

Luciano  
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**THE DARK  
SIDE OF  
THE COPA  
LIBERTADORES**

**Cheats, Corruption and Violence  
Behind the Legendary South  
American Football Tournament**



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## Chapter 1

# Black Terror

ALL OVER the world, referees are fans' favourite victims. The defeat of a team usually unleashes insults and perhaps the fall of a projectile aimed at the man in black. In South America, crowd discontent has unleashed true hell inside football stadiums, and also outside them. One of the most terrifying events occurred in Venezuela on the night of 30 March 1978, after Portuguesa FC and Olimpia of Paraguay drew 1-1 at the José Antonio Páez stadium in the city of Acarigua. Pedro Pascual Peralta opened the scoring for the home side, while the Paraguayan Gerardo Gonzalez got the equalising goal.

Up to that point, everything was normal. In fact, the game ended without incident. However, the final whistle of the Colombian referee Orlando Sánchez gave birth to a terrible story. Sánchez and his assistants

– Venezuelan Vicente Llobregat and the Peruvian Enrique Labo Revoredo – showered, changed and got into a car heading to Caracas, where the two foreign referees planned to board the planes that would take them back to their homelands. But, about three miles from Acarigua, the vehicle was intercepted by a group of Portuguesa fans. The three officials were threatened with firearms and pulled out of the car. Sánchez was dragged by his hair to a field, where he was handed a shovel and forced, at gunpoint, to dig a grave where the aggressors threatened to bury his body. Terrified, the Colombian referee began to dig a hole in the ground until several police patrols appeared in time to rescue him. The Portuguesa club had to pay a fine of \$5,000, and its stadium was suspended for a year. Sánchez never returned to Venezuela.

Some referees have resorted to an unusual containment mechanism in order to stop the explosion of a pressure cooker and to protect their lives, those of their collaborators and those of the footballers: simulation. Probably the most famous of the ‘stagings’ occurred on 2 August 1962 at the Urbano Caldeira stadium of Santos Futebol Clube, where the local squad faced Club Atlético Peñarol in the rematch of the 1962 Copa Libertadores Final. The white team, without Edson Arantes do Nascimento, Pelé, injured

in the World Cup in Chile that year, had beaten their Uruguayan rivals in the legendary Centenario in Montevideo, 2-1, and with a draw at home they secured their first continental title.

The referee of the second game, the Chilean Carlos Robles Robles, told his country's *Triunfo* magazine that, before the start of the match, a local fan entered his dressing room armed with a revolver, shouting, 'Santos has to win no matter what.' Robles assured that, calmly, he answered, 'To frighten a Chilean you need a hundred men, so go look for the other 99 you need.'

The game began and Santos went into half-time ahead, 2-1. But in the second half the Uruguayans brought out their well-earned brave reputation, acquired in the 'Maracanazo' of the 1950 World Cup in Brazil, to turn the score around through goals from the Ecuadorian Alberto Spencer (at 49) and José 'Pepe' Sasía (at 51).

The visitors' comeback drove the Brazilian fans crazy. It was said that the spectators had seen Sasía throw dirt in the eyes of goalkeeper Gilmar dos Santos Neves before he scored, something that was not noticed by Robles or his collaborators, to the point that they began to launch all kinds of projectiles on to the pitch. In a corner, a bottle knocked out the Chilean

referee. In the report he submitted to CONMEBOL, the referee explained:

Seven minutes had passed in the second half and in circumstances in which I had awarded a corner kick in favour of the Santos team, when I took my position near the goal, a bottle was thrown at me, which hit me in the neck. Because of this I was left semi-conscious and momentarily blind. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in the locker room surrounded by representatives of both teams. Because of what I said above, I decided to suspend the match because I had no guarantees to develop my mission. Brazilian officials tried to convince me to continue the match, which I flatly refused.

Due to my attitude, I was threatened by the President of the Paulista Federation, João Mendonça Falcão, who told me that if I did not continue directing the match, he, as a deputy, would have me arrested by the police. As I stood by my decision, he insulted me in front of my colleagues, [Sergio] Bustamante and [Domingo] Massaro, telling me ‘thief, coward, I can prove that you are a scoundrel’.

Two other people who had entered the locker room trying to change my attitude, Mr Luis Alonso, Santos coach, and the club president, Athie Jorge Coury, insulted me and said that they were not responsible for my life when I left the stadium.

Peñarol's players also received a shower of objects – rocks, beer bottles – and death threats from spectators, rivals and even some police officers who were supposed to protect them. In this dangerous context, Robles pulled an ace from his sleeve that would allow him to return home safely. After a 51-minute suspension, the referee returned to the playing field and gathered the Uruguayans Sasía, Néstor Gonçalves and goalkeeper Luis Maidana in the middle of the pitch and confessed to them that the match was already suspended but that the remaining 39 minutes would be played to defuse the situation.

'Guys, help me because, if not, they will kill us all,' the referee pleaded. The match resumed and, within a few minutes, Santos 'levelled' the score through striker Paulo César 'Pagão' Araújo. Peñarol's players hardly set foot in their rivals' half again, a fact that went unnoticed by fans, players and leaders of the São Paulo team, who unleashed an exorbitant celebration after

the final whistle. None of them, nor the journalists, found out about the staging. In fact, newspapers such as *O Estado* headlined in their editions the following day: 'Santos tied: champion of America.' The splash of cold water came hours later: with Robles and the Peñarol footballers already safe in their respective countries, CONMEBOL announced the annulment of the tie, ratified the visitors' victory and ordered that both clubs face each other in a third and final duel in Buenos Aires, four weeks later, officiated by the prestigious Dutch referee Leo Horn.

On 30 September, almost a month after the very serious episode and with Pelé now recovered, Santos crushed Peñarol 3-0 at River Plate's Estadio Monumental. The *Rei* scored twice and the other was an own goal by defender Omar Caetano. The Brazilians finally had their long-awaited trophy. The Uruguayan players, like the Chilean Robles, at least lived to tell the tale.

At the end of June 1975, the Chilean club Unión Española arrived in Buenos Aires with great conviction. Their 1-0 victory in the first leg of the Copa Libertadores Final against Club Atlético Independiente gave the Hispanic team an advantage that was felt enough for consecration. Coach Luis Santibáñez and his men were confident of obtaining



a draw that would enable them to celebrate with a lap of honour. But, in Argentinian territory, the Chilean delegation bitterly discovered that it would not only have to face a football team. Years later, Santibáñez related in an interview that ‘we stayed in La Candela – a sports complex of the Boca Juniors club that was located in the town of San Justo, about 20 kilometres from the Independiente field, in Avellaneda – and when it was time for us to go to the stadium, the bus was stoned.’ A Chilean leader asked to borrow a car from *Xeneize* player Ubaldo Rattín and went out to look for taxis to take the team to the match. ‘We went to a square and brought some taxis. Then we got some motorcycles to guide us, but they turned the other way. We arrived [at the stadium] just 20 minutes before the match started. We changed and went out to the pitch,’ he said.

Without having warmed up and being unfocused, the Chileans conceded a goal from Peruvian Percy Rojas one minute into the game. Despite the adversity, Unión Española managed to level the score after 15 minutes, thanks to a penalty taken by Francisco Las Heras after a foul by local defender Eduardo Commisso on Argentine striker Jorge Spedaletti. ‘When the first half ended,’ Santibáñez said, ‘from the stands someone threw a bolt that broke the face of the

referee [Uruguayan Ramón] Barreto.’ The projectile opened a deep wound on his left cheekbone. ‘He and his assistants said that they would not go out to direct the second half. We celebrated on the field, because we were 1-1 and we were champions.’

The joy was short-lived, because the chaos was not over. A group of ‘red’ people sneaked into the referee’s dressing room and ‘convinced’ Barreto and his assistants to return to the grass. ‘An Independiente leader, José Epelboim, along with other guys, slapped them on to the field,’ described Santibáñez. The Uruguayan not only reversed the suspension, but ten minutes into the match he awarded the local team ‘a non-existent penalty’, according to the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio*. ‘Unión Española held firm, without desperation, but this fan gang frightened the referees and, like any human being, Barreto was weak in the face of threats to sanction the penalty,’ added Santibáñez. In that context, Independiente rounded off a 3-1 victory against their intimidated rivals – and the intimidated ref – which forced a third decisive match in Asunción, Paraguay. At the Estadio Defensores del Chaco, the emboldened Argentinian team won a clear 2-0 victory and lifted their sixth Copa Libertadores.

Bolivia’s Club Deportivo Jorge Wilstermann fans were infuriated at Paraguayan club Olimpia’s 1-0

lead. The two teams were playing in a crowded Félix Capriles stadium in the city of Cochabamba that night, 29 March 1979, for the Copa Libertadores. Hugo Talavera's goal on 15 minutes practically eliminated the 'aviator' team, although only two matches had been contested. At that time, only one team per zone advanced to the semi-finals. In need of a draw and technically overcome by their rival, the Bolivians began to use force. The game became very violent, and soon resembled more a massive boxing melee than a football match.

Eleven minutes into the second half, with the score still 1-0, the Bolivians became embroiled in a pitched battle that could only be contained with police force. When peace returned, Brazilian referee José Roberto Wright took the red card out of his pocket to expel a single Olimpia player, forward Enrique Atanasio Villalba, and four Wilstermann men: defenders Carlos Arias, Miguel Bengolea and Raúl Navarro, and the attacker Juan Sánchez. According to the report, one of the expelled players from Wilstermann had launched 'a flying kick, looking for the body of the rival'. The unequal justice rendered by Wright for an 'everyone against everyone' fight angered the spectators even more, but the real disaster occurred a few minutes later when, favoured by the

numerical inferiority of their opponent, Evaristo Isasi scored Olimpia's second goal.

To avoid a thrashing, the coach of the Bolivian team, Roberto Pavisic, ordered one of his players to 'get injured', leaving the team with only six players. Since there were no more substitutions for the decimated Wilstermann, Wright was forced to whistle the end of the match 20 minutes before time because the Bolivian club did not have the minimum of seven players required by regulation. The story, however, did not end there. Hundreds of disgruntled fans invaded the pitch and ran after the Olimpia players and, mainly, the referee, to gratify their need for revenge for what they considered a tremendous injustice. The police could do little to contain the anger of so many people. Several of Olimpia's players received unmitigated punches and kicks.

Assisted by a handful of policemen, the Paraguayans managed to escape the mob and lock themselves in their dressing room. Wright and his assistants, meanwhile, had to remain in their dressing room for several hours because the stadium had been surrounded by hundreds of outraged spectators. As revealed by Wilstermann midfielder Johnny Villarroel many years later during an interview, the only way Wright would leave the stadium was disguised as a

woman. The Brazilian and his collaborators were taken to the city of Oruro more than 125 miles from Cochabamba, because they were told that a crowd of fans was waiting for them at the Cochabamba airport.

Because of this incident, CONMEBOL suspended the Félix Capriles stadium for a long time and banned the five players. Club Jorge Wilstermann played their two remaining home games in Santa Cruz de la Sierra and La Paz. They lost them, too. Olimpia, meanwhile, went on to the next round: they won the group, then the semi-final, and, in the final, lifted the Copa Libertadores after dethroning the Argentinian champions, Boca Juniors. Wright, meanwhile, would experience another very dark night in this continental tournament two years later, but that story is still to come.

The Chilean referee Carlos Robles Mella (son of Carlos Robles Robles, protagonist of the chilling final between Santos and Peñarol) put his right hand in his pocket and pulled out the red card to send off Waldir Sáenz Pérez, striker of Alianza Lima, for a strong foul against a Grêmio Foot-Ball Porto Alegre player. The expulsion of 'Wally', the top scorer in the history of the Peruvian club, added to the fact that the Brazilian team won 4-0 that night of 4 March 1997, enraged the 40,000 Lima fans who filled up the stands

of the national stadium to see their team play in group 4 of the Copa Libertadores.

During the almost half-hour that followed, the Chilean ref was chased by a rain of projectiles that fell from all four sides of the Lima arena, especially when he approached the stands. At the end of the match, Robles and his linesmen had to leave the grass under an umbrella of police shields, to avoid the torrent of stones and other objects that were thrown at them. Already in the dressing room, the referee encountered another problem: a huge portion of the angry crowd had surrounded the stadium to prevent him leaving. People shouted insults and made threats against the Chilean, whom they accused of being mainly responsible for their team's defeat. 'The fans wanted to lynch me,' Robles recalled later. In order to escape from the furious crowd that was trying to punish him, the head of the police operation suggested to the referee that he put on a white lab coat and get into an ambulance that would take him out of that cauldron. The referee willingly accepted the officer's advice and, thanks to the doctor's costume and the vehicle decorated with red crosses, he was able to escape from Lima's hell unscathed.

The episodes suffered by Orlando Sánchez, the Robles father and son, and Ramón Barreto seem like a

comedy compared to the tragedies that several referees experienced at the end of the 1980s, when drug trafficker Pablo Escobar Gaviria managed the Atlético Nacional de Medellín club. In 1988, the green-and-white team qualified for the Copa Libertadores as Colombian runners-up, behind Millonarios from Bogotá. The Medellín team had participated six times in the continental club competition (the last in 1982) but had never made it past the group stage. Aided by a change in the competition format – the previous year, CONMEBOL had increased the number of teams playing in the initial rounds – Nacional climbed over the first rung in second place in a group made up of Millonarios and two Ecuadorian clubs: Deportivo Quito and Emelec.

From the round of 16, the *Paisa* team's march was unstoppable, although it was suspected that it was receiving aid from the Escobar cartel. After beating Argentina's Racing and compatriot Millonarios, it was time for the semi-final against Uruguay's Danubio FC. In 2011, the *Pura Química* show on the Argentinian ESPN network featured a former international referee named Juan Bava as a guest. During the interview, the retired ref recalled how he, along with two other colleagues, Carlos Espósito and Abel Gnecco, were to officiate the rematch of that Libertadores semi-final

in the city of Medellín. En route to the game, a local colleague had told them stories about violence against referees in the Colombian league, including the murder of one following a match in a regional tournament.

The three Argentines felt intimidated, but these stories were only the beginning. ‘We go to bed and [at dawn] three or four people break the door, they split it in the middle, and come in with machine guns,’ said Bava. ‘They started jumping on top of the beds with the weapons.’ As Bava huddled in a corner, one of the intruders cocked a 9mm pistol and pressed it against his colleague Gnecco’s head. They identified Espósito as the lead referee and said to him, ‘Here is the money, Nacional has to win.’ The intruders, said Bava, left a box containing \$1 million. (In another interview, Bava reduced the amount to \$250,000, adding that the interlocutor had been Jhon Jairo Velásquez Vásquez, one of the cartel’s main hitmen known by the nickname ‘Popeye’ – well dressed with a suit and a tie.)

Before disappearing, the intruders told the referees that if Nacional won the next day, they would be free ‘to leave Colombia without problems’. If that wasn’t clear enough, they added, ‘Nacional wins or consider yourselves dead. Your life here is worth nothing, and in Buenos Aires it can cost us a thousand dollars each.’ In the ESPN interview, Bava said that after the hitmen



escaped 'it was six in the morning and Espósito was smoking and smoking. I told him: "Carlitos, this is an atrocity. I say this to you so that you have it very clear: if with five minutes to go these guys are not winning, I will go on to the pitch and I will send the ball to the net myself. Do you understand me? Nacional must win, Carlitos. I have two children to raise!"'

According to an article published by the news portal *Infobae*, the car that took the referees from the hotel to the Atanasio Girardot stadium 'left them more than a kilometre away. This forced them to walk under a merciless sun with suits and ties among the crowd, easily identified and threatened at every step. Already in the dressing room, they found a giant wreath hanging from one of the walls and a crucifix with three candles.'

That afternoon, Atlético Nacional won 6-0. The final against Olimpia of Paraguay, a difficult opponent who had already won the Libertadores in 1979, started badly for the Colombian club. In the first game, played in Asunción, they lost 2-0. The rematch was moved to Bogotá, the capital city, by intervention of the president of the Argentinian Football Association, Julio Grondona. Aware of what happened in Medellín with Bava, Espósito and Gnecco, and after another Argentine trio had been

selected to referee the last game – Juan Carlos Loustau, Jorge Romero and Francisco Lamolina – Grondona lobbied for the Estadio Nemésio Camacho El Campín. His pretext? Size. At that time, the Atanasio Girardot had a capacity for 36,000 spectators, while Bogotá's stadium held 51,000 people.

Despite the move, the Argentine officials were once again pressured by Pablo Escobar's associates. While the three were dining at the Hotel Tequendama, a man dressed in a black suit approached quietly, carrying a briefcase that he placed on their table. 'Colombia cannot lose any more finals,' said the stranger, referring to the fact that another club, América de Cali, had already fallen in three consecutive decisive games, in 1985, 1986 and 1987. Romero and Lamolina leapt to their feet screaming, intending to attack the intruder, but stopped short when the man opened his jacket to expose the butt of a pistol. The appearance of the weapon did not scare Loustau, who elbowed the intruder in the chest. The commotion attracted the attention of hotel security; the man took the briefcase and fled as quickly as he had arrived, although he managed an ominous farewell before disappearing: 'Here we win or you will not return to your country.'

The officials reported the incident to the CONMEBOL delegates, who washed their hands of

it: the game was played despite the threats. 'I became strong and led with dignity and respect for myself and the footballers,' Loustau said in an interview with Paraguayan radio ABC Cardinal 30 years later. The referee's courage was rewarded: the following year, he was designated by the Argentinian Football Association to work at the 1990 World Cup in Italy.

Atlético Nacional won 2-0 so the outcome was to be decided by penalty kicks. The Uruguayan goalkeeper from Olimpia, Ever Almeida, declared in a radio report that when time ran out and the game was level, 'the referee Loustau called [René] Higuita and me [the two captains] to choose the goal where the shots would be launched and which team would fire first, and he was crying. He told us: "I saved my family, now it's up to you."'

Almeida's first shot failed, stopped by Higuita. Then the ball found the net six times in a row, until Almeida made up for his error by stopping Alexis Garcia's shot. There was one kick left per team, and Loustau and his associates could barely contain their rattling nerves. The Paraguayan Raúl Amarilla shot and converted. Higuita had to score to equalise, and he did. The three Argentines breathed a sigh of relief. However, from there, the series took on the dimensions of a Californian roller coaster: Gabriel González

launched and the local goalkeeper saved. The title remained at the feet of Felipe Pérez, but he sent the ball to the clouds. Higueta blocked again, from Jorge Guasch, but Gildardo Gómez also failed to hit the 17.86-square-metre rectangle. The officials looked at the sky, trying to find some divine explanation for so much misfortune.

René saved again, for the third consecutive time, and for the third consecutive time Atlético Nacional failed, although Luis Perea's shot was saved by Almeida. Romero looked at Loustau, desperate: the torture seemed endless. Vidal Sanabria wasted the fourth shot in a row, and finally Leonel Álvarez put an end to the agony of the fans ... and the officials. 'Olimpia missed five penalties, Nacional could have won it easily,' Loustau stressed during the interview conducted by Paraguayan radio almost 30 years after the episode, perhaps to dissolve any suspicion towards the work he had done that night. However, the Argentine referee had to swallow one last spoonful of gall before leaving Colombia. He delayed his return to the hotel to retrieve two video cassettes that he had given to those responsible for the official broadcast, on which the match was recorded. While he was travelling alone in a taxi to the Tequendama hotel, two cars crossed the path of his vehicle. Four armed

men forced Loustau out of the taxi and into one of the cars. The criminals took the referee to an open field on the outskirts of Bogotá and made him kneel. While Loustau was begging for his life, one of his captors approached him and bellowed, 'You didn't fulfil what was agreed upon. We offered you a briefcase with the money and you left it. You didn't understand the message.' Immediately, the strangers returned to their vehicles and disappeared without harming the kidnapped ref. Somewhat relieved but still in shock, Loustau walked for a long time until he found a house, whose residents helped him get another taxi that, finally, left him safe at the Tequendama.

Atlético Nacional's success in the 1989 Copa Libertadores did not quench Escobar's thirst for victories. The following year, the night before a quarter-final match between the *Paisa* club and Brazil's Vasco da Gama (the rematch of a goalless draw in Rio de Janeiro), Uruguayan referee Daniel Cardellino received a phone call in his room in the Veracruz hotel in Medellín. An investigation published by the Colombian magazine *Semana* in 1990 reported that, after the conversation, Cardellino 'left the hotel and went to a cafeteria near where he was staying'. He returned to his room an hour later, 'visibly worried', and began preparing for the game, which resulted

in Nacional's 2-0 victory. That result qualified the Colombian club for the next round.

*Semana* learned that '48 hours after Cardellino arrived in Montevideo, he delivered a report to CONMEBOL in which he indicated that he had called the match under death threats'. He recounted being intimidated by six men in a Medellín cafeteria, one of whom, carrying a black briefcase, offered him \$20,000 to be 'impartial' during the game. CONMEBOL annulled the match result and ordered it to be played at a new venue, the Santa Laura stadium in Chile's capital, Santiago. Atlético Nacional won again, 1-0. In the semi-final, Olimpia of Paraguay got revenge, beating the Colombians in a curious way: Olimpia won in Chile, lost in Asunción, and reached the final in a shoot-out with 12 attempts and just three goals.

The most horrendous episode ordered by Escobar on the football pitch did not have to do with the Copa Libertadores but with a local league game, although with severe consequences for the South American tournament. On 26 October 1989, América defeated Independiente Medellín 3-2 at the Pascual Guerrero stadium in Cali. In the last minute, visiting player Carlos Castro scored an electrifying goal with a bicycle kick. But the referee, Álvaro Ortega, disallowed the goal, citing a 'dangerous move' by Castro on

an opponent. A few seconds later, Ortega whistled the end of the match, which sealed the victory for América. 'Popeye' Velásquez Vásquez revealed during an interview that he had been watching that match on television with his boss, Escobar. 'That day I was at the side of El Patron. Pablo was very offended and ordered Chopo [Mario Alberto Castaño Molina, one of the hitmen of the Medellín cartel] to look for the referee Álvaro Ortega to kill him.'

On 15 November, Álvaro Ortega and one of his companions, Jesús 'Chucho' Díaz Palacio, left a hotel in Medellín to do some shopping hours after a game they had officiated in the city. The officials were intercepted by a man armed with a machine gun: 'Chopo.' 'Get away, Chucho, this is not for you,' shouted the hitman. Ortega tried to escape, but a bullet hit one of his legs and he fell on the sidewalk. The assassin approached slowly, took his victim by the neck and fired nine more shots.

Ortega's death was a drop in the bloody ocean of violence and corruption with which Pablo Escobar coloured his homeland. In 1989 alone, his hitmen assassinated the presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán, detonated 100 kilos of dynamite in front of the *El Espectador* newspaper building in Bogotá, and shot down an Avianca company plane with 107 passengers

just because they believed that another candidate for the country's presidency, César Gaviria, was aboard.

After Ortega's murder, the Colombian tournament was immediately suspended and in 1989 there were no champions. The only Colombian representative in the Copa Libertadores the following year, 1990, was Atlético Nacional as defender of the title. The Colombian Football Federation did not present other teams in the first phase of the competition due to the suspension. By 1991, the climate of violence forced two Colombian teams that qualified for the Copa Libertadores, the staunch rivals América from Cali and Atlético Nacional, to play their matches outside their country. The first clash between the 'coffee' teams was played at the Pueblo Nuevo stadium in San Cristóbal on 22 February (América won 2-0), and the rest of the matches (with the Venezuelan representatives Sport Marítimo and Unión Atlético Táchira) were staged at the Orange Bowl in the American city of Miami.

The revenge of the Colombian crossroads took place on 31 March, with a new victory for the 'red devils', 1-0. The four remaining matches were resolved in two days (5 and 7 April) on the stage in the south of the state of Florida. América and Nacional survived the initial phase and faced Club Deportes Concepción from Chile and the Liga Deportiva Universitaria



from Ecuador in the second round respectively. The rematches of these two challenges took place on 25 April, but in the Venezuelan city of San Cristóbal. The two Colombian clubs triumphed and faced each other in the third round, first in Miami and then in San Cristóbal. In this case, Atlético Nacional were the winners, after a goalless draw, then a 2-0 victory in Venezuela. In the semi-final against Olimpia of Paraguay, the Medellín team drew 0-0 in San Cristóbal but fell 1-0 at the Defensores del Chaco stadium in Asunción, which determined their elimination. These six games played in Miami were the first of the Copa Libertadores that had an exceptional setting located outside of South America.