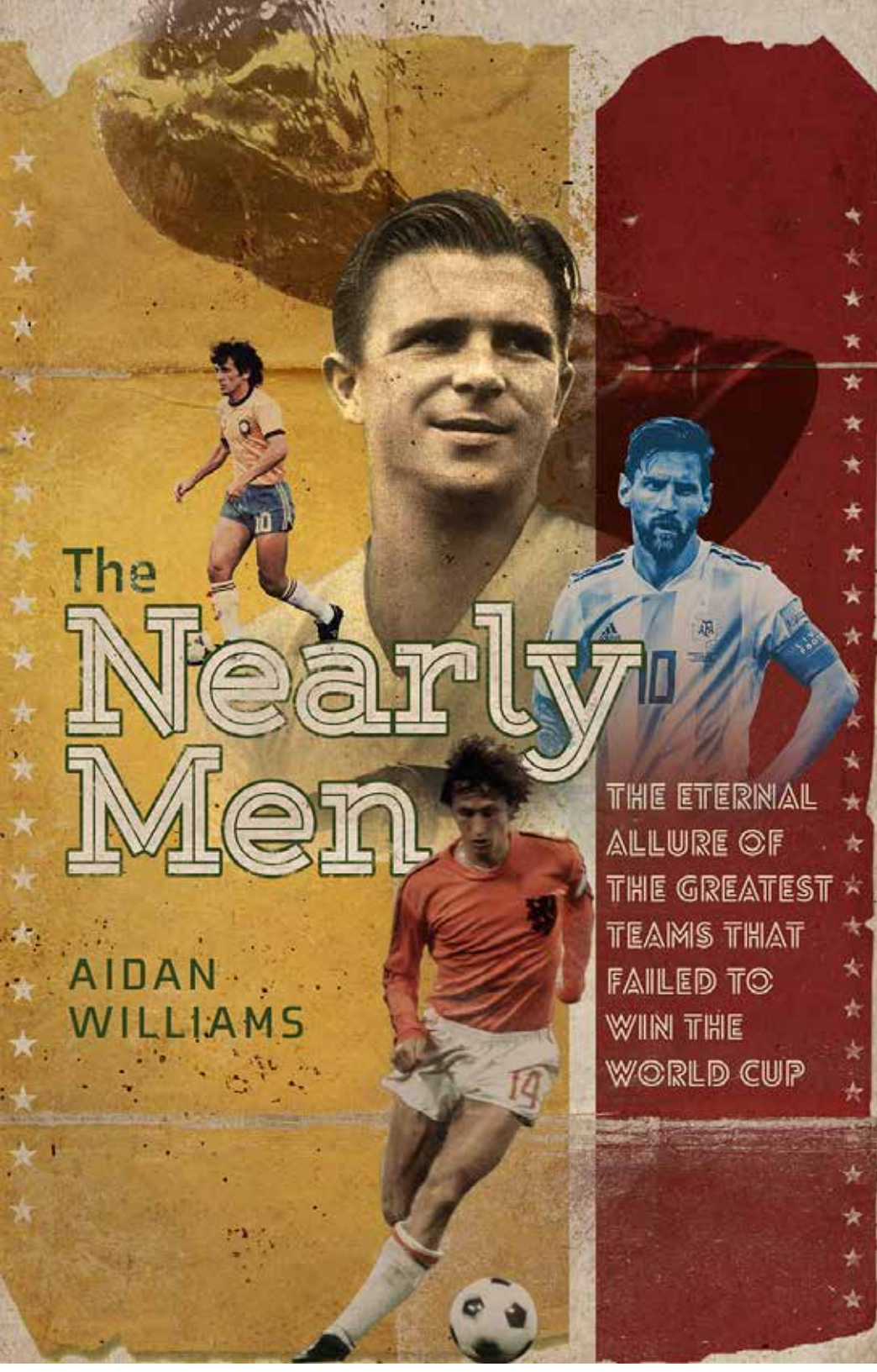
The
Nearly
Men
THE ETERNAL ALLURE OF THE GREATEST TEAMS THAT FAILED TO WIN THE WORLD CUP
AIDAN WILLIAMS

The Nearly Men

THE ETERNAL ALLURE OF THE GREATEST TEAMS THAT FAILED TO WIN THE WORLD CUP

AIDAN WILLIAMS

pitch

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Argentina 1930

If there is one game I would not like to remember, it's Uruguay-Argentina in the World Cup Final. Yet it always comes back to my mind. It's in my mind. I'd do anything to go back there and play again.

Francisco 'Pancho' Varallo

WHEN THE first World Cup was being planned for 1930, Uruguay seemed the obvious choice of hosts. They were the double Olympic champions from the 1920s, impressing all observers with their brand of delightfully technical football, as if from another world compared to the more prosaic European approach. Uruguay were the clear lone symbol of football excellence and progression, or so the common perception would have you believe. But across the Rio de la Plata, Argentina too were excelling in the world's game through the late 1920s and into that first World Cup year.

For all the claims of British football primacy in the early decades of the 20th century, the pompously self-imposed isolation of the home associations means we can't fully judge

what might have happened in those three pre-war World Cups had the British nations taken part. A strong argument can be made, however, that the football being played by the national teams sitting either side of the Rio de la Plata by the early 1930s was at least as good as anywhere in the world.

Tales from the pioneering days of the World Cup never fail to pique my interest and resonate with my self-declared obsession, but until looking into the subject more, I had been fairly fixed in my view that Uruguay winning the inaugural World Cup was the correct result. They had, after all, dominated the two preceding Olympic tournaments, laying sufficient claim to being world champions before the World Cup existed as to be allowed to add a pair of stars to their national team shirts for those pre-World Cup titles.

And yet the more I looked into it, the more I was persuaded that their fellow *rioplatense* nation of Argentina could and perhaps should have prevailed on the day of the first official World Cup Final. It wasn't simply that they were ahead in the final at half-time, making victory a distinct possibility. It goes beyond that, to a team that were as much a part of the international supremacy of football from that part of the world as Uruguay. Argentina could equally point to various outside influences affecting their chances in that epic first final. That clash in Montevideo was the culmination of a decade of development and innovation by these South American giants.

When Uruguay dazzled the world at the 1924 Olympics, winning the gold medal in spectacular style, a new and unexpected shift in power was made clear to all willing to take notice. It wasn't simply the size of their victories, more often than not by a suitably hefty margin, but it was also the manner in which they achieved them which made Uruguay stand out. The slick, highly technical style of play

was worlds away from the blood and thunder of the British game, but even when pitched against some of Europe's more forward-thinking nations, Uruguay's style had blown them away on the path to victory.

The South American *fútbol criollo,* a style built on individual flair and creativity, quick passes and rapid changes in rhythm, established itself in Argentina and Uruguay in the early development of the game in South America. It made these two nations not only the most advanced football nations on their continent but, as evidenced by the manner in which Uruguay stunned the old world in the 1924 Olympics, among the most advanced in the world.

In Argentina, news of Uruguay's newly elevated international status was greeted with a hint of Latin American pride but also with a sense of disbelief and no little envy. Equally, though, the prevailing attitude was simply that, had Argentina been there, it was they who would have won it. To Argentinian minds, there was nothing special about this Uruguay team. In what is the oldest international fixture outside of Britain, the regularity of their contests – sometimes up to five or six clashes a year in the 1920s – meant that Argentina had beaten this Uruguay team numerous times with overall honours fairly evenly shared between the two.

To now see Uruguay heralded around the football world stuck in the throat. No sooner had Uruguay returned from their Olympic triumph in Paris than Argentina were challenging the newly crowned champions to two matches, one in Buenos Aires and one in Montevideo. The challenge was accepted, perhaps unwisely, but it served a purpose for both. For Uruguay, it was a chance to confirm their status against their noisy neighbours, while to Argentina it was a chance to transport their local rivalry on to the global

stage; to demonstrate to the world what they felt was the real truth: that the real master of the world's game was not Uruguay, but Argentina. As Dr Peter Watson, Latin American Studies Fellow at Leeds University, explained to me, 'For Argentina there was no sense of inferiority but, if anything, a frustration at the fact that they saw themselves as superior.'

This wasn't just in footballing terms either. Argentina was the economic power, the dominant force, with Buenos Aires the cultural capital of the region, and Argentinians knew it. Whereas for Uruguay, a created buffer state between Brazil and Argentina, the cultural closeness to Argentina had led them to seek ways of developing their national identity, of proving they weren't Argentinian. Excelling at football was a prime means, and against Argentina it meant trying that bit harder against those they perceived as always looking down their noses at Uruguay.

In Buenos Aires, while missiles rained down on the Uruguayan players from the stands, the teams played out an inconclusive goalless draw, before a 3-2 victory for Argentina in Uruguay three weeks later. Point proven? To Argentinians, absolutely yes: proof of their belief that they would have won gold given the opportunity.

As if to emphasise the relative parity between the two, however, they would face each other a further five times over the remainder of 1924, drawing three times. The other two games produced more Argentine solace with two more single-goal victories, one of which became famed for the goal scored directly from a corner by the winger Cesáreo Onzari. Given it was against the Olympic champions, the goal became known as a *Gol Olimpico*, taking a gleeful dig at the Uruguayans who may have been the toast of Europe's football intelligentsia but who Argentina were

revelling in beating once again amid a raucous, rather hostile atmosphere. Of the seven clashes between the two sides in 1924 since Uruguay had been elevated to their lofty international status, Argentina had won three, drawn four and lost none against their bitter rivals. Just who was the greater team of the era again?

But if this meant that Argentina felt justified in their claims of supremacy, Uruguay could point to the fact that one of those drawn games helped Uruguay claim the title of South American champions in November that year, topping the four-team round robin held in Montevideo as a way of honouring the Olympic champions. This was an early indicator of a recurring theme which would become an intense source of frustration for Argentina. For all of their victories against Uruguay, when it came to dishing out the silverware, Argentina seemed perennially destined to miss out to their rivals.

Argentina may have claimed the 1925 Campeonato Sudamericano, but the behind-the-headline story was that Uruguay had withdrawn, meaning Argentina claimed their second continental title against decidedly weaker opposition, as the Brazil of the day would be classed in comparison to the *rioplatense* royalty. When Uruguay took part again in 1926, they won, claiming their sixth title, and so it was not until the 1927 edition when Argentina earned their most rewarding success to date.

Their 3-2 win in the pivotal clash in that year's tournament was a cathartic breakthrough for Argentina, not because they had beaten Uruguay – they were well used to doing that – but that they had beaten them to a trophy. What is more, it had served as the Olympic qualifiers with the predictable top two taking their place in the 1928 Games. Being champions of South America was all well and good,

but becoming a global champion, replicating what Uruguay had done with such style in 1924, was the essential next step.

A very strong squad was assembled to make the trip to Amsterdam, with the boundaries of amateurism pushed beyond its limits. Argentina were hardly alone in this, however, with the issue of defining amateur status having caused increasing problems for several years already, leading to the withdrawal of the British football associations from FIFA over the matter. While this would ultimately result in the creation of the World Cup to be first held two years later, it also meant that the 1928 Olympics saw a particularly strong football tournament, with Italy, Spain and France also contenders for glory.

For most, though, a South American final was the expected outcome and Argentina began in overwhelming form, swatting aside the United States 11-2 in the first round and Belgium 6-3 in the quarter-final. The Boca Juniors forward Domingo Tarasconi scored four in both wins, and then a hat-trick in the semi-final – a 6-0 thrashing of Egypt. As the goals flew in with astonishing regularity in Amsterdam, back in Buenos Aires the fans were captivated by news of the games, listening to loudspeaker broadcasts outside the offices of the newspaper *La Prensa* reading out the stream of telegrams sent by journalists at the Games.

Uruguay had progressed rather less spectacularly, but arguably against stronger opposition in overcoming the Netherlands, Germany and then Italy in the semi-final after a replay, giving the tournament the expected final that most observers had wanted. The 40,000 tickets available for the final weren't enough to satisfy the demand in Amsterdam to see the two most intoxicating national teams of the day, while in Buenos Aires the crowds stretched for several blocks around the *La Prensa* offices as the throngs partied

in between the intermittent loudspeaker broadcasts from thousands of miles away.

The 1928 final was another tight game between two well-matched sides, with Pedro Petrone giving Uruguay a first-half lead before Manuel Ferreira levelled five minutes after the break. A 1-1 finish in those days didn't lead to any sudden-death decider through the luck of a coin toss or a penalty shoot-out. Instead, the sides met again three days later, and again Uruguay took the lead in the first half, this time through Roberto Figueroa, while Argentina equalised more swiftly this time through the domineering midfielder Luis Monti.

Following Monti's goal, it was Argentina who had the better of the match, creating a succession of chances. Stern Uruguayan defence and an inspired goalkeeping performance kept them at bay, however. When the winning goal came, it was for Uruguay: Héctor Scarone securing their second successive gold medal, and sealing an intense sense of frustration in Argentina. Where 1924 could be brushed aside, this was a real shock to the system. 'A blow to the national confidence,' as Peter Watson described it.

This frustration led to the two sets of players, regular acquaintances, falling out in quite spectacular style. When the famous Argentine tango singer Carlos Gardel invited both teams to a cabaret show in Paris at the start of their long journey home, his attempt at enabling the players to reconcile backfired when fighting broke out mid-show between the arguing teams. As Argentina's Raimondo Orsi recalled, 'The *rioplatense* brotherhood went to hell,' adding that he smashed a violin on the head of Uruguayan star José Andrade in the melee.

It was of little solace at the time but the manner of Argentina's progression, and the *fútbol criollo* style of both

of the finalists, meant that the world was at last paying attention to Argentina as much as to Uruguay. The downside of this success, though, was the attention paid to their players from European clubs seeking to add *rioplatense* talent to their squads. Italian clubs were chief among them, and with the implementation of new allowances in Italy defining the Italian diaspora abroad as true Italians, the earliest examples of what would become a theme of player migration from Argentina and Uruguay to Italy began.

Many of these lost players ultimately represented the Italian national team rather than the countries of their birth, but such was the strength of *rioplatense* football that the increasing loss of players wasn't yet enough to significantly weaken the national teams of Uruguay and Argentina. They remained among the best in the world for now at least, though the ongoing drain would eventually diminish them both. For Argentina, the loss of the aforementioned Orsi, a hugely impressive winger, was particularly painful, and he would later be a part of Italy's World Cup-winning team in 1934.

Further comfort came Argentina's way in winning the 1929 Campeonato Sudamericano, beating Uruguay 2-0 to seal the title. With no tournament having taken place in 1928 due to the Olympics, that meant Argentina had won two successive continental championships, but with Uruguay having won the clash that mattered most, the frustration lingered on. With the newly announced inaugural World Cup set to begin just eight months after Argentina's South American triumph, the opportunity for Argentina to get one over on their rivals on the global stage was there for the taking. What is more, with Uruguay hosting the World Cup in Montevideo as a reward for their Olympic successes, and coinciding as it did with Uruguay's centenary celebrations,

the chance to rain on Uruguay's parade was one that all of Argentina desperately hoped their national team could take.

All of my talk of how good Argentina were in this era is not to denigrate Uruguay at all. They were an incredible team, gaining their historic victories through the perfection of a style of play that most simply could not match. The Uruguayan version of *fútbol criollo* was a more direct style than that developed in Argentina, more about using their speed of pass and movement to hit teams on the counter-attack than the more possession-based attack of the Argentine equivalent. In the earlier years of their rivalry this difference led to the coining of the phrase, 'Argentina attack, Uruguay score.' Through the years, the styles grew more robust, but increasingly technical, pacy and hugely effective.

History has given Uruguay a deserved place in the pantheon of great international teams, but the margins between them and Argentina were wafer-thin. They were so evenly matched, so familiar with each other, and both well used to winning, that the triumphs of one could so easily have belonged to the other. It is in this regard that I am seeking to highlight Argentina's successes in this era. While they had arguably trailed Uruguay at the start of the 1920s, by 1930 they were at least Uruguay's equal. World Cup history has a tendency to gloss over this fact, content with the apparently obvious narrative of the two-time Olympic champions going on to win the World Cup as the clear best team of the time. That wasn't the case in the 1928 Olympics, and neither was it true in the 1930 World Cup, with both going into the tournament with realistic hopes of victory.

It was a tournament taking place with a reduced field when compared to the 1928 Olympics, particularly when it

came to the European contingent. There would be no Italy, Spain, Germany or the Netherlands. There would be no British representation either, resplendent in their isolation when either England or Scotland would have been realistic contenders.

Indeed, this inaugural World Cup took place virtually unnoticed back in Britain, with only a short Press Association report on the final itself making any reference to the tournament at all, while *The Times* opted to ignore it entirely. Only four European teams travelled to Uruguay, a protracted process in itself, leading to a weaker field than had been hoped for, but as noted by Jonathan Wilson in his Argentinian football history *Angels With Dirty Faces*, 'Few doubted anyway that Argentina and Uruguay were the two best teams in the world and their meeting in the final seemed pre-ordained almost from the moment of the draw.'

Argentina went into the 1930 tournament with a squad that had gained in experience and new talent since the 1928 Olympics. They may have lost Orsi in the forward line, but exciting new young talents had emerged in the form of 21-year-old Carlos Peucelle, Alejandro Scopelli, 22, and the 20-year-old Francisco Varallo. This all added to the experience through the spine of the team from Ángel Bossio in goal and defender Fernando Paternoster, to Luis Monti in the midfield and the captain Manuel Ferreira up front. If the Olympic squad had been the strongest to represent Argentina up to that point, the 1930 World Cup squad took that to another level.

Argentina's World Cup began amid controversy and seemingly stayed that way throughout, with any and every incident giving the local population all the excuse they needed to antagonise the Argentinian group. Their campaign began against France, who had already played

their own opening match two days earlier, beating Mexico 4-1. The day before Argentina played France was Bastille Day and Montevideo's large French population duly celebrated with gusto, with many taking the opportunity to do so outside the Argentina team hotel, keeping the players up for much of the night.

The French players were no doubt tired after their opening match, but soon had injury concerns with Argentina making a very physical start to their World Cup in a fixture originally intended to be played in the huge, newly built Estadio Centenario. Construction delays meant the showpiece stadium was not ready for its opening day, so Argentina took on France in the more frugal and intimate confines of the Estadio Parque Central. Early in the match, Monti crashed into Lucien Laurent, the French forward famed for scoring the first-ever World Cup goal, injuring his ankle and leaving him limping for the rest of the game, a powerless bystander to much of the proceedings. Then the goalkeeper Alex Thépot, injured in France's opening match two days before, was hurt again, leaving his team battling on with a hobbling forward and a lame goalkeeper.

That they held on until the final ten minutes in the face of the tough Argentine attacks is impressive, but Argentina were not playing as fluidly as usual. In part, they were perhaps unused to facing the different approach of a European side, but they were lacking their usual zest in attack with Ferreira playing as a more orthodox centre-forward than he was usually required to do. Whatever the reasons, France held out until the 81st minute when Monti smashed home a free kick from just outside the box.

The French began to fight back though, and three minutes later had managed to set the winger Marcel Langiller clear through on goal. Only 84 minutes had

elapsed at this point but the Brazilian referee bizarrely blew for full time as Langiller raced through. Despite the obvious protests this caused, it was only after the teams had retired to the dressing room that the referee saw fit to ask the teams to complete the match. All French momentum had gone by then though, leaving Argentina able to see out the win to the backdrop of a hostile reaction from the largely Uruguayan crowd.

Such was the unpopularity of the result and the manner in which it was secured that several French players were carried shoulder-high from the pitch by spectators, while the Argentinian players were jeered and pelted with stones and any other object to hand. In the furore, Argentina even threatened to withdraw from the tournament, apparently only agreeing to remain in Uruguay once the Argentinian president, no less, had been given a guarantee of his countrymen's safety.

Argentina's captain Ferreira may not have played to his usual high standards but that wasn't the reason he would miss the next game against Mexico. Far from being dropped from the line-up, instead he had returned to Buenos Aires to sit a law exam; not something that usually distracts a potential World Cup-winning captain mid-tournament. In his place was the diminutive striker, Guillermo Stábile, who was fabulously described by Jonathan Wilson as, 'A short goal-scorer from Huracán whose thin moustache and narrow-eyed gunslinger's stare gave the impression that he regarded the world with an air of amused and possibly lethal detachment.'

Stábile had never played for Argentina before and arguably only got his chance thanks to Ferreira's inconvenient exam schedule, but it was an opportunity he would seize, ultimately going on to become the first-ever top scorer at

a World Cup. Against Mexico, played at the now-ready Centenario, he scored a hat-trick on his international debut in a 6-3 victory. The convincing win could easily have been more, with a missed penalty by Paternoster among the spurned opportunities.

Stábile was picked alongside the returning Ferreira, now in his more familiar inside-left position, for the final group game against Chile, scoring twice more in the first quarter of an hour. Argentina won this group decider 3-1, but aside from more Stábile strikes, it was best remembered for the mass brawl which broke out following an inevitably robust foul from Monti. His aggression provoked the Chilean right-back to punch him in return, sparking a rumpus with at least 30 officials from either side joining the melee on the pitch which had to be broken up by the police. Such was Argentina's unpopularity in Uruguay by now that the local law enforcement was also required to protect the team in their hotel.

Back home, the team's exploits in winning their group and securing a place in the semi-finals were far from unpopular. Such was the frenzy being built up by the news of their successes that thousands of fans made the trip across the Rio de la Plata to see their heroes take on the United States in the Estadio Centenario. The match, against a team Argentina had beaten 11-2 at the Olympics two years before, began relatively evenly with the USA twice going close through Ralph Tracey. But as soon as Monti had put Argentina ahead midway through the first half, there was only going to be one winner as their dominance grew.

Soon after his missed opportunities, Tracey was injured in a bone-crunching challenge from Alejandro Scopelli, but played on as best as he possibly could with what was later found to be a broken leg. With Tracey unable to return after

the break, the USA were forced to continue with ten men. When their goalkeeper sustained a leg injury in the second half, any faint hopes of a fightback rapidly vanished as the already dominant Argentina cut loose. Stábile scored two more, as did the inside-forward Carlos Peucelle, following on from a goal by Scopelli as Argentina hit the USA for six.

A last-minute consolation for the beaten Americans, scored past the goalkeeper Juan Botasso who had come into the team for the semi-final and final, was little solace for a well-beaten opponent. The Americans had also suffered from a bizarre incident when their physio dropped a bottle of chloroform with the resultant spillage temporarily blinding the midfielder Andy Auld. For all the American setbacks though, Argentina had dominated the game to such an extent, their skill and technical ability simply overwhelming their opponents at will, that their place in the final was just reward.

They remained the arch-villains for the home fans, however, with the Uruguayan newspaper *El Diario* noting that the Americans had been truly sporting, 'Refusing to lose their temper in spite of the continued fouls of the Argentina players.' Argentina were undoubtedly a tough, rough team, but they were also technically excellent – both qualities equally attributable to their Uruguayan rivals.

The hosts played their own semi-final the next day in the same stadium, and anything Argentina could do Uruguay could match as the 6-1 score was repeated as Yugoslavia were eased past. Two spectacular performances from the two great national teams of the day ensured the final that all had expected.

Thousands more packed on to a fleet of ships crossing from Buenos Aires to be in Montevideo for this highly anticipated clash, sent off by a huge farewell party lining

the docks with shouts of 'Argentina si! Uruguay no!' Many of those ships would be unable to reach Uruguay though, having to sit out some heavy fog before safely continuing and arriving too late for the match. Offices in the Argentinian capital closed for the afternoon to allow everyone to listen in, this final being played on a Wednesday afternoon rather than a weekend, many of whom congregated outside the newspaper offices again in what was becoming a tradition.

In Montevideo, the stadium gates were opened at eight in the morning and the stands were full to bursting by midday, well ahead of the kick-off at 2.15pm and well beyond the official 68,000 capacity. There is a magnificent aerial photograph taken of the swamped approaches to the stadium, full of fans making their way for the big occasion, taken during the morning, with the stands clearly almost full already.

As the atmosphere bristled, so too did various other factors. Amid fears of safety, all fans entering the stadium were checked for firearms and other weapons, as were all Argentinians who did make it across the Rio de la Plata by boat, with some reports citing a significant number of confiscated revolvers from those landing in the Uruguayan capital. The referee, Belgian John Langenus, was so rapt by what he termed a 'genuine fear' for his and his linesmen's safety that he only agreed to take charge on condition that all of the officials were escorted afterwards by mounted police straight to their ship, due to depart that evening.

Relationships between the two teams had been strained since that explosive 1928 Olympic final, and this rematch – the 111th *rioplatense* derby – would be no different. The first manifestation of this was slightly comical with both teams insistent on using their own ball for the final. Thankfully, a suitable compromise was reached, with the Argentinian

ball used for the first half and the Uruguayan for the second. More sinister, and significantly more disruptive to Argentinian preparations, were the death threats directed at the hugely influential Luis Monti and his family in the event of a victory for his nation.

Monti was a forceful character, difficult to intimidate on the football field either physically or emotionally, but this was on another level altogether. At first, he understandably refused to play for fear of the consequences of winning. This caused huge dismay in the Argentina camp on a personal and a footballing level. Purely in football terms, the fact that the obvious replacement for Monti, the experienced Adolfo Zumelzu, was injured compounded matters. Plans were hatched to play the inexperienced defender Alberto Chividni in Monti's midfield role only for Monti to declare on the morning of the final, after a night of soul-searching, that he would play after all. Whether this was a personal decision, or one made under the duress of the Argentinian football authorities, is unclear. He took the field in body, but played in a manner that belied the fear he held within, one team-mate describing his performance as 'paralysed': an intimidating man playing under huge intimidation.

For their part, Uruguay were without one of their principal strikers, Peregrino Anselmo, who had scored three goals in the tournament up to then. A bout of illness for Anselmo brought a recall for Héctor Castro, who had played and scored in the opening game in Anselmo's place but had not been selected since. He is notable for having lost most of one arm in a childhood accident, but by the end of the day he would have his place in history for other reasons.

The game began in a hostile manner on and off the pitch, with no quarter being given in many brutally robust challenges. As the home side aimed to unsettle Argentina

physically, so the crowd's hostility was also affecting the opposing players. 'The stadium was full and there was no barrier between the crowd and the players,' recalled the striker Francisco Varallo. 'We were afraid they would kill us.'

Uruguay took an early lead, with the Argentinian ball, when a blocked shot fell to Castro who set up Pablo Dorado to smash a ferocious shot under the body of Botasso in Argentina's goal. If Argentina had been unsettled up to this point, this seemed to sting them into action, an equaliser coming eight minutes later when Ferreira released Peucelle on the right, who flew past a startled defender and sent a fierce shot into the far corner of the goal.

Shortly before half-time, a long pass from Monti was uncharacteristically misjudged by the usually excellent Uruguayan defender José Nasazzi, allowing Stábile to score his eighth goal of the World Cup. From chaotic beginnings, Argentina had not only settled but become dominant, establishing the lead their play deserved and going into the break well in control despite their issues and the severely hampered performance of Monti in the heart of their midfield.

Argentina had suffered several injuries in a bruising first half, however, with Uruguay intent on intimidation of the more usual footballing variety with their physicality. Both Botasso and Juan Evaristo also had knocks, while Varallo would injure himself soon after the restart. In addition, such were the effects of the hostility from the stands that the defender José Della Torre told his team-mates at the interval, despite Argentina leading in the World Cup Final, 'If we win, this crowd will tear us apart.'

But as the second half began, it was Argentina who had the chances to extend their lead: Stábile missing a decent

opportunity and then Varallo firing a looping shot which hit the angle of post and bar. Not only had his chance of personal glory been thwarted, but in taking this shot Varallo aggravated the knee injury that had kept him out of the semi-final and had nearly prevented him from taking part in the final. Now utterly injured, he spent the next part of the match ineffectively out of the way on the wing before having to go off altogether, unable to walk.

A goal then would have changed everything, putting Argentina well within reach of victory, but instead it was the moment that fate pointed its fickle finger towards Uruguay. Instead of going 3-1 down, Uruguay had soon levelled the scores at 2-2. That equaliser came 12 minutes into the second half when Héctor Scarone looped a ball over the full-backs Della Torre and Paternoster to find Uruguay's top scorer at the finals, Pedro Cea, who tapped in.

Uruguay's third had come when the soon-to-depart Varallo had lost possession, leading to Santos Iriarte scoring. Héctor Castro added the *coup de grâce* in the closing moments, beating Della Torre to Dorado's cross and heading over Botasso for Uruguay's fourth.

When the referee signalled the end of the game, it also indicated, yet again, that, for all of Argentina's wins over Uruguay at other times, when it came to handing out the global medals and trophies destiny was not on their side. A celebratory pitch invasion was all the excuse needed for the referee Langenus to make his planned swift exit, while the victorious players were carried from the pitch by their adoring fans. The joyous mood of the hosts extended into the following day which was declared a public holiday in Uruguay in celebration of their team's achievements, with the players each rewarded with a house gifted by the state.

In Buenos Aires, though, the mood was darker. A throng of angered fans threw stones at the Uruguayan embassy late that night, while there were several other flashpoints as disappointment turned to despair. Some Uruguayan expats in Buenos Aires were enjoying their victory in the city streets, but reports of gunfire and police dispersals showed that those celebrations were perhaps ill-advised in the midst of a disappointed nation. Where pre-match there had been joyful, hopeful marches and flag waving, now the Argentinian marches took on a more funereal air, with flags bowed as if in mourning.

The fallout was not restricted to the fans, however. The Argentinian football association broke off official relations with their Uruguayan counterparts in a fit of pique, in large part due to the intimidatory tactics of Uruguay's players, officials and media. As noted by Argentina's *El Grafico* afterwards, 'The Belgian referee Langenus let the Uruguayans go unpunished with violent challenges, while the Argentinians were doing what had been previously agreed, not to make violent fouls and use fair play.' The report went on to highlight several other factors, 'I also complain about the off-pitch behaviour of the Uruguayans, threatening players with anonymous calls and letters during and after the game against France, the press articles that brought Monti's morale down, and the mistake of the delegates that forced him to play, and that picked an injured Varallo over a fit Scopelli.' A post-match report in *El Grafico* lamented Monti's contributions in the final, saying the great midfielder 'was standing, literally soulless, without being the great playmaker that in normal circumstances he would have been, in the middle of the park'.

It is clear that the much-diminished effectiveness of one of their most influential players had a deep impact

on proceedings. Had the death threats directed his way never occurred, would Argentina have been so physically dominated in the match? Would his influence on the play have crafted more opportunities for Argentina to build their lead? We will never know, but it seems inconceivable that Argentina would not have produced a more effective performance, and would have dished out as much physicality as they took, had Monti been at full tilt.

Other critics scathingly turned their anger on to those they perceived as having let Argentina down. *La Prensa*'s comment noted, 'Argentina teams sent abroad to represent the prestige of the nation in any form of sport should not be composed of men who have anything the matter with them. We don't need men who fall at the first blow, who are in danger of fainting at the first onslaught even if they are clever in their footwork.'

This astonishing reaction reveals the degree to which the defeat prompted a national analysis about why they lost. The question became not 'Why did we lose a football match?' but more 'What is it about our nation that is failing us?' With Monti, the symbol of Argentinian power, the player who was supposed to be there to impose that sense of power over Uruguay, resolutely failing to do so in the final, the soul-searching led to questions of virility. 'It's about manliness, bravery, strength, fitness, all those masculine characteristics,' Dr Peter Watson explained. 'Are we really man enough? Are we fit enough or strong enough? We haven't gained that sense of national discipline that's needed for success.'

Incidents such as the disorder around the Uruguayan embassy in Buenos Aires simply added to this, leading to questioning whether it revealed a deeper malaise in how Argentinian people are. Forgetting how well they had played

to reach the final, instead the unexpected, shocking defeat to a perceived inferior nation left Argentinians focusing on the fact that they had failed when it mattered most. 'They looked at it as though questioning if this was a war, a battle when it really mattered, is that where we also fail?' added Watson. With national representation at stake, the idea of sport as war by other means was one that resonated.

The bitter sense of loss was heightened by the swift break-up of the team. Eight of the players who took the field in Argentinian stripes in that 1930 final never played for the national team again. The loss of players to Europe, with the exodus to Italy in particular continuing apace, left Argentina increasingly unable to cope with the repeated talent drain. Most significantly, Luis Monti left to join Juventus following the World Cup.

He played again for Argentina once more in 1931 but once established in Italy, and with the impracticalities of playing for a nation thousands of miles away, Monti was soon playing for Italy instead. His unique place in history is to be the only player to take the field in two successive World Cup finals for different nations. That he would win with Italy in 1934 – along with two other Argentinians – where he had failed with Argentina in 1930, merely added to the disappointment.

Gone, too, was Guillermo Stábile, who had never played for Argentina prior to this World Cup and never played for them again after it. Having scored eight goals in his four appearances, he left Argentina for Italy, to Genoa and Napoli, leaving his legacy as a remarkable World Cup statistic, but a symbol of the opportunity missed in 1930. Beyond the sporting impact, these departures raised questions around immigrants, about whether the sons of migrants so prevalent in society, and in the national football

team, were truly Argentine and, by extension, whether they gave their all for Argentina. Seeing them succeed elsewhere merely enhanced this view.

While Argentina, unlike Uruguay, did go to the 1934 World Cup, they were severely weakened by that stage, losing to Sweden in the first round; a shadow of the team who went so close to glory in 1930. They soon entered a period of international isolation during which a developing professionalism and their own *la nuestra* style emerged. Argentina would become increasingly bolstered with a sense of self-confidence, devoid of the comparison of meaningful international competition beyond the Campeonato Sudamericano. Victory in the 1957 Sudamericano sent Argentina into their next World Cup appearance, in 1958, with a casual expectation of success.

They ran into their awakening in the form of a crushing defeat by Czechoslovakia that demonstrated just how far both the delusions of grandeur had risen and their international standing had slipped. *La nuestra*, a style of extravagant skill that Argentina had stubbornly clung to, may have lived on as the ideal all Argentina longed for, but pragmatism and *anti-fútbol* took over, before the rise of idealism under César Luis Menotti finally brought Argentina to the World Cup summit they yearned for in 1978.

That long-awaited glory could so easily have come nearly half a century earlier in the very first World Cup. The pain may have dwindled to nothing as the memories of 1930 fade as much as the grainy images of those pioneering days. But for those whose time that was, it was a pain that never left them. In an era when Uruguay gained international acclaim, the sense that Argentina were at least their equal was an itch that the country's teams of the day remained unable to scratch. For all of the regular victories over Uruguay, to

lose out in both of the global titles the two contested was an enduring frustration.

The clear sense that Argentina had been the best side in the 1930 World Cup, and indeed for much of the final until injury took its toll, is a view that is frequently overlooked when the history of the competition is told. Some 80 years after that disappointment, the striker Francisco Varallo remained convinced his side would have won, even with the handicap of the understandable loss of focus and influence of Monti, were it not for the injuries leaving them undermanned at a critical time, 'I still remember it so well and it makes me so angry. I still wonder how we let it slip … In my whole life I've never felt such a bitter pain as losing that final.'

Just how different may Argentinian and world football history have been had that match, the biggest match there had ever been at that time, gone Argentina's way? 'The thing is that we were winning comfortably, really, really comfortably,' recalled Varallo only months before his death in 2010. 'At half-time the score was 2-1 to us, but it could have been more. We were making them dance.'