

## **Irish Association Football in Argentina**

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Little has been documented about the descendants of Irish migrants and their connection with the introduction of football to Argentina, a country that is passionate about this sport to such an extent that it is now a powerful global competitor. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Hiberno-Argentines founded clubs such as Lobos and Porteño, which competed in the League of Buenos Aires, the first of its kind in South America. Both clubs have lasted until the present-day, but they do not identify themselves with the Irish community of Argentina. This shift is due to changes in Argentine sport which resulted in Hiberno-Argentines moving away from football into different spheres.

Argentina is recognised world-wide as a force to be reckoned with in football. One of the factors that might explain this supremacy is the early development of this sport in the River Plate when compared with the development of sport in other parts of the world. Football was regulated officially in England in 1863, and scarcely four years later it was already being practiced in Buenos Aires, where a small group of British residents, including some Irish people, founded the Buenos Aires Football Club (BAFC), a pioneer in South America.

But to what can we attribute this speedy development? The British colony in Argentina was small and isolated in the main, in the context of a country in which another language was spoken. The community strongly felt the urge to recreate 'ethnic associations' which could typify the culture of their country of origin and might serve them in a more long-term way during their residence in foreign lands. It is common to hear that football was introduced to Argentina by 'the English', but in fact the Irish and the Scottish played a significant part also. Even amongst the founders of the BAFC in 1867 there was one Dubliner, and another who hailed originally from County Armagh. Among the clubs that competed in the first years of the

Association Argentina Football League (AAFL, the first in South America), founded in 1893, were two clubs founded by Hiberno-Argentines: Lobos Athletic Club and Porteño Athletic Club.

Although this is not the place to elaborate greatly upon the characteristics of Irish immigration to Argentina, it is helpful to highlight some pertinent points. The total number of Irish migrants to Argentina in the nineteenth century is thought to be 40-45,000 (Murray 2004: 28). Almost all of these people moved to the province of Buenos Aires. [1] Compared with the numbers of migrants who went to North America, Australia or New Zealand, the number of Irish migrants who arrived in the River Plate region seems insignificant. Here however, they arrived at a destination in which an unfamiliar language was spoken, and though the Catholic faith was practiced they were immersed in a land where unfamiliar customs were practiced by entirely different peoples. This presented challenges to the possibility of swift integration.

Prior to the 1840s, the few Irish in Argentina were clustered mainly in the city of Buenos Aires. From that time, corresponding to a time of economic crisis in Ireland, an organised and continuous flow of immigrants began to increase. In 1844, Father Anthony Fahy arrived, and for the next three decades he played a fundamental role in the consolidation and the development of the Irish Catholic community in Argentina.

From 1870 onwards, the number of migrants diminished significantly, almost to the point of disappearing. This relates to the changes which the socio-economic structure of Argentina underwent at the time. This complicated Irish migrants' chances of becoming part of the community. Nevertheless, because of its own organic growth, the community of Hiberno-Argentines had doubled in number. In the 1890s, an internal migration began from communities in the countryside towards the city

of Buenos Aires and the other towns in the province. It was customary at this time for farmers and landowners to 'have a house in the city' and this coincided with the organisation of the clubs which we will now analyse.

### **Football in the Countryside: Lobos**

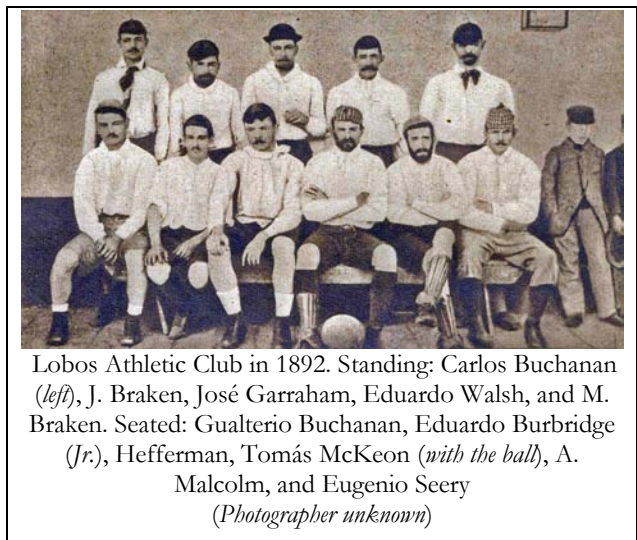
Work was tough and distractions few in the immense expanses of the Pampas. Marriages and wakes were the only forms of entertainment and social activity for those Irish migrants who spent most of their days taking care of ewes. As their income increased, they began to transform their way of life, sending their children to schools in the city, or to Britain and Ireland, as well as creating institutions which improved communication between members of the community. At the same time, many left rural life and became part of other sectors of the economy, such as the railroads. Within this context, the Hiberno-Argentines began to set up clubs in the region northwest of the province of Buenos Aires, like the Lobos Athletic Club, founded in the district of Lobos on 3 July 1892, 102 kilometres from Buenos Aires. In its foundation charter, the club set out its aims:

*Life seems very dull and monotonous in this town of Lobos and to make it a little more lively and agreeable a few of the youth of this place decided upon having some amusement in their leisure hours on Sunday. This amusement was decided upon and unanimously namely Association Football. To this effect a meeting was called and it was arranged to form a Club which was to be called "Lobos Athletic Club".*

The first board of Directors consisted of Edmundo T. Kirk (President), Carlos Page (Vice-President), Tomás McKeon (Treasurer), Eugene Seery (Secretary) and Tomás Moore (Team Captain). Other co-founders were Patricio Kirk, Tomás Garrahan, Santiago McKeon, Eduardo Burbridge, Juan Geoghegan, Lorenzo Owens, Felix Dolan, Hugo Lawlor, William Weir, José Joyce, Eusebio Eguino, Eduardo Slamon and Eduardo Burbridge (Jr.). Among them were several former students of Buenos Aires English High School. This school had been founded by the Scottish Professor Alexander Watson Hutton in 1884, who is recognised as 'The Father of Argentine

Football', as he introduced to Argentina the rules of association football, which prohibited handling, as distinct from the rules of Rugby Union, which did not. Watson Hutton taught football to his students, among whom were Tomás Moore and his cousins Tomás and Santiago McKeon, who were in charge of teaching the game to the other founders of the club. The Secretary's report tells of the beginnings of the club in the year of 1892-1893 as follows:

*As our members were few it was difficult to form two teams of eleven for our practice match, which was not to be wondered at, as with the exception of four or five none of us had ever played football before*



Lobos Athletic Club in 1892. Standing: Carlos Buchanan (left), J. Braken, José Garrahan, Eduardo Walsh, and M. Braken. Seated: Gualterio Buchanan, Eduardo Burbridge (Jr.), Hefferman, Tomás McKeon (with the ball), A. Malcolm, and Eugenio Seery  
(Photographer unknown)

Little by little however, new players were joining and before long they were able to form a good team which challenged clubs and schools in the city of Buenos Aires, achieving some astounding results. 'Before the gaze of our fiancées and families we felt invincible,' affirmed Tomás Moore. The first playing-field was located in the hinterland of the railroad, next to the station. At the outset they adopted the colours blue and white, but as many clubs had this strip in 1893, they changed the team colours to dark red and black. Years later Tomás McKeon remembered these first encounters on the field:

*The spectators were made up mainly of horsemen within our group, who in the classical position of fellow countrymen, edged to the front and were placed in rows at one side of the field. They were generally labourers of the same rank as the players*

*who took part in the match, and who came to see 'the children's' performance (Lucero 1962: 3).*

By 1894 the Lobos Athletic Club had one of the best teams in the country and was registered for the championships of the Football Association League of Argentina, which despite its name was really the League of Buenos Aires. Before the threat of armed conflict between Argentina and Chile arose, the football activity of the club became paralysed in 1896-1897. The climax came on 11 September 1898, when the club lost in the final to the Lomas Athletic Club.

The following year the Lobos Athletic Club became the first Argentine club to tour internationally. On 30-31 July 1899, they faced the Albión and Peñarol clubs in Montevideo, Uruguay, and defeated them 2-1, and 2-0 respectively. At the end of the second match a political revolution exploded in the Uruguayan capital and the team had to take refuge in a warship of the Royal Navy, which brought them back to Argentina.

However, during the 1899 season, other clubs petitioned the board of the League because they felt that the 102-kilometre trip to the grounds of the Lobos caused too many problems for them. As a result, in 1900 the AAFL (the Football Association League of Argentina) decreed that in order to participate in their championships, all teams must have a playing-field within fifty kilometres of Buenos Aires. As a result of not being able to compete, the Lobos team dissolved. Those members who had been students of the English High School reunited with former classmates and played in other clubs, a combination which resulted in the formation of the first great champion teams of Argentine football: Alumni. [2]

Between 1900 and 1911 Alumni were champions for nine seasons, [3] and eight of the former Lobos players had joined their ranks: Carlos and Walter Buchanan, Armando Coste, Guillermo and Heriberto Jordan, Juan McKechnie and Juan and Eugenio Moore. It is also worth emphasising that when the Argentine national team of the country's memorable early football history was put together, it contained the figures of Carlos and Walter Buchanan and Juan Moore, the latter being appointed Team

Captain. He played in Montevideo in 1902 when Argentina defeated Uruguay by 6-0.

Shortly after the foundation of the Lobos Athletic club in 1892, its members tried to establish similar clubs in neighbouring districts, but all these initiatives either failed outright, or were short-lived. Around 1897 in Salto, Salto Athletic Club was founded and their team was formed by the personnel of the ranches of 'Santa Rosa' and 'Las Rosas', mainly by the families of Duggan and Healy respectively. [4] At the same time, the Irish Argentine Football Club was founded in Rojas, with a powerful team who crossed the region, laying waste to all of its adversaries (Rodrigo 2001). And in Navarro, Lorenzo Gahan as President and his brother Federico as Team Captain headed a rather precarious Navarro Athletic Club.

### **Football in the City: Porteño**

On 28 July 1895 at the 'Confitería Las Familias' in the city of Buenos Aires, a group of students, all of Irish descent, organised a club which they named 'Club Atlético Capital' with the intention of playing football. According to a legend surrounding the club's inception, the students did not have enough money even to buy balls. This limitation motivated them to meet at a racecourse on 6 October of the same year in order to bet what little money they had on a horse by the name of 'Porteño'. The noble creature achieved a great triumph even though he was not one of the favourites, and the students returned from the races with enough capital not only to purchase balls, but also a kit for the team, boots and even bandages and some medicine. That same day they decided to change the name of their club to 'Club Atlético Porteño'. Another version of the story affirms that this club was founded specifically to oppose the clubs of other schools and English companies in Buenos Aires.

What is known for certain is that the first officials of this new institution were Tomás Gahan (President), Juan P. Feliberg (Secretary) José Ignacio O'Farrell (Assistant Secretary), Gerardo R. Kenny (Treasurer), Tomás Cavanagh (Vice-Treasurer), and Francisco Geoghegan (Team Captain). Shortly afterwards honorary presidents Santiago O'Farrell,

Guillermo Bulfin (editor of *The Southern Cross*), and Guillermo F. Frecker (a director of the British School) were appointed. Several of the organisers of the club were young students. The core group of founders was Alfredo Gahan, José Gahan, Miguel A. Kenny, Miguel Tyrrel, Miguel Dogerthy, José Cavanagh, Eugenio Kenny, Juan Aneil, Patricio Rath, Francisco Bowes, Héctor Mac Lean, Patricio Dillon, Santiago B. Kenny, Alberto Kenny and Eduardo O'Farrell. Navy-blue (almost black) with vertical white stripes were chosen as team colours.



Alumni, Argentina's First Division Champion in 1900, including six players from Lobos Athletic Club. (Standing): McEwen (referee), Carlos Carr Brown, Alejandro Watson Hutton (director of the English High School), Armando Coste, Diego Brown, and Walter Buchanan. Seated: Guillermo Jordan, Tomás Brown, Andres Mack, Ernesto Brown and Eugenio Moore. (On the ground): Juan José Moore, Spencer Leonard and Heriberto Jordan (Photographer unknown)

Their first match was on Sunday 4 August 1895, on some uncultivated land in the district of Chacarita, which was the scene of an amusing incident. The police detained the president of the club and various players on the grounds of 'immorality', due to their dressing in a manner which showed their uncovered legs. Victims of their own passion for sport, those detained were released within a few days after much negotiation (Palacio Zino 1920: 10). [5]

In 1899 the AAFL decided to create the Second Division. At that time the club had 42 members and registered its team in this new category. 'There is said to be splendid material for a good team of footballers, and no time will be lost in getting practice started', *The Standard* newspaper reported, on the topic of the Irish club ('Sport: Porteño A. C.',

*The Standard*, 20 April 1899, p. 5). During its first official season Porteño finished sixth out of nine participants and consisted of the following players: H. Chopitea, G. Hearney, T. Geoghegan, Torney, Laviaguierre y Rugeroni, Kenny, McDonald, F. Geoghegan (Captain), Tyrell and E. Hearne. The team was based in the district of Caballito. *The Standard* reported in the same year:

*The Porteño Athletic Club is now preparing a grand entertainment to take place in the Catholic Club of this city next July. The saloon, through the influence of the Porteño's Hon. President Doctor O'Farrell, has been generously granted by the Committee of the Catholic Club. It will be a grand affair. (...) The object of the concert is to get up funds to build a pavilion on the ground occupied by the Club in Caballito and belonging to the Irish Orphanage ('Editor's Table', *The Standard*, 28 July 1899, p. 6).*

Porteño remained in the Second Division until the 1907 season when it was promoted to the First Division. A major achievement was garnered in 1911 when they ended the season on top, defeating the powerful Alumni club by 2-1. The following year a split occurred in the organisation of Argentine football and two federations emerged as a consequence. Porteño affiliated themselves to the *Federación Argentina de Football* and were crowned champions, however there were no longer any Irish surnames on the Porteño team.

### Common Characteristics of both Clubs

Throughout their history, both clubs shared common ground in some aspects. Both the Lobos and Porteño clubs were initiated to give priority to football, a sport which was practiced in all English-speaking circles, both ignoring cricket. In 1895, *The Standard* newspaper tried without success to form a Hiberno-Argentine team of cricket players to be called the 'United Irish Team' (UIT). It was referred to ironically as 'the Marylebone Cricket Club of the Plate.' It should be remembered that the editors and publishers of the newspaper, the Irish Mulhall brothers, showed great loyalty to the British Crown. *The Standard's* pages never contained news of notices or statistics of the UIT, inviting the assumption that the entire initiative failed, or

that it was merely a farcical enterprise. [6] In addition, in the summer of 1897-1898 the first cricket championship was played in Buenos Aires, but neither the Lobos nor Porteño were present. [7] In the particular case of Lobos, the club's minutes of 1894 recount:

*Our cricket season began in October when the weather got too warm to continue playing football. This game, due to the lack of excitement it affords to beginners, and the excessive heat, did not take well, and after three or four frail attempts, it was ultimately given up completely, and to this day it has remained a dead letter.*

Another particularity which distinguishes both clubs is that each continues to exist up to the present day, yet neither one can count among its members any Hiberno-Argentines. The Lobos club celebrated 110 years of existence in 2002. Its centennial trajectory did not however mirror its auspicious beginnings. It never returned to the First Division of Argentine Football League, but it continues to participate in regional leagues. Porteño, for its part, alternated between good and bad seasons. The club continued to play in the official Football League until 1929, when the concealed professionalism of most of its rivals was impossible to continue to deny. Ever faithful to the spirit of amateur sport, the team made the decision to dissolve its ties with the official leagues and to disband the team altogether.

## **Notes**

[1] The original urban area began to extend towards the countryside. It first expanded towards the south (Cañuelas, San Vicente, Chascomús, Ranchos) and from the 1860s towards the west (Mercedes, Suipacha, Carmen de Areco, Exaltación de la Cruz, Luján, San Andrés de Giles), eventually advancing beyond the frontier with the indigenous population (Rojas, Chacabuco, 25 de Mayo, Bragado, Saladillo).

[2] The original name of the team was the 'English High School', but two years afterwards, the AAFL prevented them from continuing to use that name and they became known as 'Alumni'.

[3] They were champions of the Argentina Football Association (in reality this was the league only for Buenos Aires) in the years 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1909, 1910 and 1911. Alumni were disbanded at the beginning of 1912.

[4] The Football league of Salto, Bodas de Oro (Golden Jubilee), 1978. The first president of the league was Juan J. Moore.

[5] There was no mention of this game in *The Standard*, which in its edition of 5 August 1895 devoted a great amount of space to a game of rugby between a combined 'England and Ireland' team versus a combined 'Scotland and Wales' team, played in the district of Lomas de Zamora, Buenos Aires. The 'English/ Irish' team was formed by Treacy, E. Robson, F. Jacobs, H. Anderson, F. Chantrill, C.

The main sport of the club was in fact rugby and this continues today; in 1932 it competed in the championships of the Union of Rugby of Buenos Aires (URBA). It is a fact worthy of note that in 1938 Porteño merged with *Sportive Française*, a conjunction which resulted in the incorporation of many families of French origin into its ranks. Since its beginnings as a rugby team, the club colours have been blue with sky-blue horizontal bands. It was first based in Palermo, but the club's history is characterised by constant movement of locale. Its location has changed nine times in total. From 1971 it has had its grounds in the district of San Vicente, to the south of the city of Buenos Aires.

Around 1910, the concealed professionalism or 'shamateurism' of Buenos Aires football began to rear its head. At this point Anglo-Argentines 'took refuge' in the leagues that were specifically for the schools or companies of the British community, such as the railway leagues. With the passing of the decades, English-speaking sportsmen turned their attention to rugby or cricket, but by this time Ireland had already become politically divided. Now the club of choice for the Irish community in Buenos Aires is the Hurling Club, founded on 22 August 1922.

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Holway, G. C. Kennard, A. Jones, L. Jacobs, D. Hannay, C. Smiles, W. Smiles, Smiles, Liversidge and R. Brooking. It should be borne in mind that the English language press in Buenos Aires was reluctant to publish policing matters involving the English-speaking community.

[6] See for example, "Sport", *The Standard*, 29 February 1895, p. 7.

[7] Participating clubs were Hurlingham, Belgrano, Buenos Aires, Flores, Lanús, Lomas and Palermo. The first cricket championships were held under the auspices of the Buenos Aires Cricket Club, in its role as custodian of the sport. La Asociación del Cricket Argentino (Argentine Cricket Association) was founded in 1912.

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