

The Development of Rugby in the River Plate Region: Irish Influences

By Hugh FitzGerald Ryan



A very pleased Old Christians team, including Roberto Canessa (*left*) and Gustavo Zerbino (*right*), both Andes survivors. Gustavo is the current president of the Uruguay Rugby Union (URU)
(*Photographer unknown*)

Origins of the game

Two years before the irascible Duke of Wellington [1] scored his final victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium, young Matthew Bloxam entered Rugby School. It is a cliché that Waterloo was in fact won on the playing fields of Eton, England, attesting to the vigorous and barely contained mayhem practised at the time on the sports fields of the English public schools. Sixty-four years later Bloxam wrote his recollections of the game of football as played at Rugby in his times. These games consisted of selected teams of twenty or so, to which others might attach themselves as they saw fit, not dissimilar to a form of football known as *caid* quite common in Ireland at that time. He remembered William Webb Ellis, a boy ‘with no lack of assurance,’ whose time at Rugby overlapped with his. It was this boy who allegedly broke the rule on handling the ball. According to Bloxham, on one occasion in 1823, on catching the ball, Ellis did not retire to

take his kick, but rather, ‘with a fine disregard for the rules of football,’ ran forward with the ball in his hands, towards the opposite goal. If a junior boy had done this, wrote Bloxam, ‘he would probably have received more kicks than commendations’. This in time was to become the apocryphal account of the origin of the game. ‘It is an attractively subversive story, impossible to prove beyond doubt’ (Richards 2007: 24).

The game was adopted by other public schools as ‘Rugby football with some exceptions’ and inevitably, as the British Empire spread to many parts of the world, its administrators and army officers brought the game with them. In 1871 the English Rugby Football Union was formed, and the laws were codified as they were to apply wherever the game was played. Scotland, Ireland and Wales followed suit in 1873, 1874 [2] and 1880 respectively. For almost a century the game was strictly an amateur game.

The schism which led to the creation of the Northern Rugby Football Union (NRFU) in Yorkshire, England (later to become rugby league) in 1895 was deep and bitter. The kernel of the dispute was that some believed that working men should be compensated for the loss of a day's or a half-day's pay, while others regarded rugby as exclusively a game for 'gentlemen', presumably with private means. It took ninety-nine years and 364 days for the International Rugby Board to concede the principal of payment for playing, due in a large degree to the vast amounts of money flowing into the game from advertising and television, as well as a drain of players to rugby league.

Introduction to the River Plate

British games arrived to the River Plate with British citizens who were involved in trade, rather than with imperial administration and conquest. Sports clubs served a valuable social function for immigrants who had little affinity with bull-fighting or other sports of Spanish origin.

Rodeo, the pre-eminent sport of the *gauchos*, is still popular and attracts thousands to the spectacle of the *domador* (the horse breaker / tamer) in the Prado Park in Montevideo during Holy Week. A visitor from Ireland would have been struck by the similarities to the Royal Dublin Society's Horse Show, [3] even in the design of the exhibition buildings. However, the differences were more striking. This is a week of wild horses, broken bones and *gauchos* in flamboyant costume, with *facóns* (long knives) tucked into their belts.

As in Ireland and Britain during the early nineteenth century, cock-fighting was prevalent at the time, as a focus for gambling. Legend has it that many a man gambled his wife's honour at these events, certainly not the action of a gentleman!

Despite its ancient origin, - it was played at Troy by Achilles and Patroclus - the *gaucho* gambling game *taba* was frowned upon by the civil authorities and eventually outlawed. Not dissimilar in concept to 'Pitch and Toss', [4] it is played with the knuckle bone of a cow and

attracted extravagant bets on how the bones might fall. It remains illegal in Uruguay, except on election-day. The newly arrived *inglés*, despite the emphasis on the Classics in his or her public school education, would most probably have regarded it as they would have regarded Pitch and Toss home, a pursuit for corner boys and wastrels.

The largest bull-ring in South America was completed at Colonia del Sacramento in southern Uruguay in 1912, the same year that bull-fighting was made illegal in the country, attesting to the decline of the old amusements in favour of the imported European games and to some spectacularly bad timing on the part of the promoters.

The Montevideo Cricket Club (MVCC) illustrates the situation of the new immigrants well and may serve as a paradigm for developments in Argentina also. Founded by an *inglés* involved in the meat trade as the Victoria Cricket Club in 1842, it withered almost immediately due to the siege of Montevideo, which began the following year and lasted until 1851. General Rivera and the Colorado party declared themselves to be the defenders of liberty and with the help of Britain and France, fortified the city against General Manuel Oribe, the Blanco party and their ally, the dictator Juan Manuel Rosas of Argentina. Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Italian national hero, was among the foreign volunteers who came to defend this 'New Troy'. Most of the inhabitants of Montevideo were European at that time, though there was a substantial community of Afro-Uruguayans. It is doubtful if there was any space for field games within the walls during those years. Presumably the traditional games went on as before. The government was obliged to impose severe duties on imports, which may explain why the Cricket Club was unable to import bats, balls and stumps until 1862.

Paradoxically during two decades of war and political upheaval, British influence and commercial activity increased in Uruguay. The production of wool expanded rapidly, in inverse proportion to the decline of cotton production during the American Civil War.

British investors such as the Drabble Brothers and MacIntyre developed new production techniques, notably the enclosure of pastures with barbed wire and the introduction of British breeds of sheep and cattle. In 1862 the firm founded by German chemist Justus von Liebig in London, The Liebig Extract of Meat Company (Lemco) began to produce their famous meat extract at Fray Bentos.

The government of Bernardo Berro, from 1860 to 1864, introduced many liberal reforms, set up a new and strong currency using the gold standard, and separated the Catholic Church from state institutions, especially education.

The MVCC reappeared under its present name at a meeting in 1861 of the original founders, at the fashionable *Confitería Oriental* in Montevideo. Its objective was to foster all sports, including rugby, athletics, rowing and football. Tennis and the use of the velocipede were also later introduced.

The Bank of London opened a branch in Montevideo in 1863, and in 1865 Montevideo Waterworks was set up by a British company to provide a source of clean drinking water, encouraging more British settlement and investment. Thousands of comparatively affluent Brazilian troops passing through Montevideo during the Paraguayan war [5] brought about a large injection of cash into the economy. The first railways were also built at this time. In 1876, during a period of political stability and prosperity, Uruguay purchased English railway equipment and a further influx of British immigrants took place. The employees of these enterprises all gravitated towards the sports clubs already in existence or founded their own along similar lines. Names of football clubs such as the Carmelo Wanderers are evidence of the direct influence of the *ingleses* in their foundation. President Pedro Varela in 1875, noted for his progressive and egalitarian education policies, remarked that he felt like the manager of a great *estancia*, the owner of which lived in London. Indeed the impact of the British community would in less than two decades manifest itself in the highest echelons of political power, when in

1894 a Scottish-Argentine, Duncan Stewart was appointed interim President.

A cricket match against Buenos Aires Cricket Club, scheduled for 1864, was postponed until 1868. The first international competition of its kind in South America was delayed various significant events: the *Cruzada Libertadora* of Venancio Flores; the overthrow of the Blanco government; the massacres at Paysandú; the war against Paraguay; the assassination of Flores; the subsequent assassination of Berro; and a massive outbreak of cholera on both sides of the River Plate.

From 1863 to 1865, Flores, with troops from Brazil and Argentina, raised a revolt against Berro and the Blancos and ravaged the country north of the Río Negro. He was responsible for the massacre of the citizens of Paysandú and the destruction of their town. He wrested power from the Blancos and began to roll back the reforms instigated by Berro. In this he was supported by the Catholic Church and conservative elements in society and in the military. He involved Uruguay with Brazil and Argentina in a war against Paraguay that resulted in the devastation of that country.

On 19 February 1965, during a heatwave and with an outbreak of cholera in the city, Berro, regarded as a man of peace and reconciliation, staged a coup, beginning with the assassination of Flores and seizure of the government buildings. The young son of Flores came to do reverence to the decapitated body of his father. Tearfully he embraced his former mentor and friend, Bernardo Berro, drew a pistol from his coat and shot him dead. There followed a reign of terror, partly precipitated by an English telegraph operator in the new Proudfoot Telegraph Company, who confused 'vénganse' (come!) with 'vénguense' (take revenge!), in a message to military commanders. The episode exhibited to perfection all the elements of Shakespearian tragedy, especially the dramatic unities of time and place. The heatwave abated. The executions petered out and play was resumed. In calmer times both clubs played the first international rugby match in the region in 1874.

The first football match in Uruguay was played between a team from MVCC and a team from a visiting British ship in 1878. The story of the expansion of Association Football in South America is well known. The game of rugby was eclipsed by the increasing passion for *fútbol*.

English cricket clubs were the incubators of rugby's development in the River Plate region (Richards 2007:54). Rugby later gained a firm foothold in the clubs established by the English schools during the 1870s and 1880s. Significantly, these schools also enrolled Uruguayans and Argentineans, integrating the colleges and their sports into the mainstream of Uruguayan and Argentinean life and leading to the formation of clubs throughout both countries. The game advanced rapidly in Argentina and in 1899 the River Plate Rugby Football Union was formed, later to be Unión Argentina de Rugby (UAR). However, the club had to wait until 1987 to be affiliated to the international board (IRB), when they were invited to compete in the inaugural World Cup. 'Rugby criollo' was introduced in 1949 at the Carrasco Polo Club (Richards 2007: 164). Uruguay did not form its own union until 1951. Appropriately the first president of the union was Carlos E. Cat, a leading figure in Montevideo Cricket Club, who had played rugby for San Isidro Club in Argentina. There would also appear to be an Irish link with the foundation of the Uruguay Rugby Union, as its first honorary secretary was a Mr D McCormack. The game is constituted on an amateur basis in both countries.

Irish Involvement

Two events of significance occurred in Montevideo in May 1955. Firstly, the last tram of the crumbling British transport system rattled along the route from central Montevideo to Punta Carretas, a suburb on the coast. Britain had amassed large debts to Uruguay for the supply of foodstuffs during the Second World War and arguably, a debt of honour for its assistance in the destruction of the German warship *Admiral Graf Spee* at the outbreak of hostilities. Drained by the cost of the war, Britain, in the grip of rationing, harsh

winters, poor harvests and facing the imminent loss of its Empire, could not or would not pay the debt. Instead, British interests were persuaded to sign over ownership of the rattle-trap, ill-maintained transport infrastructure to the Uruguayan state. Most of the system was decommissioned forthwith. This was perhaps a shrewd deal for Britain, but definitely not for cricket! [6] Secondly, a small group of Irish Christian Brothers opened a school at Carrasco, a leafy suburb on the outskirts of the city. This school, Stella Maris, was to attract worldwide attention in 1972, following the crash of Flight F-227 of the Uruguayan Air Force, high in the Andes.

The Irish Christian Brothers, colloquially known as 'the Brothers', were founded in County Waterford, Ireland, by Edmund Ignatius Rice, a devout Roman Catholic and philanthropic businessman in that city. He opened his first school for the education of poor boys in a stable in Waterford in 1802 with the support of the local Roman Catholic bishop Thomas Hussey. Using his own money to provide food, clothing and books for the students and the teachers who came to join him in his work, and having overcome many difficulties, the order of the Irish Christian Brothers was finally sanctioned by Rome in 1821. It was designated as a religious congregation of men, as opposed to ordained clergy. By this time they had founded schools in many parts of the country, under the patronage of local bishops (Cullen & O' Toole 1979).

The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 posed an unexpected threat to the existence of the Order. The bill proposed to continue the law of 1791, forbidding religious orders from recruiting new members, under threat of transportation to the penal colonies. [7] A delegation to London bearing a petition signed by thousands of prominent people of different Christian denominations secured an interview with the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, the famously reluctant Irishman. [8] Edmund Rice's brother, Fr. John Rice was a member of the delegation. He explained clearly the work done by the Brothers in the fields of

education and charity. The Duke replied in a characteristic fashion:

'You exist contrary to the law. You may perceive that the people of this country are hostile to you.' The law remained, but Daniel O'Connell, [9] a Catholic lawyer known as The Liberator in Ireland, advised Edmund Rice to disregard it. It was O'Connell who famously remarked that he could drive 'a coach and four' [10] through any act of parliament. Nevertheless, its presence created financial difficulties for the Brothers. They found that they could not affiliate to the new state-funded multi-denominational National Schools system that was set up in 1831 as these schools were strictly secular, (as were the public schools set up in Uruguay in the 1870s.) In order to survive, the Brothers introduced a system of fee-paying schools, whereby the better off subsidised the education of the poor.



To some degree this question arose wherever the Brothers opened schools, as they were to do in many parts of the world. Stella Maris in Carrasco and Cardenal Newman College in Buenos Aires are regarded as schools for the more affluent middle class. Nevertheless the schools have been consistently involved in social and charitable work in their communities, following the teaching of their founder. Cardenal Newman, founded in 1948, was their first school in South America, followed by schools in Uruguay, Peru and Paraguay. The influence of the Brothers has waned in modern times and their numbers have diminished.

'The Spirit of the Scrum'

Stella Maris was to a certain extent an offshoot of the Brothers' Cardenal Newman School. It had taken quite a few years for the Brothers in Dublin to accede to repeated requests from Catholic parents and clergy in Buenos Aires. The Order was more inclined to concentrate on the English-speaking countries of the Empire.

Nevertheless, Cardenal Newman School opened in 1948. Some of the Brothers from the earliest times are still attached to the college and, in some cases, still active in social work with elderly and underprivileged fellow parishioners.

A group of Catholic parents based in Uruguay came to Buenos Aires and petitioned the Brothers to found a similar school in Montevideo. They had originally approached a congregation of Canadian Jesuits, but liked what they saw in Buenos Aires. From the outset, the Brothers insisted that the college would be English-speaking and that the education provided would be Catholic. Moreover, physical education and sport would play a major role in the life of the college. Given the perceived aversion of the Brothers to 'foreign games' (any sport of British origin) in Ireland, it is interesting that they chose rugby as the dominant game at Cardenal Newman and at Stella Maris. Moreover, Uruguay was still basking in the glory of two wins in the football World Cup competition: the inaugural World Cup in 1930, which was held at the Estadio Centenario in Montevideo, and the 1950 World Cup in Brazil. When they had first arrived 'rugby was hardly played at all there' (Reid 1974:21).

The reasoning behind the choice of rugby was that it encouraged teamwork rather than the cultivation of individual stars. At all times boys were taught to play fair but hard, and to support one another, all striving together towards a common goal. This spirit of cooperation permeated all aspects of the life of the school and still does. This attitude contributed to what has been called 'the mystery of Christians'. The Brothers, some of them new to South America and speaking little or no Spanish, learned from the boys and *vice versa*.

As the first generation of graduates left the school, many imbued with a passion for rugby, they decided to continue practising the game and in 1965 established 'Old Christians' Rugby Club. Reflecting the Irish link, they adopted the shamrock as the club's crest. Within a short period of time they became a dominant force in

Uruguayan rugby. In 1968 they won their first Uruguayan National championship, and their second in 1970. They made their international tour to Argentina in 1970 and the following year went to Chile, chartering a plane from the Uruguayan air force.

Such was the success of the 1971 tour to Chile that it was decided to do another tour the following year, again chartering a plane from the air force, recruiting friends and relatives to help fill the plane. On 13 October 1972 the flight (F-227), which flew via Mendoza in Argentina, crashed in the snow-covered peaks of the Andes on its way to Santiago de Chile. The survivors initially survived with scarce food reserves salvaged from the plane, but once these supplies ran out, they were forced to feed themselves on the bodies of their dead companions (Reid 1974) and (Parrado 2006).

Initially the young men turned to their team captain for leadership. They attributed their survival to a great extent to the attitudes and discipline inculcated in them by the Brothers, and to their involvement in rugby. They invoked the 'Spirit of the Scrum'. They prayed together as they had at school and sang their school chants and songs.

Nando Parrado and Roberto Canessa undertook a ten-day expedition of incredible risk and hardship over the Andes, securing the rescue of their fourteen surviving companions, [11] after seventy-two days in the mountains. On returning to Montevideo, the survivors consulted Brother John McGuinness, the director of the college, as to how they should deal with the frenzy of media attention. His simple answer was 'Tell them the truth'.

This most extraordinary of 'rugby stories' focused world attention on Uruguay and on Stella Maris and defines to this day the spirit of the school. Fittingly, thirty years later, a selection including a dozen of the survivors played the match originally intended for 1972, which they won by twenty-eight points to eleven. Roberto Canessa, one of the try scorers, remarked: 'We were really up for the game. We were focused, just like thirty years ago.' Most of the survivors are still closely involved with the

school and with the Old Christians club. Many of them are distinguished members of the professions and commercial life in Uruguay. Nando Parrado is prominent in the media and in business. Roberto Canessa is Uruguay's leading paediatric cardiologist and in 1978 he was picked to play on the South American rugby XV, named the Jaguars.

Although the Brothers had an influential role in Uruguayan rugby, establishing the foundations for one of the country's most successful clubs and the diffusion of the sport in the country, their contribution to Argentinean rugby was on a smaller scale, as the game was well established by the time Cardenal Newman College was founded. Nevertheless they still made a significant contribution to Argentinean rugby. Club Newman was founded in Benavides, Buenos Aires in 1975, by graduates of the school, and the Club competes in the first division of the Rugby Union of Buenos Aires (URBA) championship. 'Pumas' (Argentinean national rugby team) players who got their start in Club Newman include the Contepomi brothers, Felipe and Manuel, and Marcos Ayerza.

The Modern Game

Argentina played its first full international game against a touring British Isles team in 1910. Distance, two World Wars and lack of funding limited international involvement until the later decades of the century. The game spread within Argentina itself. There are eighty clubs in the greater Buenos Aires area and about four hundred throughout the country. In the Northwest, the game comes close to surpassing football in popularity. More than seventy private schools, mostly bilingual as a result of British and Irish influence, and twenty universities, predominantly in the Buenos Aires area, have their own rugby teams. Women's rugby has begun to develop in a handful of clubs. The season runs from March to November. This has enticed European teams to tour there for an easy run up to the Six Nations, only to be severely mauled by the Pumas. There have also been Irish links with the Pumas: two coaches were of Irish origin, Adolfo 'Michingo' O'Reilly during the 1980s

and Dermot Cavanagh during the 1960s. There have also been players of Irish origin, including Santiago Phelan, who played in the late 1990s and retired in 2003.

In their first World Cup, the Pumas scored a win over Italy but finished bottom of their pool on points difference. In subsequent World Cup tournaments and Test Series they scored notable wins over all the Six Nations teams and gave the All Blacks a severe fright, allaying any notion that they are a second-tier force in the rugby world. In the 2007 World Cup they devastated Ireland and went on to destroy the reigning champions, France, twice, coming third overall in the tournament. Many Argentinean players play professional rugby in Europe including Agustín Pichot, Felipe Contepomi and Juan Martín Hernández. Contepomi, a graduate of Cardinal Newman College, playing for Leinster, was named as the sports writers' player of the year in Ireland in 2007. He made his international debut against Uruguay in 1995 and established himself as a formidable force with Bristol in England and later with Leinster, enabling him to complete his medical studies in Ireland.

Although the UAR considered a change to its statutes which would allow professionalism in Argentina's domestic leagues, this was unanimously rejected in an extraordinary meeting in January 2008. Whilst some were pushing for inclusion in the Six Nations competition, it seems more likely that Argentina's future lies with the Tri-Nations competition in the Southern hemisphere.

On the opposite bank of the Plate, the game similarly remains steadfastly amateur. After the formation of the Uruguay Rugby Union (URU) in 1951, four teams took part in the first club tournament: Carrasco Polo, Colonia Rugby

(now defunct), Old Boys and Montevideo Cricket. Since then Old Christians, Los Cuervos, Champagnat and El Trébol (Paysandú) have joined the competition. Carrasco Polo has been the dominant champion for most of this time, winning twenty-one championships, followed by Old Christians with sixteen. Old Christians won the Championship in 2007. Brother McGuinness, speaking from retirement in County Kilkenny, expressed regret that the game was changing from an open, running game to one of 'big hits' and increased physical contact. He kept a close eye on the rugby scene in Uruguay. He maintained that Carrasco Polo retained its dominance by recruiting the biggest players available.

The Punta del Este Sevens attract the best players in South America and formerly some of the most outstanding players in the world, such as Jonah Lomu. The tournament is a major tourist attraction in Punta del Este and one of the highlights of the rugby year in the region. The URU puts a great deal of effort into organising youth rugby in the country by encouraging clubs and schools. In this way they have enlarged the pool of up-and-coming players, to the benefit of the clubs and ultimately, it is hoped, the national team, Los Teros. [12] On the international level Los Teros have won twenty, drawn one and lost thirty-eight. Notable wins were against Georgia in the World Cup in Australia; 18-12 against Portugal in 2007, following a previous defeat; 43-15 against Chile in 2006 and a spectacular recovery against Chile in 2007, coming from 27-0 at half-time to win by 35-34. Unfortunately they failed to qualify for the World Cup in France in 2007.

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Notes

- [1] Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769 -1852), was a British Army soldier and statesman, and is considered one of the leading military and political figures of the first half of the nineteenth century.
- [2] The Irish Football Union (IFU) was formed in Dublin in 1874 and in 1875 the Northern Football Union (NFU) was founded in Belfast. The two bodies agreed to merge in 1879 to form the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU).
- [3] The Royal Dublin Society (RDS) was founded in 1731 to promote and develop agriculture, arts, science and industry. The society's main premises and main arena in Ballsbridge, a suburb of Dublin, hosts an annual international showjumping week entitled 'Dublin Horse Show, culminating in the Aga Khan Showjumping final.
- [4] Pitch and Toss is a simple coin game, known by this name in Britain since at least the eighteenth century.
- [5] The War of the Triple Alliance, also known as the Paraguayan War, was fought from 1864 to 1870; it was fought between Paraguay and the allied countries of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.
- [6] An idiom which is used especially in England and Wales meaning something is unfair.
- [7] Initially the British used North America as a penal colony, the most famous being the Province of Georgia. Convicts were transported by private sector merchants and auctioned off to plantation owners upon arrival in the colonies. After the American independence in 1779 this avenue was closed off. Australia was to later take its place with penal colonies such as Norfolk Island, Van Diemen's Land and New South Wales.
- [8] When someone commended him as a famous Irishman, he replied 'Being born in a stable does not make one a horse.'
- [9] Daniel O'Connell (1775 -1847) was Ireland's predominant political leader in the first half of the nineteenth century. He campaigned for Catholic Emancipation - the right for Catholics to sit in the British parliament in Westminster, which was achieved in 1829 through the Roman Catholic Relief Act. In the 1830s Daniel O'Connell became a major figure in the House of Commons and was active in the campaigns for prison and law reform, free trade, the abolition of slavery and Jewish emancipation.
- [10] An idiom which means that lawyer can always find for their clients some loophole in the law.
- [11] José Pedro Algorta, Alfredo 'Pancho' Delgado, Daniel Fernández, Roberto 'Bobby' François, Roy Harley, José Luis 'Coche' Inciarte, Álvaro Mangino, Javier Methol, Carlos 'Carlitos' Páez, Ramon 'Moncho' Sabella, Adolfo 'Fito' Strauch, Eduardo Strauch, Antonio 'Tintin' Vizintín and Gustavo Zerbino
- [12] 'Tero' is the Spanish for Southern Lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*). It is the national bird of Uruguay.

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