



FEATURE 53

MIERDA
PENEROL!

TELLY!

Clásico del fútbol uruguayo

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In April, 2017, Geoff Stellfox journeyed to Uruguay to take in the culture, and experience the country’s passion for the game as he attended one of the oldest and most fiercely fought football rivalries, the Uruguayan Clásico.



In a Napolitano style pizzeria hidden in the heart of Montevideo, I learned a lesson that would define my experience with Uruguayan football.

Tonight has all the makings of a romantic evening – the beat of tango music meandering in the background, while the soft light from flickering candles illuminates our table. Sitting across from me, however, is a robustly bearded man with a mop of brown hair, piling a mountain of arugula atop a slice of pizza. His name is Juan Pablo Iborra, and he’s the official club photographer for Nacional, one of the country’s two largest football teams. We’re here to talk about a complicated history.

“I think this is the only country in the world that plays better with 10 men,” he chuckles. “For some perverted reason, we love the struggle and we love the fight – we always choose the hard way.”

This is largely true. Uruguay had to sneak into the last two World Cups via the playoff position, despite being two-time World Cup champions and holding 15 Copa America titles. During the 2014 qualification cycle, it took victories against Argentina and Colombia in the last few rounds to even secure a playoff spot. However, my interest isn’t in the Uruguay’s storied national team. I’ve flown to this diminutive South American country to investigate Uruguay’s version of El Clásico. The two combatants, Club Nacional and Club Athletic Peñarol, both hailing from the country’s capital of Montevideo, have been gridlocked in battle for over 100 years.

The love of “the fight,” on the other hand, is a more sensitive subject. When pressed on the recent violence plaguing meetings between the two sides, Juan Pablo’s eyes begin to wander, presumably looking for a way out of the question.

“I wouldn’t call this rivalry violent or hateful. Of course, there are sections of fans that get violent and are hateful, but it’s not everyone. But yes, there have been incidents.”

This is the first match between the two sides since last year’s cancellation of El Clásico due to Peñarol supporters dropping a trash can on police from atop the stadium. If that sounds barbaric, that’s because it is. The match has already been postponed once this year because of the Uruguayan government’s insistence on installing facial recognition cameras. Newspapers report that there will be 1,200 police officers at the ground, along with 150 members of the national guard. This is the kind of scene we’ve become accustomed to seeing in places like Venezuela, but not Uruguay, a country known as being one of the most economically and politically stable in the continent.

The game is often spoken about in grandiose terms – that football is life and death. It’s a romantic notion, but one that’s far away from the reality of our (mostly) comfortable lives. Here, it’s much more real. Many players and supporters come from unimaginably poor backgrounds, growing up in homes that may not even have four walls and require you to find your dinner in a trash dumpster. Luis Suarez once commented on how he can’t stand to miss a single ball because that might cost him his career and send him back to the slums of Montevideo.

Juan Pablo has covered a decade’s worth of Clásicos and has seen it all. Despite being employed by Nacional, he’s extremely well versed in the history of both sides and shares with me their intertwined history between shovel-sized bites of pizza. Peñarol was originally founded as the Central Uruguayan Railway Cricket Club (CURCC) by English railway workers, and after a split with the owners, the club



renamed itself Peñarol 1914. With every match, whether home or away, a sea of black and gold accompanies the team.

Nacional’s genesis, however, was quite different. To combat the European dominance in football, a coalition between university students playing for Uruguay Athletic Club and Montevideo Football Club founded Club Nacional de Fútbol. The club was created specifically for Uruguayans and the players selected red, white, and blue, the symbols of Uruguayan independence hero José Gervasio Artigas, as the team’s colours. But the club’s nationalistic roots run even deeper. In 1903, when players from other clubs rejected a national team call up (including three from Peñarol), Nacional represented the Uruguayan National Team and secured the country’s first international win, against arch rivals Argentina.

“I respect the role that they play for Nacional. Without this rivalry, each season wouldn’t have the same flavour,” he explains, laughing.

“But everyone has an opinion about this match. It’s in our blood.”



On the eve of El Clásico, football takes precedence, even at a farewell barbeque. While most of the guests are spending time with a friend preparing to leave for a new life in Germany, I’ve built myself a makeshift Uruguayan football panel. To my right is Nicolas, pale and wiry with a shock of brown hair and a tattoo of the Nacional badge on his right tricep. Behind the bar, serving as the de facto grill master and emcee, is Diego. Tall and good looking with a broad smile, he floats effortlessly between our conversation, tending to the enormous wood fire grill, and serving other guests. More importantly, he comes from a family of Peñarol season ticket holders.

“On my 5th birthday, a neighbour dressed me from head to toe in a Cerro (a rival club) kit while my dad was away picking up dinner. My dad didn’t speak to him for two years after that,” Diego says with a chuckle. “But that’s the way it works here.”

There are 15 clubs in the Uruguayan Primera División, but really there are only two, dividing the nation in half. In 2013, a study conducted by the consulting firm

Cifra found that 46 percent of the country identify as Peñarol’s supporters, while 36 percent are loyal to Nacional. That means these matches maintain the level of national importance reserved for presidential elections. What sets this match apart from other derbies is the length that each set of supporters go to one-up the other side. For example, Nacional has called the legitimacy of several of Peñarol’s titles into question. So, when it came time to build a new stadium, Peñarol decided to forgo naming rights. Now, every year Nacional plays their away match against Peñarol at ‘Champion of the Century Stadium.’

Even more illustrative is the battle for flag dominance. In 2011, Peñarol unfurled the largest flag in the world during a Copa Libertadores match against Independiente of Argentina. The 309-metre-long flag engulfed two of the main stands in the national stadium like a black and yellow tide. The victory, however, was short lived. Just two years later, Nacional claimed the title of the world’s largest football flag with a 600-metre-long flag covering three stands. Not only did they double the size of the flag, but they unleashed it almost exactly two years after Peñarol’s flag, as an extra fuck you. Take a step back and appreciate the lunacy of it all – one of the smallest footballing countries in the world had a penis measuring contest, only in flag form.

“This is a match you can never lose,” says Diego. “Not losing is more important than winning. We can deal with a draw, but nothing is worse than seeing Nicolas the day after a loss.”

With the fire from the grill crackling in the background, there’s a serenity tonight. The stadium is only a few blocks away from the barbecue. It’s crazy to think that in less than 24 hours those same streets will be filled with thousands of fans hopeful for a victory, but desperate not to lose.



The supporters’ songs are drowned out by the diesel engines of armored transports and the rumble of the national guard’s footsteps. Soldiers carry assault weapons and patrol steel barricades separating rival factions. For a moment, it’s easy to lose your sense of place. The military occupation does little to dampen the spirits of fans, many of whom have taken the hours, or days, long pilgrimage to





► Montevideo in order to support their team. A Volkswagen bus firing flares and roman candles out the window and into the night sky circles the stadium, honking for Nacional supporters and singing songs about the unscrupulous morals of the Peñarol supporters' mothers (and sisters).

Derby day has well and truly arrived.

Uruguayans never arrive early unless they're arriving at a football match. Two-thirds of the stadium looks like a swarm of wasps – black and gold shirts, black and gold drums, and black and gold banners hanging from the walls, a point of pride displaying how each section of the fans have travelled. Both sides rain down boos on the referees before the game even starts. Finally, something Nacional and Peñarol can agree on.

This match is deeply personal for the players as well. Half the players in this match have graduated through the youth ranks of their respective teams, and both managers have represented these same clubs on the pitch. Contrast that with the previous Merseyside Derby, and Spanish Clásico which featured 5 and 7 local boys, respectively. Many players grew up just blocks from their club and have held onto the childhood dream of playing in this match their entire life. Those who never reached a high enough level to make it to this pitch are now congregated in the stands.

Supporters patiently trade volleys of songs featuring equally vile content. The moral fibre of the opposing players' mothers (and sisters) are called into question once again. The decibel level is so loud that it's nearly impossible to hear the opening whistle. From the first touch, the pace of the match is frenetic and the fans demand absolute commitment. There's no such thing as a lost cause, no ball that's not worth chasing, and no tackle that's too robust. Each 50/50 challenge is the microcosm of the larger war between Peñarol and Nacional. Conceding anything is unacceptable. Technical ability and guile are valued highly, but commitment



and indomitable will are the pillars of Uruguayan football. As such, the match can lack a bit of, let's say, polish, at times. If the Spanish Clásico is Jamón Serrano, aged to perfection and paired with a glass of red wine, its Uruguayan counterpart is raw meat thrown on a searing hot grill with a bottle of cheap beer – they're completely different sensory experiences. One is significantly less refined, yet satisfying nonetheless. And it's not that the players lack technical ability. There's plenty of individual skill on display, but the play is raw and instinctual.

Luis Suarez is Uruguayan football at its highest aspiration. While being capable of conjuring a goal from unimaginable angles and locations on the pitch, as well as creating a mile with an inch of space, his defining quality is undoubtedly an unparalleled work ethic for a striker.

Peñarol's 21-year-old captain, Nahitan Nandez, is a carbon copy of Suarez's indomitable will to win and silky skills, making it abundantly clear that he's the best player on the pitch. He seems to take it personally when his team loses possession, tracking back, winning the ball, and then driving into the Nacional penalty box. Despite their less-than-stellar league form, Peñarol bosses the opening stages of the match and find their breakthrough in the 30th minute. Christian Rodriguez's shot is deflected off the post and into the path of striker Junior Arias who converts the simplest of headers. The cement stands of the 87-year-old stadium trembled under the celebrations of 30,000 fans. Despite the strict ban and less-than-thorough search, bright red flares from Peñarol supporters illuminating the way to 3 points. The night became even redder when Brian Lozano, a second-half



substitute, is sent off for a second late challenge. Tension builds, but with each minute that passes, Peñarol is that much closer to moral supremacy. The red, white and blue section of the stadium is practically silent and stark contrast to the home supporters.

Juan Pablo's prophecy, however, soon manifests itself. With practically the last kick of the match, Rodrigo Aguirre pounces on a knockdown from outside the 18-yard box and blasts a shot into the side netting – a golazo in the truest sense.

Some Nacional players celebrate together, while others – in an act of defiance – jump the barricades to celebrate in front of the main Peñarol stand. Nacional has brought their own set of flares, and ruining Peñarol's night is treated like winning the league. The end whistle is drowned out in the same way it was in the beginning of the match. A draw does little for their standing in the table, but everything for their ego. The once jubilant black and yellow army sulk silently away into the Montevideo night, while their Nacional counterparts seem dead set on waking up the entire city.



My taxi driver on the way home notices my match credentials and shares his two cents on the night. The wrinkles and deep marks around his soft smile lead me to believe that he's seen this sort of match play out a hundred or so times.

“As soon as they got a red card, I turned off the radio – I knew this was going to happen. Being a Uruguayan football fan is never easy.”