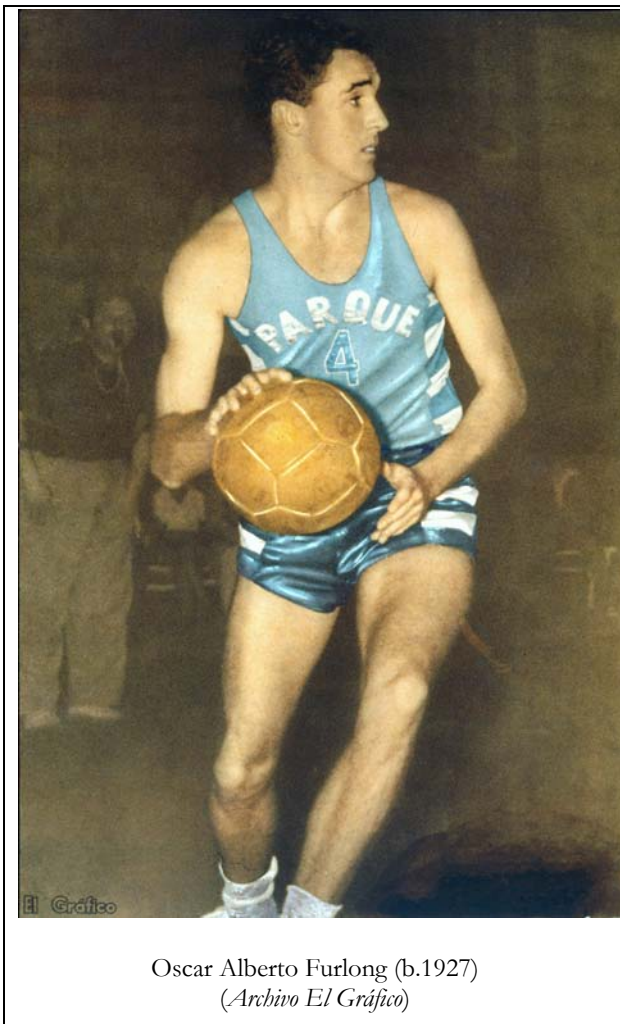


‘El Primer Crack’ of Argentine Basketball: Oscar Furlong

By John Kennedy

Since the turn of the millennium Argentine basketball has gained international prominence largely through the exploits of the San Antonio Spurs player Manu Ginóbili from Bahía Blanca, the only basketball player ever to win a Euroleague title, a National Basketball Association (NBA) championship and an Olympic gold medal. Nevertheless, other players such as Rubén Wolkowyski of the Boston Celtics have also contributed to the ascendancy of Argentine basketball in recent years. Over fifty years earlier another Argentine gained similar legendary status in the sport: Oscar Alberto Furlong, ‘*El Primer Crack*’. [1]



The sports periodical *El Gráfico* in its fortieth anniversary edition published in 1959 said of Furlong: ‘Here is the man who is the symbol of Argentine basketball. It could have been many other players, but if you ask anyone the name of an Argentine basketball player, the response surely will be Furlong and not only in our country, but abroad as well. Argentine basketball is Furlong and Furlong is the most skilled exponent and best in the class of this golden age’ (O.R.O., 2007: 99). Ricardo González, captain of the 1950 World Championship team, said of Furlong: ‘He was the Maradona of the age, the best [...], he understood the game like nobody else’ (CABB).

Oscar Alberto Furlong was born on 22 October in 1927 in Buenos Aires to Carlos Martín Furlong and Elena Chretienneau (Coughlan, 1987: 365-366). In 1887 Carlos’ father Pedro, who was descended from immigrants from County Wexford, established his own logistics company in the Port of Buenos Aires to transfer cargo between the port and its hinterland (Furlong Transportes). These were boom years for Argentine trade, with shipping using Argentine ports climbing from 2.1 million tons in 1880 to 7.7 million tons in 1889 (Rock, 1987: 153). The company established close trading links with the British-run railways and Express Furlong soon became one of the largest transportation companies in the country. As with other family members, Carlos was involved in running the business. When the railways were nationalised by Juan Domingo Perón [2] in 1948, ancillary companies linked to the railway were expropriated by the Government, and Express Furlong was among them. The directors and senior management of the company were subsequently prohibited from taking up positions in the transport sector for a period of ten years.

Furlong grew up in the middle-to-upper class neighbourhood of Villa del Parque in the Northwest of the City of Buenos Aires. The neighbourhood itself emerged due to an initiative during the presidency of Julio Argentino Roca [3] in 1901 to improve the teaching of agronomy, which had until then only been taught in the Faculty of Agronomy and Veterinary Science in the University of La Plata. In 1903 a field station was established along with a model farm. Over time Villa Devoto, an adjacent neighbourhood, began to expand toward the park. This part of the neighbourhood became known as Villa del Parque because of its proximity to the agronomy faculty. A railway station on the Pacific line was officially opened in August 1907 and on 8 November 1908 the neighbourhood was officially incorporated as a separate district of the city of Buenos Aires (Villa del Parque).

The first sports clubs in Argentina were established by the British, were closely associated with the railways and British commercial concerns, and generally catered for *ingleses*. Almost in parallel, new clubs emerged, founded by *criollos* and the general immigrant population. One of the first was Club Gimnasia y Esgrima (Gymnastics and Fencing Club), which was founded at a meeting in a café on Florida street in the centre of Buenos Aires in 1880 by Don Léon Marchand. The intention was to create a club exclusively for the practice of gymnastics and fencing (Piccirilli *et al* 1954: 436). Both sports reflected more continental origins - modern gymnastics evolved in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and fencing developed from Italian, Hungarian and French influences. Fencing was actively promoted in late nineteenth-century Argentina by French and Italian teachers (Piccirilli *et al*, 1954: 505). In time other similar clubs were founded, and they evolved, with broader sports offerings. This reflected the impact of the diffusion of organised team sports of British and North American origin, while clubs also served as a social centre for the community.

One such club was the Club Gimnasia y Esgrima Villa Devoto, founded in 1912. As the neighbourhood of Villa del Parque grew and matured, the residents decided that it was time to establish a sports and social club of their own, which would act as a focal point for the community. The Club Gimnasia y Esgrima de Villa del Parque (GEVP) was formally founded by a group of residents in the waiting room of Villa Parque Pacific rail station in June 1922. Among the founding committee were Carlos and Luis Furlong, Oscar Furlong's father and uncle respectively. Carlos was later to become president of the club. In July 1922, the club acquired the stables of a Mr Caputo and erected a hut of timber with a zinc roof, serving as its first clubhouse (GEV Parque). From its humble beginnings, it grew into one of the most renowned sports clubs in the capital and dominated Argentine basketball for much of 1940s and 1950s.

The sport of basketball was developed in 1891 by a Canadian physical education teacher James Naismith, at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) International Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, USA. Naismith had himself been an accomplished gymnast, lacrosse player and American football player in his youth. The impetus came from Dr Luther H. Gulick, an instructor at the college and a major promoter of muscular Christianity, who viewed the gymnasium as an intrinsic part in the salvation of man (Putney, 2001: 71). Naismith was tasked with devising a game that would fit with the association's new ideals of 'teamwork, ease of access and applicability to all ages' (Putney, 2001: 71). On a practical level it was not to take up much space, not to be too physically dangerous and to be played indoors.

The first rules for basketball were published in 1892 and did not include some of the most common features of today's game including the dribble. The sport spread rapidly throughout the United States and Canada, mainly through the work of YMCA missionaries. It later became a demonstration sport at the 1904 Games in St. Louis, USA. Finally it became an official Olympic sport at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. It was introduced to Argentina by

PP Philips, who worked at the Department of Physical Education at the YMCA in Buenos Aires and quickly gained in popularity (Lupo, 2004: 253).

GEVP was from its earliest days an exponent of basketball and affiliated to the now defunct Federación Argentina de Básquetbol (FAB) in 1926. In a major expansion of the facilities at the club in 1937, a dedicated basketball court was built. Soon after, the club achieved an ascendancy in the sport that lasted for many years.

Following in the footsteps of his parents Carlos and Elena, Furlong at first devoted his energies to tennis. Due to the popularity of tennis at GEVP the courts could only be booked for a non-continuous half-hour at a time. At that time, the club had a celebrated basketball team, which included Jorge Canavesi, who would later become a pivotal and indeed pioneering figure in Argentine basketball. Furlong then turned his hand to basketball too and started playing in the youth divisions, although he did not abandon tennis entirely. Following his half-hour practice in the tennis court, Furlong spent the second half-hour training in the basketball court, and then continued the rotation by returning to the tennis court. An innate capacity for playful mischievousness led his team-mates to christen him 'Pillín', [4] a moniker he became universally known by.

In 1944 at the age of seventeen, he became a member of the GEVP senior squad and the following year they became champions of the premier division. They came to dominate Argentine basketball over the following decade in a large measure due to Furlong's brilliance, winning six Buenos Aires championships in total: 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1951 and 1954. [5]

The 1948 Olympics were held in London against a backdrop of a city still recovering from the ravages of war. Argentina was one of fifty-nine countries to participate and only one of twenty-three nations to send a basketball team. Furlong was named as one of the fourteen members of the basketball team. Due to post-war austerity, there was to be no special

treatment for the Olympic athletes and they too would be subject to the same food rationing conditions as the local populace. For the purposes of the games the competitors were classed as heavy industrial workers and their rations allocated accordingly. As with other nations the Argentine delegation brought significant quantities of food with them. Also among the Argentine delegation were members of the Irish-Argentine institution Hurling Club, who were participating in the field hockey competition.

Only a short-time before, Mr Hawkes, president of the Argentine Confederation of Basketball (CAAB), had appointed Jorge Canavesi, former GEVP player and physical education teacher, as team coach. Whilst Canavesi did not prove particularly successful in the short-run, in the long-run this turned out to have been an inspired choice.

The Argentine basketball team was pitched against the USA and Czechoslovakia, among others in Pool C. The basketball team came only fifteenth out of twenty-three nations in an Olympics that was defined for Argentina by Delfo Cabrera [6] winning the marathon. Yet they did show some of their emerging talent in their pool game against the USA, losing by a respectable 57-59. However, during that game one Argentine player did stand out from the crowd and made a lasting impression on the coaches and scouts present. That was Furlong, who scored eighteen points in the game. In an interview, Jorge Canavesi recalled that Omar Browning, the American coach had said that 'apart from ourselves, Furlong of Argentina is one of the best players in the world' (Guterman & Gutiérrez, 2006a). He also made a big impression on Adolph Rupp, the legendary coach from the University of Kentucky.

The telegrams started flooding in with offers from the US-American National Basketball Association (NBA) and Furlong could have been the first player Argentine to play in that league. The Minneapolis Lakers (now the Los Angeles Lakers), even sent a contract ready for his signature. The Baltimore Bullets were also on his trail. However, Furlong had decided not to go to the USA and nothing would persuade

him otherwise. In an interview with the Argentine daily *La Nación*, he gave the following rationale for rejecting the offers he had received from the NBA: 'It was another age, where amateurism was important. I had it in my head to go and play at university, not as a professional. I had an offer from Racing of Paris, to study in the Sorbonne. I left it a while as I could not decide' (*La Nación*, 2000). Given what was to transpire a few years later, his steadfast commitment to the values of amateurism was one of the many great ironies associated with his career.

Noting the large number of countries that had decided to participate in the basketball competition in the 1948 Olympics, William Jones, Secretary General of Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) decided to push for the a World Championship competition at a congress held in the margins of the Olympics itself. A motion was carried at the congress to organise a world championship every four years in between the Olympic tournaments. The inaugural championship, to take place in 1950, was awarded to Argentina. There were a number of factors at play in awarding Argentina the inaugural championships: firstly, given that Europe was shattered by the war, there was no country that had the desire to hold it. Secondly, Argentina had a positive international image and had been a founding member of FIBA in 1932 (CABB). Finally, Perón, who had been a keen basketball player in his youth (Lupo 1999: 104), pledged his support. The venue for the event was the iconic indoor arena, Luna Park, at the corner of Corrientes Avenue and Leandro N. Alem Avenue in the centre of Buenos Aires; a venue inextricably linked with the modern history of Argentina.

As far as CABB and the coach Jorge Canavesi were concerned, nothing was to be left to chance; the team of twelve players [7] would undergo a long period of preparation to avoid the pitfalls of the 1948 Olympics, where they suffered a severe disadvantage in terms of team height. Canavesi engaged in intense preparation, studying the latest sports techniques emanating from Europe and the

USA and having them translated into Spanish. The team trained in the River Plate football club complex in Nuñez. For three months there was a gruelling schedule of six hours of training per day, including a run everyday from Nuñez down along Libertador Avenue to the Hipódromo in Palermo. Canavesi believed that the key was being faster and more athletic than the other teams, as they could not compete in terms of height. By contemporary standards, the training regime was very advanced and included four physiotherapists and an orthopaedist.

In their opening game the Argentine team won 56-40 against silver Olympic medal-holders France, which was a very promising start and pointed to even greater things to come. Furlong scored twelve of those points, Pichón fourteen points and the captain González thirteen points. Although the game against fellow South American rivals Brazil was more difficult, Argentina also won 40-35.

The defining game of the Championship took place on 3 November as Argentina faced the USA for the gold medal spot. The Luna Park arena was packed to capacity, with over 20,000 spectators crammed into the venue. *La Nación* reported that 'already from early on, large numbers of fans were in the vicinity, some to take a good vantage point and others with a faint hope of finding tickets which had been sold-out' (Trenado, 2000). Basketball fever had struck Buenos Aires. Both Argentina and the USA had unblemished records, both having won all five previous games. The USA were represented by the AAU Denver Chevrolets. The USA team had the distinct advantage of having the tallest contingent in the tournament with no less than nine players over 183cm.

At the end of the first half Argentina was winning by 34-24. Although the USA managed to close the gap to 40-37 in the second half, Argentina came back to dominate, earning a 64-50 victory. The hero of the night was Furlong, who scored twenty points and was the Most Valuable Player (MVP) and Top Scorer of the inaugural 1950 World Championship. Furlong later recalled, 'we were a very compact team and had much force. We played well with the

ball; we had a good defence and a good counterattack. We attacked in blocks - we had seen this done by the All Stars from California, a North American university that came to Argentina and who played very well in that period. We copied them' (*La Nación*, 2000). The key advantage that the Argentines had was speed, as they lacked the height of the Americans - the hard physical training they had undertaken under Canavesi had paid off.



Programme of the First World Cup, 1950, including the Coat of Arms of the Justicialist Party (Pedro Ferrandiz Foundation)

As soon as the game finished, the spectators invaded the pitch to congratulate the players. A torchlight procession accompanied the bus containing the winners as it made its way along Corrientes Avenue towards the legendary El Tropezón restaurant in Callao Avenue, where the team and management celebrated their achievement (López Vázquez 2002). The night is commonly referred to in Argentine sporting parlance as 'la noche de las antorchas'. [8]

'Authorities promote sports as a means to improve the physical and mental health of the society at large. Leaders also back sports, as a means of enhancing a country's image and helping legitimise an incumbent regime'

(Arbena & LaFrance, 2002: xii). Getúlio Dornelles Vargas (1882 -1954,) who served as president of Brazil during the 1930s, was the first Latin American leader to give politicians a formal role in sports promotion. Perón expanded the boundaries further by funding travel and training for athletes, giving grants to football clubs and organising sports (Arbena & LaFrance, 2002: xii).

No doubt cognisant of the political benefit of associating himself with sporting success, after the victory at Luna Park, Perón called the team to congratulate them. According to Ricardo González, team captain, Perón said: 'I am not worried about what political ideals you have. What you have done for Argentina is better than the work of a hundred ambassadors' (Guterman & Gutiérrez, 2006b). Perón's intentions may have been entirely noble, as he had been an enthusiastic sportsman in his youth and even played basketball (Lupo 203: 190). Whilst other sporting stars of the age, such as Delfo Cabrera and Juan Manuel Fangio [9] had dedicated their wins to him, the World Champions distanced themselves from politics. The captain, González, simply thanked the general public for their support (Guterman & Gutiérrez 2006b).

Despite the basketball team's desire not to entwine their sporting success with politics, Perón gave them a reward in the form of a permit for each of them to import a car up to a certain weight. As Ricardo González said in an interview, 'most chose a Ford Mercury, as it complied with the requirements' (Guterman & Gutiérrez 2006b).

Following World War Two, a new model of economic growth began to be promoted in Argentina. Import substitution industrialisation, or ISI, along with exchange rate controls, were adopted into the economic policy framework. In an effort to limit the country's dependence on the international markets, government-induced economic measures such as the nationalisation of domestic industry were aimed at encouraging a more internal, self-sustaining development. As a result strict controls were placed on the importation of many consumer products including cars, so a permit was a

prized reward. Rather than keeping the cars, some of the team members sold them on to third parties, making a modest profit in the process. They knew little at this time of the repercussions this would have on their careers a few years down the line.

In 1951 the now defunct Helms Foundation of Los Angeles awarded Furlong the prize of best South American athlete. The same year Furlong was a member of the team that won a silver medal in the 1951 Pan-American Games in Buenos Aires. The following year Furlong and the other members of the team came fourth in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, narrowly losing out on a bronze medal to Uruguay. Furlong played all eight games in that Olympics. At the World University Games of 1953 in Dortmund, Germany, Furlong was part of the Argentine team that won the Gold Medal.

Although Furlong rejected the possibility of playing in the NBA after the 1948 Olympics, he did eventually have a playing career in the USA, though it was strictly amateur. In 1953 he won a scholarship (covering the fees) to go and study at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas (SMU). He studied for a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and from 1953 to 1956 played on the University's team, which was in the premier division of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). As well as being an outstanding player, Furlong was also a pioneer in the Argentine game - he introduced the jump-shot [10] to Argentina after learning it during his three seasons with SMU. Though it is the most common shot today, it was a new innovation in the 1950s.

In September 1955 Perón was deposed in a military coup known as the *Revolución Libertadora*, and General Lonardi [11] assumed the presidency. Lonardi adopted a conciliatory policy towards Peronism, saying that there would 'neither be victors nor vanquished' (Romero, 2002: 131). This policy earned him the opposition of hard-liners, and in November of the same year, disillusioned and fatally ill, Lonardi was replaced by the hard-line General Aramburu. [12] With his vice-president, Admiral Isaac Rojas, he ruled by decree and

began a process of de-peronisation, vigorously purging Peronists from business, government and military posts. Even mention of Perón's name was forbidden (Rock, 1987: p335). As part of this process, Admiral Isaac Rojas appointed General Fernando Huergo to the presidency of the Argentine Olympic Committee (COI) and the Argentine Confederation of Sport (CAD-COA).

A commission was created to investigate irregularities in the field of sport, 'The Commission of Investigation in to Irregularities in Sports N° 49' (Lupo 2003: 341). Amador Barros Hurtado, President of the CABB, testified that all the world champions should be considered professional as they had breached the 'Amateurism Code' of the COI which prohibited sports-men and -women from receiving gifts. On 8 January 1957, all the World Champions were banned for life from participation in basketball. This has been described as 'sporting genocide' by the historian Víctor Lupo (Lupo, 2003: 339). Although none of the team members gave any support to Perón, merely having attained the World Championship during his period in power was enough to warrant sanctions from the new regime.

Furlong played his last game on 6 January 1957, when Villa del Parque won 71-52 to Welcome of Montevideo, scoring twenty of the points. The suspension of the golden generation of players at the height of their careers had major ramifications for Argentine basketball. It would be the 1990s before the country would again become a force internationally. One other consequence of this was that it also led to the demise of Buenos Aires as the epicentre of basketball in Argentina.

For Furlong the suspension brought down the curtain on a celebrated career, littered with many ironies, and still in his prime at age of twenty-nine, depriving Argentine basketball of one its greatest talents. In summary, his accomplishments included fifty appearances for the Argentine team, one World Championship, two Olympic Games, two Silver medals in the Pan American Games (Buenos Aires 1951 and Mexico City 1955), the Gold medal in the

World University Games of 1953 in Dortmund and six times Champion of Buenos Aires.

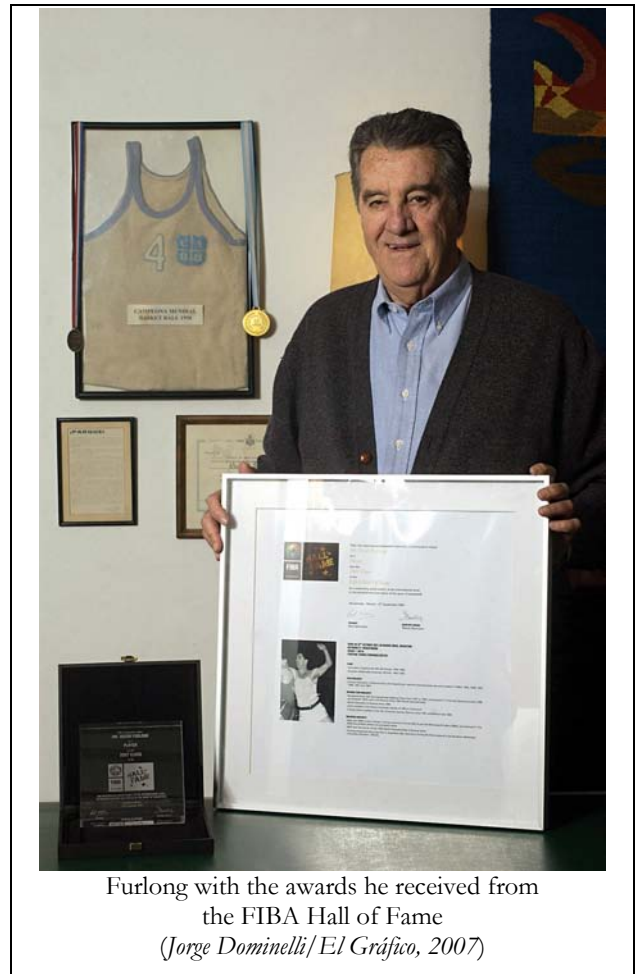
Not only is Furlong considered one of the greatest basketball players of all time, but he also excelled in tennis both as a doubles player and manager. Following his suspension from playing basketball, he concentrated on tennis and attained seventh in the national rankings. In 1966 he was invited to join the committee of the Asociación Argentina de Tenis (AAT), becoming vice-president. In the same year he was appointed coach of the Argentine Davis Cup team, a post he held until 1977. His greatest achievement was bringing the team to semi-finals of the Davis Cup in his final year as coach. Players under his tutelage included the legendary Guillermo Villas, the first South American male player to win a grand slam event, who first competed in 1970, and José-Luis Clerc in 1976.

Despite devoting considerable time to sport, he also built up a very successful business concern following his forced retirement from the game. In 1958, the ten-year moratorium on the Furlong family going into business in the transportation sector ended. Oscar, together with his brothers Eduardo and Carlos, founded Transportes Furlong, in Santa Isabel, Cordoba, concentrating on hauling cars from the new Kaiser Car factory. Transportes Furlong grew to become the one of the largest carriers in Argentina.

It was some years before Furlong's immense contribution to basketball was finally recognised, beginning in 1980 when he received one of most prestigious honours in Argentina, the Konex Platinum prize [13] for his contribution to Argentine sport. Other honours followed - he received the Delfo Cabrera prize from the Argentine Senate in 2005 and in the same year was declared a 'distinguished person' by the legislature of the autonomous city of Buenos Aires, along with the other world champions from 1950.

Acknowledgements

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On 1 March 2007, FIBA officially inaugurated its Hall of Fame in Alcobendas, Madrid, Spain and announced its first inductees, who were chosen on the basis of an outstanding contribution to the sport at the international level and an outstanding contribution to the development and status of the sport. Among the first inductees was Oscar Furlong. As a measure of his contribution and standing in the sport, not only did it include such stars such as Bill Russell, the renowned former Boston Celtics player and a contemporary of Furlong in the NCAA, but also, posthumously James Naismith, the founder of the game.

John Kennedy

Notes

- [1] Crack is a word in the Rioplatense dialect defined as a person who distinguishes him/herself in an extraordinary manner in an activity: Jose Gobello, *Nuevo Diccionario Lunfardo* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2003). The footballer Diego Maradona and the rugby player Juan Martín Hernández have been accorded this name in the Argentine press.
- [2] Juan Domingo Perón (1895 -1974), Argentine general and politician and three times President of Argentina.
- [3] Julio Argentino Roca Paz (1843 -1914), President of Argentina from 12 October 1880 to 12 October 1886 and again from 12 October 1898 to 12 October 1904.
- [4] Defined in the Oxford Spanish Dictionary as crafty devil or rascal.
- [5] The Argentine national championship was only created in 1984.
- [6] Delfo Cabrera (1919 -1981), Argentine athlete and winner of the marathon at the 1948 London Olympics. He was a close friend of General Perón and an active member of Justicialist Party.
- [7] Oscar Furlong, Raúl Pérez Varela, Ricardo González, Juan Carlos Uder, Rubén Menini, Omar Monza, Pedro Bustos, Alberto López, Roberto Viau, Leopoldo Contarbio, Hugo del Vecchio and Vito Liva.
- [8] The night of the torches.
- [9] Juan Manuel Fangio (1911-1995), was a race-car driver from Argentina, who dominated the first decade of Formula One racing in the 1950s.
- [10] Jump Shot: A shot performed while jumping in the air in which the ball is released at the highest point off the ground. It is often used when shooting over a defender trying to block the ball.
- [11] Eduardo A. Lonardi Doucet (1896-1956), de facto president of Argentina from September 23 to November 13 1955.
- [12] Pedro Eugenio Aramburu Cilveti (1903-1970), de facto president of Argentina from November 1955 to 1 May 1958.
- [13] The Konex Awards were established by the Konex Foundation in Buenos Aires in 1980 and are awarded on a yearly basis to distinguished personalities in Argentina in every national field.

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