battling past three particularly tough opponents, the Argentines' experience was in stark contrast. On the other side of the draw, Argentina racked up 23 goals in three games, destroying the

United States 11-2, taking apart Belgium 6-3 and then receiving a quasi-bye into the final by walking past Egypt 6-0. To prove how weak the Egyptians were, in the third-place play-off, the day before the final, Italy crushed them 11-3, barely breaking a sweat in the process.

Prior to the tournament, the conventional logic in the press was that Uruguay's defence (led by Nasazzi) was more solid than that of Argentina but that the Argentines possessed the more potent attack. The way the tournament played out seemed to justify that assessment. Whilst the Argentines seemingly scored at will, they had shipped five goals in three games against relatively poor opposition. The Uruguayan defence had conceded just three – and only one in the first two games when Nasazzi was on the field.

Owing to injuries in the Argentine defence, the versatile Luis Monti stepped into the centre-half position. He became known as '*el doble ancho*' (which translates, very clunkily, as double wide) on account of his ability to cover extremely large areas of the pitch, using his excellent reading of the game and his pace. Together with Luigi Bertolini, Raimundo Orsi and Atilio Demaría, Monti would become one of the '*oriundi*' who went on to represent Italy in their 1934 and 1938 triumphs.

The Uruguayans, much as in 1924, had been disappointed with their semi-final performance, despite winning. The sacrificial lamb on this occasion was Héctor Scarone, who, despite coming up with crucial goals at important moments, wasn't convincing in terms of his all-round play. José Castro replaced him.

The match was fiercely contested, with Uruguay stealing a first-half lead through Petrone before being pegged back by Manuel Ferreira in the second half. In the dying minutes of the game, Gainzarain found himself one-on-one with the Uruguayan keeper, Mazali. He had dribbled past Nasazzi but then, somehow, choked when the goal was at his mercy. Uruguayan accounts suggest that he was in shock at having got past a player as accomplished as Nasazzi. More likely, it was simply the pressure of converting with the championship at stake. Uruguayan keeper Mazali raced out to smother the chance and the moment passed. For his 'crime', Gainzarain would be dropped for the replay.

The game remained deadlocked at 1-1 after a gruelling 30 minutes of extra time and, afterwards, there was much debate about who had shaded the match. It is worth a mention that Uruguay had, in effect, played much of the first match with ten men, as José Castro was badly injured in the opening minutes of the first half and could barely walk for much of the game. It would be decades before substitutes were allowed, so the Uruguayan had little choice but to limp around and hope to somehow help his team without exacerbating the injury.

After the game, debate raged on. Should Uruguay have dropped Scarone? Might Uruguay have won it anyway but for the early injury to Castro? Had Uruguay been lucky to survive the late scare when Gainzarain had broken clear? Whatever the truth, the bottom line was that Uruguay had a second chance. Scarone was brought back in for the injured Castro. He would make the difference.

In the first half, Roberto Figueroa's opener for Uruguay was cancelled out by a Luis Monti equaliser. The defining moment came with just over a quarter of an hour of the match remaining. Scarone's controlled half-volley into the far corner condemned the Argentines to a defeat that would cause them deep frustration. Back in a rainy Montevideo, large crowds celebrated excitedly under umbrellas and bowler hats. Once again, the tiny buffer state had prevailed, consolidating even further an already firm link between football and the nation's burgeoning national identity.

After the match, there was a broad consensus from both sides of the '*charco*' (puddle in Spanish; pond, idiomatically, in English). The Dutch press lamented having to leave the stadium after such a magnificent battle. Even the pompous British press admitted that, whilst their own players may be quicker, they might struggle against the excellent technique of the South American sides. The Dutch referee, Johannes Mutters, declared it the best match he had ever seen. Luis Monti graciously admitted that the best side had come through in the end. With two world championships under their belt, and the sport professionalising rapidly, the Uruguayan delegation were left to deliberate over what their next move would be as discussions about a separate tournament outside the Olympics began.