

The Sporting Dimension to the Relationship between Ireland and Latin America

By John Kennedy



Mercedes Football Club. From left to right, standing: Rufino Bello, Tuco Rodríguez, David Lennard, Hugh Gahan, Severo Ruiz, A. N. Other, J. J. McLoughlin (secretary), Charles L. Lowther (treasurer). Second row: James J. McLoughlin (president), Tommy Price, N. Alori, Eugene Gahan (captain), Juan Arturo Gahan. Third row: Johnny Rossiter, Leo Gahan
(*Hiberno-Argentine Review*, N° 149, Buenos Aires, 5 March 1909)

The prominence given to the successes of Argentina in a wide variety of sports in recent times, in particular those of British origin, has created a greater awareness of the important contribution 'ingleses' have made to the diffusion of the sport in Latin America and Iberia through the bonds of informal empire. Central to this is the influence Irish immigrants and Argentines of Irish origin have had on the dissemination and development of these sports. In addition to this, a specific contribution was made with the introduction of hurling to Argentina. Irish-Argentines have had a significant influence in football, rugby, field hockey, basketball, polo and other sports. Relations between Ireland and the region were enhanced through frequent sporting contacts. As Ireland has now become a net recipient of migrants and home to communities from Latin America and Iberia, it is likely that in the future they will in turn make their mark in those sports which the Irish played a part in diffusing and developing in their countries of origin.

Introduction

As 2007 drew to a close, there was a growing recognition of the dominance of Latin America in world sport, largely through the wide-ranging success of Argentina across a number of sporting disciplines. Ángel Cabrera won the US Open golf tournament at Oakmount; David Nalbandian won the Madrid and Paris tennis Masters; Manu Ginóbli continued to stir the world of basketball, and of course there was the spectacular success of the 'Pumas', reaching third place in the Rugby World Cup in France. Not only that, but the country also maintained

its position at the top of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) rankings. These achievements have prompted greater examination of the roots of this success.

The genesis of this sporting success lies in late eighteenth-century England and the development of modern organised sport, which reached an apex in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Latin American and Caribbean regions were among the first beneficiaries of these sporting innovations. In Latin America the diffusion of British sports took place through the informal bonds of empire through trading and capital investment,

whereas in the Caribbean it was through more formal colonial mechanisms. As one of the earliest Latin American countries to practice modern sports and the only country with significant Irish immigration, 'which has been estimated to be 45-50,000' (Murray 2004: 28), the focus of this survey article will be mainly on Argentina. However the experience is paralleled to a certain extent in other Latin American countries, as well as in Iberia. As constituent members of the community of *ingleses*, Irish immigrants played a key role in the nurturing of these new sports and their diffusion. Their descendents made their own contribution to helping to make Argentina the dominant power in world sport that it is today. As Carlin (2007) notes, all Argentines, irrespective of origin, display the 'desperate need to carve out an identity separate from the rich cultural one inherited from their transoceanic forebears.'

The Emergence of Modern Organised Sport

Before the advent of modern sports a variety of what can be termed traditional sports were practiced in Britain and Ireland. These included various types of football including a type played in Cornwall called Cornish hurling [1] and *Caid*, a precursor to Gaelic football, played in Ireland. This array also included animal-based sports such as bear-baiting, bull-running and cock-fighting, which were common throughout Europe. These were later banned, largely due to the efforts of the Methodist movement, under the British Cruelty to Animals Act in 1835.

It is a common misconception that organised sport in England emerged during the Victorian era (1837-1901), and that there was a gap between the decline of ancient forms and the development of new games (Holt 1989). 'The interplay of change and continuity, persistence in some things and innovation in others, is too complex to be slotted neatly into a simple modernisation model' (Holt 1989: 12). The first sports to take on an organised form were horseracing and cricket, albeit in a more rural context - proof that organic change in sport was taking place long before the mid-Victorian period.

Horseracing could be considered to be the first organised sport. The publication of a racing

calendar in 1727, the formation of the Jockey Club in 1752 and the establishment of classic races such as the St Ledger in 1776 and the Derby in 1780, set the foundations for modern racing. Cricket was the first team sport to emerge on an organised basis and also provided a mechanism that enabled social interaction between the aristocracy and commoners; a rarity at the time. One of the first clubs to be established was the Hambledon Cricket Club which was founded around 1750. Later in the eighteenth century the game gained its own governing body, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC).

Despite these organic developments, it was the elite public school [2] system that left the most enduring legacies, through the codification of various types of 'traditional' football. Although various types of ball games had long been part of the boys' curriculum, most headmasters saw little benefit in these pursuits and actively discouraged them. Thomas Arnold, headmaster at Rugby school from 1828 to 1842, was a pioneer in this area and was one of the first to see the potential of organised sport as a source of discipline and morality. Gradually other schools began the process of organising and introducing discipline into these sports. Another impact the public school system had on sport was the emphasis on amateurism, and the spirit of 'fair play'.

At first the universities were instrumental in establishing common rules, as most public schools had their own variants; however they were later supplanted by professional associations. The Football Association (FA) was first established in London among the old boys clubs, who drew up common rules to agree on the basis upon which they could play against each other. Initially the FA rules allowed holding the ball and hacking (kicking the opponents in the shins). However, clubs from Sheffield argued that these practices should be forbidden. With the creation of the International Football Association Board in 1886, the views of the Sheffield clubs were accepted and reflected in the new agreed code. Although a set of common rules was agreed for rugby in 1845, it was not until 1871 that the

Rugby Football Union (RFU) was formed to govern the sport.

Whilst the impetus for the codification of these traditional sports may have emanated from the public school system, there were a number of contemporaneous social and economic factors which led to the diffusion and success of organised sports, including the concept of muscular Christianity, [3] industrialisation and the associated urbanisation, the ban on the more popular blood sports, the development of the railway system, and increased wealth. The spread of empire is also considered to be an important factor in the promotion of sport, 'though public school sport was in the first instance not specifically intended to train the lieutenants of the Empire, it came rapidly to be seen in this light' (Holt 1989: 204).

As well as codification of traditional sports, there was some influence from the colonies in terms of reverse cultural transmission, as demonstrated by the adoption of polo by the British elite in colonial India. The first game was played in Hounslow Heath in West London in 1870 between two mounted military regiments; the Tenth Hussars and the Ninth Lancers.

The introduction of organised sport to Latin America: Argentina – a case study

As was the case in other Spanish colonies, among the earliest spectator amusements in the River Plate [4] region was bullfighting. Games such as the Basque ball sport, *jai alai*, were also introduced. In time the region developed its own distinctive *criollo* [5] sports, the most prominent being *pato* (duck). The chronicles of Félix de Azara mentioned a 'run' held in Buenos Aires in 1610 on the feast of the beatification of St. Ignatius Loyola (Lupo 2004: 57). In various writings of the eighteenth century there were several references to these 'runs', which were characterised for their dangerousness, often leading to tragic outcomes. The ecclesiastical authorities were the first to attempt to prohibit the game, by threatening to excommunicate any parishioners involved in the sport. A further attempt was made, this time by the civilian authorities in 1822, when the Governor of Buenos Aires, General Martín Rodríguez, issued a decree prohibiting the playing of the game, but

it failed in its objective. Arbena & LaFrance (2002: xii) have argued that 'this was part of an effort to impose capitalist control over the Pampa and its labour force'. It was not until the 1930s that a set of rules based on polo were developed for the game, through the efforts of Alberto del Castillo. It was designated the national sport of Argentina in 1953.



The children of William Murphy at the tennis court.
Estancia San Martín, Salto, Buenos Aires province,
ca. 1890

(Anastasia Joyce Collection)

Though British immigrants began arriving in Argentina as early as 1806, their numbers were small, and they were generally involved in mercantile interests. Following the fall of the Rosas regime in 1852, [6] Argentina embarked on a path of economic development, central to which was British capital. The most significant manifestation of this investment was the railways. As the railways grew, many of their employees were specifically recruited from all over Britain and Ireland for their specialist skills. By 1890 there were, according to Rock (1987: 132), over 9,344 kilometres of railway, most of it privately owned by British companies. The growth of the railways also attracted trading concerns, insurance brokerages, banking and financial enterprises, which brought many more *ingleses* to the region. The British later became involved in public utilities such as gas, tramways and water supply. Even though 'the British share of immigrants was never to surpass four percent of the annual total' (Jakubs 2000: 136), the impact they had in terms of the sporting environment was wholly disproportionate to their size.

The first organised sport played in Argentina was cricket. It is claimed that the first games were played in the Retiro district of the city of Buenos Aires during the English invasions in 1806 and 1807. It may also have been played in the rural district of San Antonio de Areco in Buenos Aires Province (Graham-Yooll 1999:176), where many of the prisoners from the invasions were incarcerated by the Viceroyalty of the River Plate. The first recorded game was at the country house of James Brittain in 1817 in the city district of Barracas (Raffo 2004:33). After many attempts, the first club, the Buenos Aires Cricket Club (BACC) was formed in 1831. However, it appears that references to the club disappeared in the late 1830s, though they reappeared during the Mitre era (1862-8). [7] In 1864 the BACC was re-formed officially and a pitch was inaugurated at Palermo Park in the city of Buenos Aires, which became the chief focus for cricket in Argentina.

The sporting trends that were emerging in Britain during the mid-Victorian period soon made their presence felt in Argentina with the first recorded football match played on 20 June 1867 by a group of British players in the grounds of BACC in Palermo. Many teams were formed during the following years, but few records remain. The most significant development was the formation of a team at the Buenos Aires English High School in 1891 by its Scottish headmaster Watson Hutton, later to become Alumni. The club was the most successful in the amateur era and took part in the inaugural Association Football League (AAFL) [8] competition in 1893. Other clubs were formed during that period, which still exist today, including Banfield AC, Rosario Central and Quilmes Athletic. It is no accident that many of the early clubs grew up around the railway stations.

Rugby Union made its first appearance in 1873 when the first game was played at Palermo. Though there are some claims that the first game on the continent was played across the river Plate in Montevideo in 1865 (Richards 2007:54). It was soon adopted as the code to be played at the Buenos Ayres Football Club. In 1874, BACC also adopted the code after a Mr Coghlan, president of the club, highlighted the

confusing regulations that applied to football, so it was decided to apply the rules of Rugby Union as the preferred code. Generally it was cricket clubs that were the earliest 'incubators' of the sport (Richards 2007: 54). It would appear that the game became so popular that it threatened the survival of football. Due to the number of casualties, the sport was banned for a period, but made its reappearance again in 1886. The game spread to other cities with the founding of clubs in Rosario in 1886 and Córdoba in 1898. It was not until 1899 that a governing body, the River Plate Rugby Union (later to become the Unión Argentina de Rugby), was formed.

Horsereading 'English style' on a round course was introduced in 1826, when the Buenos Ayres Race Club was founded by *ingleses*. The Foreign Amateurs Race Sporting Society was founded in 1849 and was active between 1849 and 1855, when it closed down due to disagreements among its members. By that time, it had been superseded by a number of smaller clubs. The equine sport most synonymous with Argentina, polo, made its first recorded appearance in 1875 at the 'Negrete' ranch of James Anderson Shennan (Graham-Yooll 1999:179). Following from that, the game became very popular among the English-speaking landed elite.

Other British sports arrived in Argentina, such as rowing, which was introduced on the river Luján in Tigre in 1871, lawn tennis in 1881 and hockey in 1905. 'British sports became an important part of national life and the only aspect of the British community that put Britons in close social and cultural contact with Argentines' (Graham-Yooll 1999: 175).

Although the focus has been on Argentina, the transference model above is equally relevant to other Latin American countries, as well as Iberia. A good example of this is that Spain's first club Huelva was founded in 1875 by British managers and workers at the Río Tinto mine (Burns 1998: 71).

As well as being instrumental in nurturing and diffusing the new British sports, the Irish community were to make a unique contribution to sport in Argentina through the introduction of hurling, a sport which itself was influenced

by the trends emanating from Victorian England. Although there are references to the game in the late 1880s in Mercedes in Buenos Aires province, it was not organised until 1900 through the efforts of William Bulfin, who was the editor of *The Southern Cross* newspaper of the Irish Catholic community. However, unlike some of the other sports introduced from Britain and Ireland during that period, it would remain a preserve of the Irish community.

Sport in Ireland during the Victorian period

Hurling is the sport most associated with Ireland, or more correctly the southern variant of the game called *iomán*, [9] where the ball can be handled or carried on the hurley (wooden stick). However, by the time the most significant immigration to Argentina had begun, the game had virtually died out. The 1740s and 1760s could be considered the apex of the sport and thereafter it declined due to a combination of factors, including the withdrawal of gentry patronage in an age of political turbulence, modernisation and the dislocating impact of the Irish potato famine (1845-9). By the middle of the nineteenth century, hurling only remained in a few pockets, which included Cork city, South East Galway and north of Wexford town (Whelan 1993: 27-31). So it is likely that only a few of the Irish immigrants to Argentina had any familiarity with or expertise in the game.

Coinciding with the demise of hurling, cricket began to be promoted from the mid 1850s onwards and began to spread rapidly. 'By 1872 cricket had a presence in every county in Ireland' (Garnham 2003:29). A small number of local studies have been conducted in recent years, examining the spread and uptake of the game, the most relevant being Hunt (2007), as it concentrates on County Westmeath, where over 42.9% of Irish emigrants to Argentina originated (Murray 2004: 29). From the 1860s, the game saw significant growth in Westmeath, and was the game 'that enjoyed the most continuity of play, and by the end of the century was the participant sport with the greatest popular appeal' (Hunt 2007: 113). Although the game has often been portrayed as being confined to the higher social groupings, evidence from Westmeath indicates that it was particularly

popular with the farming and labouring classes, the social class which was the most representative of emigrants to Argentina. The extent to which these immigrants participated in cricket in their adopted country is an area that merits further study.

Initially the GAA made a limited impact in County Westmeath and the popularity of cricket remained largely unchallenged, though this failure has been attributed to internal management failures (Hunt 2007). It was to be the early years of the twentieth century before the GAA was properly established in the county.

In addition to cricket, some of the newer codified games, such as association football and rugby, became popular, but these were mostly confined to urban areas or private schools and had less popular appeal.

The contribution of Irish and Irish-Argentines to Sports in Argentina

In urban areas, Irish immigrants, particularly those who worked for the railway and in British-owned trading and commercial concerns, joined the new British-founded sporting institutions which began to emerge from the 1860s onwards. Among these was James Wensley Bond of County Armagh. Bond played in the first organised football game on Argentine soil on 29 June 1867 in Palermo. He was to become a committee member in the newly-formed Buenos Aires Football club. Another Irish player in the same historic match was Richard Henry Murray of Dublin, auditor of the Buenos Ayres British Clerks' Provident Association (Raffo 2004: 69).

By the 1890s the practice of football took on a more identifiable Irish character, with the establishment of Lobos Athletic Club in the south of Buenos Aires on 3 July 1892, by a group of Irish-Argentines. This is considered to be the first Irish sports club in the country and signified that Irish-born and Irish-Argentines were seeking to assert their identity within the English-speaking community. This reflected some of the wider developments in the community, including the establishment of *The Southern Cross* newspaper in 1875, which sought

to uphold a more nationalist and distinctively Catholic creed. Another football club 'Capital Athletic Club' was founded mostly by Irish-Argentines in 1895. The club's original name was changed to Porteño Athletic Club soon after its foundation. Besides football the members also played cricket and other sports. Over time, the club lost its distinct Irish character and football was supplanted by rugby.

Besides Lobos and Porteño Athletic Club, many Irish-Argentines continued to be involved in British-founded clubs, such as Belgrano Athletic Club and Alumni. They also played for some of the newer *criollo* clubs, one of the most prominent players being Guillermo Ryan, who was a regular team member in the early years of Boca Juniors (*El Xentenario* 2004: 16-26). As the sport changed from being primarily rooted in the British community to being a sport of the masses, predictably both the influence and participation of the British and Irish community in the sport diminished. 'In the beginning, football was practiced as a relaxing activity, but after these "romantic" years came the professional era, beginning in 1931, in which it became a game, and a business' (Noguera 1986: 147). Argentina followed a similar path to Britain. Once the sport was professionalised, this led to a decline in middle-class players, and it came to be seen as primarily for the working classes. Professionalism probably signalled the death-knell of any significant involvement of *ingleses*, including Irish-Argentines, in the sport at the highest level, as such developments contravened the deep-seated philosophy of 'the gentleman amateur'. The decline is also perhaps an indicator of social advancement and the greater availability of opportunities for Irish-Argentines. Since the end of amateurism, very few Irish-Argentines have appeared in the annals of the sport at the highest level. One of the more notable players of Irish ancestry in recent years was Carlos McAllister, who played for Boca Juniors. Such is the absence of Irish-Argentine involvement that an examination of the of the Argentine premiership team lists for the 2007 season in the sports magazine *El Gráfico* (December 2007) did not indicate one player of discernable Irish ancestry.

Irish-Argentines also contributed to the national team in the early days of football in Argentina, a time when the team was almost exclusively of British origin. In the second international match played between Argentina and Uruguay in 1902, Eduardo Duggan of Belgrano Athletic Club was one of the team members, as was Juan Moore. Other famous players with Irish surnames who played for the national team in that era were Martín José Murphy (1890-1966), who was a member of the 1908 team and later an *estanciero* in Venado Tuerto (Coghlan 1987: 708), and Harry and Ernesto Hayes of the 1910 team.

Undoubtedly, Irish members of cricket clubs, from which rugby union emerged, were active in the game from the beginning. As the game transformed from an exclusively British sport to 'rugby criollo', through the medium of universities, schools and new clubs, Irish-Argentines made their mark. Ernesto 'Che' Guevara was an inside centre and played for three clubs: Atalaya Polo Club, Yporá and San Isidro Club (Lapaque 2007). If not one of the most accomplished players, he was certainly the most famous. An Irish-Argentine, Mario Dolan, a contemporary of Guevara, was one of the founder members of San Isidro Club (SIC) which split from Club Atlético San Isidro (CASI) in 1936 and today is one of the most successful clubs in the country. Following the demise of hurling, Hurling Club took up the sport in the 1940s and finally got promoted to the first division in 1997. Some Irish-Argentines also achieved caps for the Pumas: Jaime O'Farrel was captain in 1956, and the most prominent Irish-Argentine in recent times was Santiago Phelan. Recently Agustín Creevy played for the Under-21 team. On the management side there have been two Puma coaches of Irish origin, Adolfo 'Michingo' O'Reilly during the 1980s and Dermot Cavanagh during the 1960s. The Irish Christian Brothers also made a contribution to rugby in the wider River Plate region, particularly through the Stella Maris School in Montevideo and the Cardenal Newman School in Buenos Aires.

Since the introduction of polo to Argentina, Irish-Argentines have played a prominent role in the game. The Argentine polo team that won

the gold medal in the 1924 Summer Olympics included Arturo Kenny and in the 1936 summer Olympics Roberto Cavanagh and Luis Duggan were gold medallists. Juan A.E. Traill was the first to achieve the top handicap of ten in 1913. Indeed two of the most prominent teams in the 1940s, Venado Tuerto and El Trébol, were mainly composed of Irish-Argentines. The dominance of Irish-Argentines in the sport continues to the present day with Gonzalo (Jr) and Facundo Pieres, and Pablo MacDonough, all possessing the maximum ten handicap.

From the introduction of hockey to Hurling Club in 1930, the club became a major force in the men's and women's game. The men's team dominated Argentine hockey for a seven-year period, winning the first division championship in 1949, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1954, 1955 and 1956. The Argentine hockey team that competed in the 1948 Summer Olympics included four members of Hurling Club. The women's hockey team won their first division championship in 1958. In more recent times Irish-Argentines continue to be prominent in the sport. Alejandro Doherty represented Argentina in the 1988 Olympics and Tomás MacCormik competed in the 2000 Summer Olympic Games and the 2004 Summer Olympic games. Others of note include Ian Scally from Buenos Aires who is a member of the USA team, and whose father Gabriel played for Argentina at the 1968 and 1972 Summer Olympic Games.

Given the strong links that Irish-Argentines have developed with equestrian sports, it is unsurprising that they also left their mark in the national game of pato in the modern era. One of the most successful teams in the recent history of the game was San Patricio, which was originally founded in the early 1960s by the Reilly brothers from Marcos Paz in the province of Buenos Aires. From the late 1980s to early 1990s, the team, which included Luis Von Neufforgue y Reilly, dominated the game, winning the Argentine Pato Open in 1989, 1991, 1992, 1994 and 1995. Other notable players in recent times include Diego Kelly, Nucho Kelly, Juan Ganly, Guillermo Kennedy, and Gustavo Fitzsimons. The Rossiter brothers Carlos, Normando and Patricio from Estancia Santa Susana in Campana, were also involved in pato

from 1980 to 1998, winning many national tournaments.

In the area of the management and promotion of sports, a number of Irish-born Argentines have made a distinguished contribution to the evolution of sport in Argentina, perhaps none more so than Dr. Santiago Fitzsimons, who is considered a pioneer in the field of physical education and had the foresight to see the benefit of physical exercise as part of a holistic educational experience. In 1888, as director of the National College of Corrientes, he received permission from the Federal Minister for Public Instruction Filemón Posse, to employ Thomas Reeve, a Cambridge graduate, as a physical education teacher (Lupo 2004: 77). This was a first for Argentina. Two years later, Fitzsimons was appointed National Inspector General of Public Instruction. One of his key initiatives was to introduce physical education as part of the curriculum in all National Colleges and normal schools in the country, thereby bequeathing a lasting legacy to generations of Argentine schoolchildren.

Fitzsimons was to have another major impact on Argentine sport, albeit in a more indirect manner. In 1891 he was appointed director of the National School of Commerce, located in Bartolomé Mitre Street in the centre of Buenos Aires. One of the people Fitzsimons hired was Paddy McCarthy from County Tipperary, a physical education teacher, and a former boxer and footballer, who himself had a major impact on sport in Argentina (Murray 2005). In fact he participated in the first professional boxing match in Argentina in 1903 against the Italian Abelardo Robassio. As part of the physical education curriculum McCarthy introduced football and boxing. Among his students were three teenagers of Genovese origin from the port district of La Boca: Esteban Baglietto, Santiago Sana and Alfredo Scarpatti (Resurgimiento Boquense). McCarthy's football lessons had a major influence on them, so much so that the three along with the Farenga brothers went on to found Boca Juniors football club in Plaza Solís in La Boca in 1905. Indeed McCarthy became one of the first coaches at the club.

In the sphere of sport and politics, Irish-Argentines have also been prominent. Rodolfo 'Michingo' O'Reilly, a former rugby player with Club Atlético San Isidro (C.A.S.I) was appointed the Secretary of Sport under the Alfonsín government following the restoration of democracy in 1983. In addition to his governmental duties, he also exercised the role of manager of the Pumas. Another Irish-Argentine Dr Santiago Leyden was appointed Secretary of Sport for the City of Buenos Aires in 1996 during the governorship of Fernando de la Rúa.

The role of the Irish-owned press in the development of sport in the River Plate

The media have played a key role in the diffusion of organised sport, and nowhere more so than in Argentina. One of the key organs of this phenomenon was *The Standard*, Argentina's first English language newspaper, founded in 1861 by two Dublin brothers Edward and Michael Mulhall. It would be for almost a century the most influential newspaper in the English-speaking community. The newspaper played a central role in reporting administrative developments in sports clubs, such as reporting on Annual General Meetings, as well as coverage of the games themselves. *The Standard* was regularly used as a means of recruiting new members, a good example being an announcement by Buenos Aires Cricket club on 5 May 1864 seeking new members and supporters for the first proposed cricket international against Uruguay in Montevideo. It also announced exhibition boxing matches such as one between Johnny McKay and William Valley on 4 March 1864. The paper advertised the meeting to form the first football club in South America 'in a pension in Calle Temple, today Viamonte, where many young British resided' and the paper also reported on the first football game. As well as team sports, *The Standard* was a fervent promoter of athletics (Raffo 2004).

The Standard's editorial generally represented a distinctly British viewpoint. Another separate English-language newspaper, *The Southern Cross*, was founded in 1875 by Rev. Patrick Joseph Dillon for the Irish Catholic community, and

presented a Catholic and Irish nationalist viewpoint. *The Southern Cross* was also an important organ in the diffusion of sport in the Irish community. William Bulfin, the editor of the paper in the early 1900s, is credited with the formal introduction of hurling to Argentina, though it had been played earlier in the country in an unorganised fashion. In August 1900 a lengthy article on the rules of hurling were published in the paper. *The Southern Cross* also played an important role in women's hockey, when it published an article in June 1930 seeking players for the Argentine Federation of Hurling. Since then, Hurling Club has gone on to become one of the more successful teams in the country in both women's and men's hockey.

Sporting Contacts between Ireland and Latin America

Rugby

The most enduring and frequent sporting contact between Ireland and a Latin American country is that with Argentina in the sphere of rugby. The earliest international contacts with Argentina were through the British Isles team (colloquially known as the British Lions and, from 2001, the British and Irish Lions), who toured the country in 1927 and again in 1936, and included Irish players. However, it was not until 1952 that the first Irish team visited Argentina, making history in the process by becoming the first Home [10] rugby union to do so. 'The tour was nearly aborted due to the death of Eva Perón' (Cronin 2007: 48). The two international games against Argentina in Buenos Aires were non-cap internationals. Whilst Argentina lost the first test by six points they drew 3-3 in the second test in Buenos Aires, which was almost considered a victory for Argentina, as they had avoided defeat against a major rugby nation.

The Irish visited Argentina again in 1970 and lost the two tests, signalling the emergence of the Pumas as a rugby power. The Pumas reciprocated Ireland's gesture of being the first Home Nation to visit Argentina by making their first appearance in Europe in 1973 at Thomond Park in Limerick against Munster. *The Irish Times*

commented: ‘that Ireland should be the first hosts is extremely fitting, for we are pioneers among the Home Countries to tour South America, when we sent a party out in 1952’ (MacWeeney 1973: 3). The Pumas returned again in 1978, but only played one game against Leinster. Ireland planned a tour in 1985, but it was cancelled in the aftermath of the Falklands / Malvinas war.



Brazil fans from São Paulo and living in Naas, Co Kildare, near Croke Park before the Ireland-Brazil football match on 6 February 2008. Brazil won 1-0
(Dara Mac Dónaill, *The Irish Times*, 2008)

It was to be 1990 before sporting links were re-established. In a report in the *The Irish Times* the restoration of playing links with Argentina was warmly welcomed (Van Esbeck 1990:30). In that particular encounter the Pumas won 28-24. Perhaps the most infamous night in the history of Irish rugby was when the Pumas deprived Ireland of a place in a home 1999 World Cup quarter-final in Dublin. The Argentine team upset their Irish counterparts with a score of 28-24 in the final pool game in Lens, France. Since then, encounters between the Pumas and Ireland have metamorphosed into one of the most bitter rivalries in the sport, though this has been confined to invectives among the team and coaching staff as opposed to the fans. Ireland was drawn in the same pool against the Pumas again in the 2003 World Cup in Australia and in France 2007. At club level there has also been a lot of contact between the two countries. Club Atlético de San Isidro (C.A.S.I.) was one of the first clubs to tour Ireland in 1973.

Sporting contact has not always generated a forging of cultural understanding. One of the most bizarre incidents in sporting contact between Ireland and Latin America occurred in

August 1978 in Buenos Aires. Irish rugby international Willie Anderson was on tour with the Penguins rugby club (an international touring club based in the UK), when he was arrested for stealing the Argentine flag from a government building (Cronin 2007: 58) and demeaning a patriotic symbol. An editorial in *The Buenos Aires Herald* labelled the act ‘brainless buffoonery’. Two companions, fellow Irish internationals David Irwin and Frank Wilson, were also arrested, prompting calls for intervention from the British and Irish governments. The matter was even raised by an Argentine journalist with an irascible General Galtieri, who was then army commander-in-chief and senior member of the military *junta*. His response was ‘do not bait me. No one here is going to touch any flag and he who does will pay the consequences’ (*The Irish Times*, 16 August 1980). Although Wilson and Irwin were released after three weeks, Anderson was to spend over three months in prison before being cleared of any charges.

Football

In the area of football the contacts between Latin America and Ireland have generally pertained to *friendlies*. The first Latin American country to play Ireland was Argentina, who came to Dalymount Park in Dublin in 1951 and defeated the Republic of Ireland team by 0-1. The next encounter with a Latin American country was perhaps the most divisive in the history of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). In 1974 the FAI planned a foreign tour of Chile, Brazil and Uruguay. The proposed tour included a match against the Chilean national team in the National Stadium in Santiago de Chile. In doing so the Republic of Ireland team would become the first foreign side to play in Chile since General Augusto Pinochet’s military *coup* against the government of Salvador Allende in September 1973. Playing in the National Stadium would be particularly symbolic, as it was used as a detention centre following the *coup* for ‘at least 7,000’ political prisoners (Collier & Sater 2004: 360) and became the main centre for interrogation.

According to reports in *The Irish Times*, foreign minister Dr Garret Fitzgerald came in for

particular criticism from the Irish Committee for Chile for not publicly denouncing the proposed tour, as he had done with Irish Rugby Football Union's Lions Tour of South Africa. Despite the protests the tour did go ahead, also including Brazil and Uruguay, with the Republic of Ireland team defeating Chile 2-1. In an interview, Eamonn Dunphy, a member of the Irish team, was to later recall: 'When we went out to inspect the pitch, armed guards ordered us back to the dressing rooms. It was a sobering experience. I think most of the lads in the team realised we were being used then. The stadium was freshly painted for our visit so all traces of blood and torture were destroyed' (Sheehan 2005).

Field Hockey

In the area of women's sport, the most frequent contact has been through field hockey. Many teams from Argentina have visited Ireland and Irish teams have also toured Argentina. In 1959, the Argentine team visited Cork and Waterford and were given a civic reception by the Mayor of Waterford. A commentary in *The Irish Times* said 'it is a pity these touring sides could not have travelled more extensively throughout the country because their visits have stimulated interest in women's hockey'.

Latin American Involvement in Contemporary Sport in Ireland

The potential for any significant migration of sportsmen or women from Latin America to Ireland in recent years has been limited. The dominance of Gaelic games, which assert a distinct Irish identity and are amateur and non-international in character; the small population coupled with a low population density; and the limited attendant advertising, are all factors

which have limited the growth of fully professional sport in Ireland. The only team sport that is fully professional is rugby, which has four provincial teams. As the only fully professional sport, rugby does have a small, yet high-profile presence of Latin American players: Felipe Contepomi, star of the Pumas, is the fly-half for the Leinster team; Juan Francisco Gómez, originally from Morón in Greater Buenos Aires, also plays for Leinster; and Federico Pucciariello from Rosario in Argentina, who was capped for Italy, plays for Munster and was part of the team that won the European Heineken cup in 2005/06.

The extent of the Latin American community's involvement in sport in Ireland, both at a competitive and non-competitive level, is difficult to gauge. At a community level, there have been efforts to set up sports clubs for the significant Brazilian community - a manifestation of this been the establishment of 'Gort for Brazil FC', in Gort, County Galway. Shaughnessy (2007) has shown that there is evidence that there has been some cultural transference as some Brazilian children have taken up hurling.

On a coaching level, the presence of Latin Americans is almost non-existent, though one of the more innovative programmes in youth football in Ireland in recent years has been the emergence of the 'Samba Soccer' summer camp which brings Brazilian coaches to Ireland in the summer months, fostering stronger sporting links between Ireland and Latin America.

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Notes

[1] Cornish hurling is an outdoor team sport of Celtic origin, played with a small silver ball. It is similar to handball.

[2] In England the term 'public school' refers to fee-charging independent secondary schools.

- [3] The concept first appeared in Emile by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which described physical education as important for the formation of moral character.
- [4] Argentina and Uruguay.
- [5] In this instance the term means 'local' or 'home-grown'.
- [6] Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877) was a conservative politician who ruled Argentina from 1829 to 1852. Rosas was one of the first famous caudillos in Latin America.
- [7] Bartolomé Mitre (1821-1906) was President of Argentina from 1862 to 1868.
- [8] The AAFL was precursor to the Asociación del Fútbol Argentino (AFA)
- [9] It is generally accepted that there are historically two variants of the game: iomán which was played in the southern part of Ireland where the ball could be handled or carried on the hurley, and camán, which was akin to modern field hockey in that it did not allow handling of the ball and was played in the northern part of Ireland.
- [10] Home Nation refers to rugby teams from England, Ireland, Scotland or Wales.

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