URUGUAY

FOOTBALL'S FIRST GLOBAL POWER
1918-1930

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pitch

Contents

Prologue: New Eras

JUST PAST midday on 10 November 1917, the Parque Pereira hummed with anticipation. Thousands of fans shuffled through the gates, people young and old, from every class and gender. They had waited all week for this. For a few hours on a Sunday afternoon they could escape the routines of daily life, could feel something alongside strangers with whom they shared an obsession. An obsession that stretched far beyond Montevideo, reaching every corner of the interior where the people moved to the same sporting rhythm. Uruguay had surrendered its soul to football. By 3pm, more than 30,000 spectators crammed into the ground, a record domestic attendance. They had come for the *Clásico*: Nacional versus Peñarol. And the stakes had never been higher.

Three weeks earlier, more than 50,000 people had gathered on this same site for a very different purpose. Uruguay, *La Celeste* (the Sky Blues), had defeated Argentina to win their second Campeonato Sudamericano (today's Copa América), confirming their position as the dominant power in South American football. The victory marked the culmination of two decades of transformation: a strange, so-called English game adopted, nationalised, democratised. Uruguayans had not merely embraced football; they had turned it into something uniquely their own.

By reshaping the game, Uruguay had reshaped itself. The era of civil war lay deep in the past. By 1904, the country had secured stability after decades of upheaval. For the first time, Uruguay stood unified. Through football, this young nation of barely 1.5 million souls could step from the shadows of its giant neighbours, Brazil and Argentina.

To achieve this, they forged a distinct footballing identity. A national style developed through homegrown players and teams, then codified with the arrival of John Harley in 1909. At Peñarol, the Scottish centre-half – a central midfielder in the 2-3-5 formation – taught a refined passing game, which soon fused with the improvised daring of Uruguay's streets and vacant lots. This style reached early perfection with the 1912 national team led by José Piendibene, the withdrawn, ball-playing centre-forward. A school equally elegant, creative and formidable.

That Uruguayan school of play was forged through the game's democratisation. The process was led by Montevideo's River Plate; the loud, working-class team that rose to the summit of national football and made the ruling class squirm. Founded in the capital's port district in 1902, they drew players from the docks and tenements: newspaper vendors, stevedores and labourers, mostly sons of immigrants. They showed what was possible, a team built on the collective, on mutual support, with craft, daring and a combative edge. They pointed to where football was heading. A path first laid by Peñarol in the railway workshops, and later consolidated by Nacional when it opened its doors to all classes in 1911.

By the time the 1912 team came into their prime, the game embodied radical reformer president José Batlle y Ordóñez's citizen-worker dream, in which those from below could shape the national story. Yet this democratic vision remained profoundly gendered. The pitch was the arena where working-class men claimed national belonging through physical prowess and collective loyalty. Women filled the stands and cheered the triumphs, but the game's myth-making machinery centred on men's bodies, men's achievement, men's heroism.

Inside-forward Héctor Scarone was the latest incarnation of the Uruguayan national football hero. At 19, scorer of the winning goal in the 1917 Campeonato decider, he was already celebrated across the nation. *El Rasquetita* (the Little Scraper), technically exquisite and determined, was Uruguay's citizen

ideal made flesh. The son of immigrants had become the face of the republic.

But today, unity dissolved. Today was about club, not country. Nacional and Peñarol, a rivalry burning deeper than any national triumph. Everything that had unified them three weeks earlier, the collective joy, the shared victory, now drove them apart. The *Clásico* was all that mattered.

Nacional needed only a draw to secure a historic third consecutive league title. They had the chance to achieve what had never been done before, something Peñarol in 1902 and River Plate in 1915 couldn't manage: the definitive claim to the Copa Uruguaya. For Peñarol, this was about pride, about spoiling the party. The tension was palpable. Supporters pressed against the fences, their voices hoarse before kick-off.

The referee's whistle pierced the air. From the opening minutes, the famed Uruguayan combinations vanished. This was the *Clásico* of old hatreds and fierce tackles, an ideal surrendered to rivalry. Nacional sat deep, content with the draw. Peñarol pushed forward desperately.

Leading the *Aurinegro* charge was Isabelino Gradín. One of Uruguay's pioneering Black footballers, he showed every Afro-Uruguayan that they too belonged in the nation's story. The attacker fought tirelessly, twisting past defenders only to be hacked down time and again, his shots whistling past the post. Centre-half Juan Delgado, the country's first Black pioneer, threw himself into every challenge and moved the ball with precision. Yet José Piendibene was strangely anonymous. Abdón Porte, Nacional's defensive anchor, completely nullified Peñarol's star forward. Some in the crowd began to mutter. Others later wondered whether Piendibene had truly tried at all.

The final whistle blew. The score remained goalless. Half of the Parque Pereira erupted. Nacional had won the title. The other half stood silent, disbelieving.

In the centre of the pitch, Isabelino dropped to his knees. Tears streamed down his face. Around him, team-mates trudged off, resigned. He stayed where he was, alone, inconsolable. He

had given everything, every run, every desperate challenge. It had not been enough. The others hadn't been there.

Across the city, Nacional celebrated. That evening, thousands of fans gathered along 8 de Octubre Avenue. A marching band led them through Montevideo's streets, the champions aboard a mail coach and supporters streaming behind with flags and banners. They stopped at the Uruguayan Football Association (AUF) headquarters, then at Nacional's clubhouse, where speeches rang long into the night. Not a corner of the city escaped the jubilation.

For *El Plata*, the 1917 season marked the end of an era: 17 years since the founding of the league, 17 years of building a national game. 'An important journey has closed,' the newspaper wrote. 'What comes tomorrow is new, unknown. We do not know whether it will be better or worse than what began in 1900. But we can assure you that it will be difficult to surpass what made Albion a master, Peñarol the popular champion and Nacional today's worthy victor.'

Two weeks later, on 25 November 1917, Uruguayans approved a constitutional reform. Universal male suffrage. Separation of church and state. A plural executive, dividing power between the presidency and a nine-member National Council. An advanced, secular democracy. Former president José Batlle y Ordóñez's vision of a 'small model country' was taking shape: a prosperous South American republic that aspired to match, even surpass, the so-called civilised nations of Europe.

Economically, Uruguay was already there. Boosted by a wartime commodity price boom in agricultural exports, it found itself among the world's wealthiest nations. Prosperity bred a national confidence that anything was possible. Yet prosperity meant more than economic indicators. It affirmed Uruguay's greater mission, filled with lofty republican ambitions of justice and equality. An optimistic vision of nationhood and citizenship.

Football had become the stage on which this vision played out. The working class elevated. Black players celebrated. The

game of the people, by the people. A democracy in motion. Yet contradictions endured. As Uruguay prepared for its centenary celebrations in the decade ahead, the nation would present itself as European, as white. Black and Indigenous peoples would remain invisible in the official story. The same nation that had lionised Gradín on the pitch would later erase him from its self-image. On the football field, as in the decades before, the ideal and the reality would continue to collide.

Uruguay entered the 1920s; the era that had built its football would soon give way to a new generation. Their stories would carry the nation's lofty ideals and its contradictions, its mythology and its struggles. Uruguay, dominant in South America, was ready to take its game to the world. The stage was set. Life begins tomorrow.

2

Stillness and Motion

ON A warm January night in 1918, nearly 300 Peñarol supporters crowded into the club's Secretariat. They had come to honour Isabelino Gradín, a tribute initiated by fans from the interior city of Minas that soon swept across the republic. The memory still felt raw from the previous November: that 1917 league decider when Gradín, the great Gradín, rose as his team-mates faltered. That afternoon he wept, carrying on his shoulders the frustration of an entire team. He remained a faithful *Peñarolense*, mourning as deeply as any supporter.

Though abandoned by many, Isabelino found steadfast support in Juan Delgado. The centre-half was among the few who rose that fateful November, the soul of Peñarol's defence. He too earned the warm gratitude of the *Aurinegro* faithful. Weeks after that match, fans honoured Delgado with a lunch and a commemorative watch. *Juancito* overcame his Sudamericano snub and showed his class through the rest of 1917. In 1918, the club recognised his efforts by naming him vice-captain.

But this night belonged to Gradín. At 9pm he entered and the hall erupted. Fans surged forward to touch their idol, eager for a handshake or embrace. Some tried to lift him onto their shoulders but were held back, for the ceremony had only just begun. Club vice-president Juan Antonio Buero spoke briefly, then came president Francisco Simón, the *Batllista* (follower of Batlle's social and political reforms) who had supported Peñarol's railway workers' strike in 1908. He presented a gold medal and addressed the gathering.

'Yes, Gradín wept,' Simón told them, 'but not from weakness or frailty. He cried because he knew he lacked the support of some of his team-mates. His tears were the tears of thousands of *Peñarolenses*. His tears, the tears of many men, fell as life-saving dew to the Peñarol tree.'

That March, Peñarol held an extraordinary assembly to heal the wounds of 1917. Before a packed hall of members, the club passed judgement on the three men blamed for that November afternoon: José Piendibene was reinstated, José Pérez pardoned and Manuel Varela suspended indefinitely. The 'indefinite' label kept Varela captive, blocking a move to Nacional just as tensions between the clubs simmered. Sensing opportunity, Nacional delegate Rodolfo Bermúdez had tried to lure Pérez across the divide as well, but the winger rejected the approach and defended his honour in the press, saying only Bermúdez knew what had truly passed in his office. With rumours spent and pride sore on both sides, Peñarol returned to the pitch, determined to reclaim its honour.

Los Aurinegros entered 1918 intent on consolidation. The team was built around veterans John Harley and José Piendibene and blended players in their prime with already seasoned youngsters. The defence was anchored by 'The Poet' Roberto Chery in goal, with backs José Benincasa and Pedro Rímolo, and Pascual Routta, Harley and Juan Delgado in midfield. Ahead of them was what former club president José Buzzetti described as 'perhaps the club's most complete front five of the amateur era', led by *El Maestro* Piendibene at centre-forward, with José Pérez and Armando Artigas on his right, and Gradín and Antonio Campolo, the Barrio Sur friends, to his left.

Gradín, meanwhile, grew restless for new arenas. That March, at the inaugural meeting of the new Uruguayan Athletics Federation, Isabelino won the 400m. *El Plata* devoted its sports column to his display, 'Our reason for focusing on this race is its winner, Isabelino Gradín, who, through his exceptional training and the determination to overcome every obstacle, completed the race at a remarkable pace, crossing the finish line in record time

and by a wide margin. Having already won honours in football and achieved success in volleyball, Gradín now claims another triumph in athletics. This is how true sportsmen are made.'

Peñarol began the season strongly, with four wins and a draw from their first five league fixtures. In early May, against River Plate, John Harley returned from injury. This time, though, he lined up to the right of Juan Delgado, who had made the centre-half role his own. Yet despite Delgado and Benincasa being named as match standouts, the fans reserved their loudest cheers for the Scot. Out of position, out of shape and out of practice, he drew applause with every touch. As *El Día* observed, 'The fans encourage the old international Harley, the teacher of many of our good players.'

Soon Harley and his team crossed the river to Buenos Aires to face the other River Plate, a courtesy return for the Argentines' 1916 Las Acacias visit. Peñarol took the field in red and white armbands and River in yellow and black, their colours traded in friendship. Gradín had arrived a day earlier to compete at Club Ferrocarril Oeste, winning the 400m. The next day he traded spikes for boots, Piendibene scored and the match ended 1-1.

On 9 June, Peñarol and Nacional met in the first *Clásico* of the season. Nacional were arguably the strongest team in the Río de la Plata, still studded with stars from the Triple Crown era: the Scarone brothers, captain Alfredo Foglino and Ángel Romano, the 'King of the Pirouette'.

More than 30,000 spectators filled the Parque Pereira. Among them was the Peruvian poet Juan Parra del Riego, who had been living in Montevideo since 1917. There he watched Gradín glide past defenders with flowing grace and electric speed. Many believe this afternoon inspired the poem he later published, *Polirritmo Dinámico a Gradín, Jugador de Fútbol* (Dynamic Polyrhythm to Gradín, Footballer). Peñarol won 1-0 and Isabelino and company surged ahead, winning the next five league fixtures.

The following month, Gradín donned the sky-blue shirt once more. On 18 July, Uruguay's national holiday, the Copa

Premio de Honor carried deeper symbolic weight: it marked the first meeting with Argentina since that fateful 1917 Campeonato Sudamericano decider. The two nations gathered at the Parque Pereira, the very ground where the Argentines had once refused to accept defeat, severing relations with their neighbour instead. Now those wounds had healed. Another large attendance prompted newspapers to renew calls for a true national stadium, one worthy of hosting such figures as Isabelino, who set the crowd alight again. 'Gradín is the soul of the attack,' said *El Día*. 'Enthusiastic, tenacious and resolute, he quickly becomes a nightmare for opponents, who simply cannot stop him.'

The afternoon did not begin as planned. Five minutes in, Nicolás Rofrano put Argentina ahead, but the visitors' jubilation lasted for only two minutes. José Piendibene rolled the ball to Isabelino, who kept it glued to his feet under pressure, driving forward as the crowd rose from their seats. Trapped by defenders on the left flank and still far from goal, he had no pass and no shot. Then, with a final burst of strength, he broke clear, cut inside and struck past goalkeeper Carlos Isola. The stands erupted, and amid the roar, Gradín heard the voices of his most faithful supporters calling his name. The game finished 1-1.

Some 25,000 fans returned for the replay. With Piendibene injured again, Uruguay made alterations to their attack. Ángel Romano took his place at centre-forward, Héctor Scarone moved to inside-right and Pascual Somma joined Gradín on the left. Here Isabelino played more for the team than for himself, combining neatly with Somma for crowd-pleasing combinations, less flashy but effective. Uruguay won 3-1, Romano scoring twice and Scarone once.

When the Argentine-sponsored Copa Premio de Honor came around on 15 August, Gradín was joined by Juan Delgado, back after illness and those 1917 snubs. The first match in Buenos Aires ended 0-0. Ten days later came the replay. This time Gradín travelled with his Barrio Sur companions Roberto Chery and Antonio Campolo, both listed as substitutes.

Gimnasia y Esgrima's ground overflowed, many supporters locked out after local authorities halted ticket sales. Uruguay began brightly, but the home crowd's fervour soon lifted the Argentines, who went 2-0 ahead. Gradín urged his men forward, driving down the left and ghosting past defenders, yet each run was cut short by brutal tackles the referee ignored. Somma suffered the same treatment, spending much of the afternoon gesticulating in protest. Romano failed to direct the attack. Uruguay pulled one back too late, and Argentina won 2-1.

That same night, the Uruguayan squad sailed home, but Gradín, Chery and Campolo stayed behind. The Barrio Sur trio lingered in Buenos Aires for its tango bars and long nights. Héctor Scarone, free of commitments back home, joined their adventure. Then, on Monday, a maritime strike stopped all river traffic and stranded the quartet. The following Sunday, Nacional and Peñarol were due to meet in the Copa de Competencia semi-final. Uruguay's two giants grew anxious as the days passed. When the strike finally lifted, *Nacionalófilos* and *Peñarolenses* moved to bring their boys back.

By the time the 1 September *Clásico* arrived, Scarone had returned, but the Barrio Sur trio were still absent. Nacional won 4-0, Scarone scoring one. Four days later, Montevideo still had no word of the Peñarol men. *El Plata* filled columns with rumours: some placed them in Chivilcoy, 150km from Buenos Aires; others in Uruguay's south-western port city of Colonia. Some whispered of a defection across the river. Most fans simply said they were staying away because they chose to. After days of speculation, Gradín, Campolo and Chery returned by train from Colonia. Two days later they were back on the pitch against Wanderers, Isabelino scoring a long-range screamer past the veteran Cayetano Saporiti.

Exhaustion hung over the capital that September. Laughter from Buenos Aires had faded and ships moved again, but in Montevideo the air remained unsettled. Few realised a far graver illness was already crossing the Atlantic.

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On 23 September, the steamship *Demerara* docked in Montevideo, her holds heavy with sickness. Among 289 passengers, six had died en route from Liverpool and 22 were ill. The Spanish Flu entered Uruguay. The country had faced its share of invisible enemies: tuberculosis, diphtheria, smallpox; part of a longer continental history of disease brought by Europeans. Its system of quarantine and inspection sprang into action: luggage searched, passengers quarantined and the sick isolated. Yet the virus moved faster than the city could prepare, striking without warning.

By the year's end, 131 had perished. Hospitals and clinics, already stretched by other diseases, buckled under the strain. Businesses closed, schools emptied, public gatherings banned. Cafes, restaurants, cabarets and churches fell silent. Mass moved outdoors until authorities banned that too. Pamphlets slipped through doorways, urging people to wash, ventilate, stay home. The already sleepy Montevideo had never seemed so still.

Football suffered too, its season fractured under the weight of illness. The 1918 Campeonato Sudamericano, scheduled for Rio de Janeiro, fell victim to postponement. Players began falling ill, Wanderers winger Omar Pérez among the first. Juan Delgado visited *El Día* in person to dispel infection rumours. Gradín caught the virus and spent days confined to bed. By late October outbreaks hit Central, Dublin and Wanderers. When entire teams went down, the AUF finally suspended a round of matches.

A single fixture survived: the Copa de Honor semi-final between Nacional and Peñarol. Just days before, the Nacional squad lay decimated. Their rivals fared little better; Harley, Benincasa, Piendibene, Pérez and Artigas would all stay home. *Los Albos* requested a postponement, but the AUF refused. The match would go ahead. Nacional announced they would not field a team.

When 1 November arrived, more than 1,000 fans gathered at the Parque Pereira before police dispersed them. Peñarol

took to the field with whatever men they had, including a few reserves. Nacional never appeared. Referee Ángel Minoli noted the no-show in his match report and recorded a walkover. Nacional protested, attaching medical certificates and insisting their absence stemmed from circumstance, not choice.

Three weeks later, the next *Clásico* would decide everything. By 24 November, both sides stood level at the top of the league table, still shadowed by the walkover scandal. Nacional had filed fresh petitions against Minoli for his handling of earlier matches, while their fans accused the AUF and the press of bias and called for national team boycotts. After two officials declined the task, José Marticorena took charge at the Gran Parque Central. Harley and Piendibene remained injured. Héctor Scarone had left Montevideo to recuperate in the coastal town of Las Toscas.

Five minutes into the second half José Pérez broke down the wing, crossed, and Guillermo Ferrero scored. It seemed nothing could deny Peñarol the league title. Then in the final moments, chaos erupted. A frantic scramble formed in front of Peñarol's goal. The ball ricocheted to Nacional's José Brachi, who struck first time. The stadium erupted. Fans invaded the pitch. Confusion reigned. Did it go in? Side-netting? Post? The police behind the goal had the clearest view. 'The civil guard must declare,' *El Plata* demanded.

Marticorena first awarded the goal, then revoked it, upholding Peñarol's 1-0 lead. Nacional captain Alfredo Foglino lodged a formal protest. These were the days when Uruguayan league matches could be won on appeal, when results could change through the skill of club delegates. For two weeks Montevideo buzzed with speculation. No one knew how the match, or even the championship, would be resolved. When the tribunal met, the referee testified that Peñarol players and officials had surrounded and threatened him. The tribunal remained unconvinced; they believed he had simply been flustered by the Nacional crowd. Rumours of bribes followed.

Pending the tribunal's verdict, Peñarol hosted the Copa de Honor Final against Argentine champions Independiente.

Travelling with the delegation were Peñarol's friends from River Plate, goalkeeper Carlos Isola and president Livio Ratto. *Los Aurinegros* won 4-0; Delgado and Benincasa commanded the defence while Gradín shone spectacularly in attack.

On the night of 10 December, Montevideo held its breath. Peñarol and Nacional fans pressed against the AUF headquarters doors, spilling into the street. Some still wore masks or scarves, unsure whether the flu danger had passed. Inside, the hall was packed tight, the air thick with smoke and tension as the tribunal delivered its ruling. The referee's original decision stood; the 1-0 scoreline was ratified.

Outside, pandemonium. When the uproar subsided, word spread through the crowd: the tribunal had also ordered a rare solution, a 15-minute replay with Peñarol still leading 1-0. It would take place on 25 December and, for the first time in Uruguayan football, be played behind closed doors.

Over the next fortnight, the city spoke of little else. The influenza had waned, but fear lingered; cafes remained half-empty, doors propped open for air. People congregated instead in plazas and, with summer arriving, on beaches chasing cool breezes. Talk of the replay drifted between coughs and rumours.

Christmas Day arrived hot and grey, the streets around the Gran Parque Central alive. More than 3,000 supporters crowded 8 de Octubre Avenue, climbing trees and walls for glimpses over the fences. Others waited at corners and side streets, hoping for an open gate. *El Día* called it 'the most picturesque sight of the afternoon'. Police formed a cordon to hold them back. Inside, a hushed silence fell as barely 100 observers stepped out: officials, journalists, police and players. Piendibene returned from injury. Héctor Scarone was back from suspension once more. Nacional brought extra balls in case their rivals looked to waste time.

Fifteen minutes to decide a season. Nacional pressed and attacked; Peñarol held their shape and broke with precision. Ten minutes in, Pascual Somma crossed for Scarone, whose volley Juan Delgado cleared off the line. Moments later, Brachi hammered a rebound off the post from close range. The final

whistle blew. Peñarol triumphed 1-0. The title lay within their grasp.

Aurinegro officials poured onto the field. New club president Félix Polleri led the invasion to embrace his men. Furious Nacional players rushed to confront him. Their president, José María Delgado, joined the fray. Police on horseback waded in. 'Overzealous, some might argue,' *El Plata* observed, 'but only if they're unfamiliar with our football's chequered past. As history shows, club presidents aren't always the calmest influence.' Indeed, years earlier Francisco Simón reportedly faced an angry crowd with a revolver. Yet Peñarol's current president sought no fight, the paper concluded, 'Such is Dr Polleri's passion for Peñarol: he might not carry a revolver, but when he's fired up, his words come out like bullets.'

Three days later, Peñarol returned to the Parque Central for a ten-minute replay against Reformers, another remnant of the season before the pandemic paused everything. Restarted at 0-0, the match finished goalless. On 29 December, fans flooded into Las Acacias to see them meet again. There, John Harley returned to the starting line-up and Ferrero scored the decisive goal. 1-0. After six years, Peñarol were champions again. *El Plata* recounted their mad joy, 'Picture this: a cart with four wheels, three horses larger than Peñarol's triumph itself, 25 supporters aboard, hats off, *Aurinegro* flags held high, shouting "Polleri is a gem!" and "Now there's panettone for the year's end!" It is a shame the cart did not parade through the city, like on other unforgettable nights. You would have witnessed one of the year's most remarkable spectacles.'

From those strange final months of 1918, Uruguayan football kept moving forward. Pandemic, protests and locked gates could not halt its momentum. The same sporting passion drove street kids and club presidents alike. Out of disorder, a harder, more resilient national game was taking shape.