

OH, SAN LORENZO

A JOURNEY THROUGH
ARGENTINE FOOTBALL CULTURE

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Contents

Introduction	7
1. <i>A la cancha</i>	13
2. We're going to kill a referee	23
3. The discovery of San Lorenzo	33
4. The Wembley of Buenos Aires.	45
5. Anatomy of a <i>cancha</i>	57
6. An <i>hincha</i> is born.	67
7. <i>Las barras bravas</i>	77
8. Coffee with the <i>capo</i>	87
9. Sun and shade in Rosario	95
10. School of the terraces.	102
11. A Dirty War in Boedo	111
12. We will return	117
13. The invisible neighbours	130
14. South America's obsession	142
15. Bring on the Brazilians.	154
16. You can look but you can't touch	169
17. The invasion of Marrakesh.	182
18. Battle of the <i>barrios</i>	194
19. Taking on the establishment	208
20. If we don't suffer, it doesn't count	219
21. The cup without a final	230
22. The folklore fallacy.	240
23. The one not jumping is an Englishman	249
24. A place to call home	261
Acknowledgements	269
Selected bibliography	271

Chapter 1

A la cancha

<i>Voy a dejarlo todo</i>	I'm going to drop everything
<i>Para ver al Ciclón</i>	To go and watch <i>El Ciclón</i>
<i>Yo pienso que esta noche</i>	I think that tonight
<i>Vamos a festejar</i>	We're going to celebrate

AS I closed the door at the foot of the towering apartment block in Caballito, Buenos Aires, I could already feel the sun beating against my back. Softened by an early spring breeze, it was a pleasant warmth. The streets were quiet with a distinctly 'Sunday' feel. It was Mother's Day in Argentina, which made it quieter still. The faint smell of *asado* – Argentina's national dish of barbecued meat – drifted on to the street, suggesting how most people were spending the afternoon.

The relative hush was punctured by the beep of a horn as a car rolled through the dappled sunlight. '*¡Vamos San Lorenzo!*' the beaming middle-aged driver shouted at me, flicking his hand back and forth through the window in that trademark gesture so particular to football fans of these parts. The mere sight of my blue-and-red-striped shirt was enough to provoke the commotion behind the wheel. One stranger greeting another with the kind of enthusiasm that only a matchday can give you.

Kick-off between San Lorenzo and Barracas Central was still five hours away, but the pre-match build-up starts

early in Argentina. For a nation of momma's boys and football fanatics, *el Día de la Madre* was a problematic item on the agenda, with fans torn between their mother and their team. Thankfully, smart diary management from my San Lorenzo-supporting friends Gonzalo and Eduardo had seen their family duties wrapped up by 2pm, so cold beers could be flowing within the hour.

I began my journey to Gonza's place in Villa Devoto, on the western edge of the city. It was the opposite direction to San Lorenzo's Estadio Pedro Bidegaín, known as El Nuevo Gasómetro, but the allure of drinks on his spacious terrace was too strong on a sunny day. After some refreshment, we would catch a fan-organised minibus to the game.

A year had passed since my last trip to Buenos Aires. Walking past Río Café Bar, a favourite spot from previous stays, I was relieved to see that the waiters in shirt and tie, the old wooden furniture and faded pink walls had not changed over the previous 12 months. In truth, they probably hadn't changed in the last 30-odd years, but in the places you love there's always a strange paranoia that things won't be as you left them.

My journey to Gonza's had got off to a slow start, with four failed attempts at topping up my SUBE transport card offering more reassurance that Argentina wasn't changing too much. In one corner shop, the friendly owner said the SUBE machine often ran slow or stopped working on Sundays. I wasn't sure about the technological validity of such a claim, but I liked the idea that the machine was just another worn-out worker who needed a day off.

Eventually I found a machine that worked and headed towards Villa Devoto on the number 105 bus, hurtling down narrow streets, accelerating into bends and screeching to an abrupt halt that jolted me out of my seat at every stop. If there is another way of driving a Buenos Aires bus, I'm yet to experience it.

An upbeat, shirtless Gonza greeted me at the door, where Edu had also just arrived. On my last visit, he'd loudly announced to his cats that 'the English pirate' had turned up, but I was spared the nod to my colonial ancestors on this occasion. Customary male-to-male cheek kisses were exchanged and we headed up to the terrace where the beers were opened. The hiss and crack of the can sent a wave of bliss through my body as I settled into a deck chair with the sun on my face and Argentinian *rock nacional* drifting from the speakers.

Gonza and Eduardo have been around the world and speak nearly ten languages between them, but as our conversation switched to football, any worldly sensibilities they may have picked up on their travels stayed well hidden. The pair embodied the cliché of the Argentine male: hairy chests exposed to the sun, one hand holding a beer and the other gesturing wildly as they despaired over their team.

'Today we have to win, *si o si*,' was Gonza's verdict given San Lorenzo's worrying position near the relegation zone. Three points was the only option on the table.

And 2024 was proving to be another tumultuous year for San Lorenzo on and off the pitch. A few days previously, a group of the club's *barra brava* hardmen (similar to hooligans – but we'll get to that) had invaded the training pitch to lecture the players on their unacceptable recent performances. Experienced centre-back Gastón Campi had tried to interject but was told to 'shut up and listen', as the *barra* and the players came close to blows. On the same day, the club's third manager in six months was appointed. It was now up to the 68-year-old Miguel Ángel Russo to steer *El Ciclón* away from trouble in his second spell at the club.

But Gonza was just as concerned with the journey to the ground as the outcome of the match. The buses organised by regional supporter groups, or *peñas*, have a reputation for unruliness and attracting more volatile elements of

the fanbase. Our bus was coming from San Martín, a working-class area outside the city's borders with a degree of notoriety.

'Going with these people is the riskiest thing I've done in the last five years,' Gonza had messaged me during the week. He had seen it all as a San Lorenzo fan, travelling home and away for every game in his younger days. But at 40, boisterous days at the football were becoming few and far between and his appetite for disorder had fully diminished. Gonza had barely been to a game since my last visit, but as always he was ready for action as soon as I said I would be in town for the Barracas game. Ever since we'd met a decade previously, he had assumed a kind of paternal role towards me with San Lorenzo and joined me for nearly every game I attended with an endearing sense of duty. Today would be no different.

Eduardo also brings generous *fútbol* guidance to our friendship. His extensive knowledge of the Argentinian lower leagues is invaluable when planning games to watch as a neutral, helping me navigate the always complicated and occasionally dangerous world of the *ascenso*. Thankfully, he had travelled with the San Martín group before and allayed Gonza's concerns about the bus journey. 'Maybe you'll find some *locos* at the back of the bus,' he said, 'but they're all good people.'

Two hours later, we were walking towards our pick-up spot on Avenida General Paz. The motorway acts as a border between Buenos Aires city and Buenos Aires province; or civilisation and danger, as more sheltered city dwellers tend to see the divide.

As we restocked beers for the bus journey, my unimaginative choice of Quilmes was once again mocked by the two Argentines. Like many 'national' lagers, Quilmes is at the cheap and insipid end of the spectrum, but to foreign eyes, the bold, elaborate type over the blue and white stripes of the Argentinian flag has a magnetic appeal. A cold can

of pure Argentina. Still high on my return to the country, I was easy prey for simple branding tactics.

* * *

Bom, bom, bom-bom, tish. Bom, bom, bom-bom, tish. We heard the bus before we could see it; a beating drum and crashing symbols edging closer, with singing voices just audible within the cacophony. When the vehicle pulled over to our spot on the pavement, confirming itself as our transport to the game, Gonza would have turned around and walked home had Edu not already vouched for the trip.

The rickety red-and-blue bus looked as if it had just emerged from a war zone. The entire left panel of the windscreen had been shattered, cracks rippling outwards from where a missile had all but pierced the glass. A broken windscreen wiper dangled vertically over the other side of the front window. Below, a battered metal bumper revealed its own traumas, jutting inwards from the blow of a collision, while gaffer tape forlornly attempted to cover gaping holes under each headlight. On the rusty red flanks, drunken passengers leaned out of the windows and waved huge San Lorenzo flags, which billowed in the wind.

We hopped aboard and received an enthusiastic welcome. Jorge, with his neat black hair and sunglasses was the *Presidente* of the San Martín group and keen to add an air of professionalism to the operation. I thanked him for his help in planning my travel and tickets, but it was difficult to chat over the hammering drumbeat and raucous singing coming from the back of the bus.

‘La banda de Boedo zarpada de gira, quiere cocaína, no puede parar.’ – ‘The gang from Boedo is on tour,’ went the song, ‘they want cocaine, they can’t stop.’ While illegal substances were not apparent on board, the booze was flowing and included some interesting concoctions. A large plastic bottle, cut in half and filled with a homemade cocktail, was thrust towards us through the mass of bodies.

Sipping from a sawn-off bottle is a familiar feature of the Argentinian pre-drinks, or *previa*, but the orangey mixture in this particular vessel was new to me.

I took a sip. '*Está buena!*' I said, wincing less than expected. 'What is that?'

'Red wine and grapefruit juice!' the mixologist responded proudly in his Lotto-made San Lorenzo shirt, which must have been 15 years old. Combining a carton of cheap wine with a fruity soda – typically from the brand Manaos – is a popular pre-match drink. As the cold, sweet liquid flowed through me and renewed my energy levels, I could understand why.

The cocktail washed away Gonza's inhibitions, while Eduardo had clearly forgotten his pledge to 'take it easy' after a heavy one the night before. Bouncing up and down, he belted out the words to an old-school San Lorenzo song, which felt particularly apt for the moment.

'If I were president, the presidential palace would be a nightclub,' they sang. 'And at the door a big poster would invite the drinker in. No waiter or counter, just everything filled with liquor' – a short pause – 'and the gang from Boedo soaked in alcohol!' they roared twice over. Beer sloshed from cans and the flag-bearers dangled out the windows, sweeping their poles from side to side as the bus roared down the motorway.

As a wild-eyed skinhead continued to orchestrate Edu and the singers from the back, I shouted through a conversation with Jorge, clinging on to the handrail so I didn't fall over every time the bus swung sideways to dodge traffic. There were now only 45 minutes until kick-off. The *previas* usually last hours and continue outside the stadium once the fans have arrived, so why were we cutting it so fine?

'*Día de la Madre*,' Jorge responded with a sage expression. Around 50 supporters were travelling from San Martín and he wanted to give everyone as much time as possible to see

their mums before escaping to the match. It was this kind of lateral thinking which had surely earned him the presidency.

Our chat was suddenly interrupted by the skinhead, who was battling his way towards me at the front of the bus. He'd got wind of the foreign *cuervo* and the next thing I knew he was removing his top in front of me. To my relief, it was just to reveal his collection of San Lorenzo tattoos.

In the centre of his back, a row of lettered drums spelt out 'BOEDO', the neighbourhood where the club was born and made its name before being controversially removed by the military dictatorship in the 1970s – a traumatic episode which continues to define the club. Next to the drums was a huge crow and underneath, '*Este sentimiento es verdadero.*' 'This feeling is real.' Given the pain he must have gone through for the sprawling set of tattoos, I didn't doubt the claim.

I thanked him for his display and returned to my lukewarm Quilmes. But he wasn't done with me. '*Veni, veni!*' he urged, staring at me intently before dragging me to the back of the bus. After squeezing down the aisle, the skinhead seized the drummer's sticks and demanded silence. 'We have an English visitor!' He announced in hoarse Spanish. 'And he will choose the next song!' The bus fell quiet. Suddenly in the spotlight, I felt a little embarrassed so I launched into a chant as quickly as I could.

'*Cuervo, sos mi alegriaaa ...*' I offered. 'Crow, you are my joy ...' It may sound somewhat deranged in English, but my fellow passengers lapped up the terrace anthem. They were screaming the words and jumping around me before I could even make it to the second line.

When I broke away from the crowd to get some air, I witnessed the other side of *peña* travel. The bus made a final stop for the remaining fans to board, and a small red-haired boy, no older than four, apprehensively stepped on board, hand-in-hand with his dad. He looked shy and slightly perturbed by all the noise, but was ushered down

the aisle like a VIP as we frantically swept the debris of cans and bottles aside.

The *Presidente* sprung into action, giving each seat a wobble to find the least-damaged option before frantically wiping down the surface with a tissue. The boy sat down, legs swinging below, as his dad laid an arm around his shoulder and sang censored versions of each chant in his ear. The bus to the game had its debaucherous streak, but the effort made to put the young family at ease was heartwarming.

I grabbed a window for the final stretch to the stadium, joining the line of bodies half-inside, half-outside the bus, flinging their arms out to the beat of each song. A man driving alongside our ramshackle mob rolled his eyes and veered away from us to another lane. A few drivers in San Lorenzo shirts beeped their horns in approval. As we entered the Bajo Flores neighbourhood and the Nuevo Gasómetro loomed ahead, the streets began to turn blue-and-red with murals and graffiti. One in particular caught my eye.

‘San Lorenzo must be defended every day, all the time, everywhere you go,’ it said. The quote belonged to Rubén Darío Insúa, a supporter, ex-player and former manager of San Lorenzo, who had left the club just six months previously. Today, in a twist of fate, he would be in the opposition dugout as manager of Barracas Central, plotting the downfall of his beloved club.

Our bus rolled to a stop. In the distance, the sun was dipping from view, sending a bright orange glow along the horizon. Buenos Aires is prone to a dramatic, fiery sunset. They seem to suit the personality of the so-called ‘City of Fury’ and its people. Bajo Flores is a poor, neglected area, but its lack of development means there are no modern high-risers to block your view of the skies overhead. Only the imposing silhouette of the Nuevo Gasómetro stood between us and the sinking sun.

On the streets, colourful swarms of San Lorenzo fans approached the ground on foot. When it comes to dressing for *la cancha* – the stadium – Argentines could not be more different from my British counterparts. At home, the ‘casuals’ style which once defined terrace trends still holds a subtle influence, with fashionable streetwear often favoured over club colours. Even those uninterested in fashion are usually wrapped in a dark jacket for most of the season anyway, keeping out the winds that whistle through our cold concrete stadiums. It leaves little opportunity for displaying club colours, barring the flash of a scarf or a shirt pulled over a hoodie. For some old-school fans, donning either item is something of a crime in itself, and may see you mocked as a ‘scarfer’ or a ‘shirter’.

In stark contrast, the Argentines dress themselves in every piece of club merchandise they can lay their hands on, with colours proudly on display from head to toe. It is not uncommon to see an official shirt paired with club-branded tracksuit bottoms and a training jacket layered over the top. Colour coordinated bucket hats are also popular, while bracelets, necklaces and any other accessories with the team’s badge or colours can be thrown into the mix. What the resulting outfits may lack in elegance, they compensate for in their contribution to the collective. The look of each individual is less important than what it lends to the overall image of the tribe; in this case, a sea of blue and red. Personal style sacrificed for allegiance to the cause.

The vibrant matchday scenes in Argentina always feel like the counterpoint to the dark silhouettes trudging towards the stadium in the paintings of L.S. Lowry, which depict the British football experience so aptly. Neither is better or worse (to my mind). There is beauty in Lowry’s panoramas, and indeed that purposeful march towards a football ground on a winter’s day, head slightly bowed, hands buried in pockets as you try to retain the heat you soaked up in the pub.

Likewise, stepping off our raucous bus into the warm evening air had its own sensory charm. The smell of barbecued chorizo filled the air as rows of ad hoc grills prepared the fans' favourite of *choripan* – a sausage sandwich – for incoming fans.

Over a nearby vendor's cries of '*chori, chori, chori!*', one of the San Martín *cuervos* leaned in to ask why I, an Englishman, had come here, and why I liked San Lorenzo so much. I had plenty of reasons to throw at him, from the community and friendship it gave to an outsider like myself, to the unique history of the club and its faithful, ingenious fanbase. I was drunk and I was gushing.

Hearing a foreign voice speak so highly of his club visibly moved the young *cuervo*, and when I finished my explanation I received an unexpected hug. As he pulled away, he looked at me with a wistful smile, gently shaking his head. '*San Lorenzo y las mujeres*,' he said, before taking a pause and repeating the mantra. 'San Lorenzo and women.'

I couldn't help but laugh. His body language and the emotion etched on to his face had suggested a more poignant comment was coming my way. And yet, his slow, sincere delivery almost made it sound profound. This young man, no older than 18 or 19, already had it all figured out. There were only two things in life that mattered. Both gave him joy, both gave him pain, but he couldn't live without either.

With my new, simplified outlook on life, I followed Gonza and Eduardo through the open gates of Ciudad Deportiva – San Lorenzo's 'Sport City' complex – where the Nuevo Gasómetro awaited.