

REINVENTING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN A WORLD OF  
GLOBALIZED SOCCER:  
THE CASE OF THE URUGUAYAN NATIONAL TEAM

By: Maia Cotelo

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APPROVED:

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Advisor: Dr. Oliver Dinius

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Second Reader: Dr. William Schenck

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Third Reader: Dr. Jeffrey Jackson

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## ABSTRACT

Soccer played a central role in Uruguay's national identity throughout the 20th century. The national team's triumphs in the first half of the century were seen as proof that the small nation could perform on a world stage. The mutually reinforcing relationship between soccer success and national identity weakened after 1950 when the national team stopped winning and when it entered into profound crisis in the 1990s as Uruguayan star players began leaving the country to play in better leagues abroad. The national team no longer provided the country with glory and the players were no longer mirrors of Uruguayan society. Through his 2006 project, Óscar Washington Tabárez tackled both of these problems. This thesis looks at how his institutional reforms and reinvention of the Uruguayan national team's image allowed for the modernization of the team as well as the emergence of a new relationship between national identity and soccer. This study serves as an example of how a peripheral soccer country can adapt to the changes of global commercialization, retain its national identity, and remain competitive.

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## **Introduction**

In November 2009, I walked into my father's study and caught him grinning. He looked up at me and told me that Uruguay had qualified for the 2010 World Cup. Dad and I had always bonded over my club and high school soccer games, but I had never shared his passion for Uruguayan soccer. Seeing my lack of enthusiasm, he added that qualifying was a big deal for Uruguay. I congratulated him and changed the topic. A month later, as we ate Christmas Eve dinner in Barcelona with family friends, my father pointed to the television as a highlight reel of a blonde player in a red and white striped jersey came on and said, "that is Diego Forlán. He is Uruguayan and one of the best in the Spanish league." I looked up and saw that Forlán played for Atlético Madrid, a team I had never heard mentioned in the United States, and looked away uninterested. I felt no connection to this Uruguayan player; I was a fan of Barcelona, the only team whose games I had ever seen on television in the United States. Barcelona was the only team whose players I knew and felt inclined to support.

After watching Uruguay's first World Cup game with my dad in early June, I began to read articles on the players and watch interviews on YouTube. As the tournament progressed, I started to skype my family in Uruguay after each match to hear about the excitement on the streets of Montevideo. By the semifinals I was so invested

that I spent my days reading comments on [FIFA.com](http://FIFA.com) articles just to see what people around the world were saying about the Uruguayan squad. Six months after shrugging off Forlán, I cried while watching the live coverage of the Uruguayan national team's return to Montevideo, because I wanted to be there; I wanted to be with my cousins, aunts, and uncles in the streets of Uruguay welcoming the very same players that months before I had considered irrelevant to my life. I knew that I had undergone a deep change in the previous month. I felt a connection and a comfort with Uruguay and my family there that I had not felt since moving away in 2001. After years of suppressing my Uruguayan identity, struggling to find topics of conversation with my family in Montevideo, and refusing to read in Spanish or practice the language, I had begun to spend hours each day listening to Uruguayan radio talk shows, reading the national newspapers, and calling my family members at *home*. The team had built a bridge for me.

It was the intensity of the connection that I felt to the 2010 Uruguayan team, a connection that developed in just weeks, that led me to spend these last four years studying the role of soccer in Uruguayan society. The 2010 World Cup team had a lasting impact on my life, leading me to join the Ole Miss Honors College's World Cup Initiative and choose a thesis topic about Uruguayan soccer. The experience had strongly influenced my identity, but I wondered whether the 'new' national team had strengthened other Uruguayans' sense of national identity, as well. My revitalized connection with Uruguay stemmed from the interviews, social media posts, and behavior of the national team; how had these mediums allowed me to develop such a strong connection to the group even while living in Mississippi? Why was this group different from previous

teams? These are the questions I have researched for the past four years and the ones that led me to focus on the relationship between the Uruguayan national team and fans for my thesis.

Soccer has always been a point of pride for South American countries. It has been one arena where they have been able to compete on equal footing with Europeans. Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay won half the World Cups held in the twentieth century; those victories enriched the national narratives of these countries. By the 1990s, however, the commercialization of club soccer in western Europe led to changes in global soccer that detrimentally affected all South American clubs and, eventually, national teams. Through partnerships with corporations, television rights, and merchandise sales, European clubs transformed soccer into a profit-driven industry. These advancements caused a divergence between the quality of South American and European clubs, resulting in the transfer of South America's top players to the European leagues.

In 1995, the Bosman ruling exacerbated the disparity between the two continents. The ruling caused a massive increase in the salaries offered by top European clubs, while also loosening the restrictions on the number of foreign players allowed on all European club rosters. This facilitated an international labor market for professional soccer players of all levels. Promising players began to leave the southern continent at younger and younger ages, meaning they lived most of their lives abroad and rarely played with their compatriots; this challenged the cohesiveness of South American national teams. The high transfer rates also caused South American clubs' quality of play to decline; teams began to be comprised of promising, young players waiting to be scouted, individuals

that were not good enough to play abroad, and older players that returned after their careers abroad had ended.

In this study, I focus on how global commercialization of soccer affected Uruguay, a small country of 3.5 million people whose success on the soccer field had been an important part of its national identity. With few battles and historical figures to commemorate, Uruguay derived many of its most revered heroes and epics from the soccer fields. Due to the global commercialization of soccer, Nacional and Peñarol, the country's largest clubs, became export factories in the 1990s. As players left the country at younger ages, became more affluent as European club salaries increased, and transformed into celebrities due to an increasing commercialization of the athletes' image, Uruguayans no longer identified with their national team players as they once had. The players were not simple or humble; they were not mirrors of the Uruguayan society. Uruguayans asked themselves: were these players actually representatives of the small, South American country, or of their flashy affluent clubs abroad?

Uruguayans' questioning of the national team players', and thus the team's, Uruguayaness challenged the connection between soccer and national identity in Uruguay. How could a group of soccer players living outside the country and playing by the rules of the global market be the symbol of a soccer nation with a glorious past? If we think of national identity as "a shared sense of nation-hood grounded in the images and stories associated with an identifiable nation-state", then the Uruguayan national teams of the past had helped create that shared sense of nationhood for Uruguay.<sup>1</sup> Their triumphs

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Coakley and Mojca Doupona Topič, "Sport and National Identity: The Case of Latin America", *ALESDE*, 2010: 2.

were the images and stories that contributed to the country's shared story. Uruguayans "learn(t) these images and stories and use(d) them to (a) express their connection with the larger collectivity, and (b) identify others as members of that collectivity or as outsiders".<sup>2</sup> the national team, whose predecessors had helped create that imagined collective, was no longer identified as a member of that collective, but rather as a group comprised of outsiders. Place had always been central to national identity, so as national team players began to spend the majority of their careers abroad, the relationship between the national team and Uruguayan national identity flagged.

After being hired as the Uruguayan national team coach in 2006, Óscar Washington Tabárez implemented a long-term project to reinvigorate the national team, which accepted the realities of the world of globalized soccer, included a strong focus on the team's public image, and tried to find a novel way for the national team to contribute images and stories to the Uruguayan national narrative. Tabárez knew that the players' transfers at young ages and high quality lives abroad were unavoidable in a world of globalized soccer. Thus, his reforms aimed to improve the on the field results of the Uruguayan national squad, known as *La Celeste*, but they also attempted to redefine the relationship between the national team and Uruguayans in the new transnational context. He sought to show that although the players lived abroad with high quality lifestyles, they were still a symbol of Uruguay and that thus, the national team still contributed to the country's shared sense of nation-hood. Through his reforms, he hoped to show that even

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

in the new transnational context, the national team could still be a pillar of the Uruguayan national identity.

## **Chapter Structure**

The opening chapter of this thesis introduces the global commercialization of soccer and their effects on South American soccer, in general. The chapter summarizes the changes that English soccer underwent in the early 1990s, which transformed it into an industry focused not only on winning, but the maximization of profit. I then go on to discuss how the commercialization of the sport and the Bosman ruling led to similar changes all around Europe, causing the salaries and quality of infrastructure of the top, elite European club teams to improve dramatically and European club players to become affluent international celebrities. The second half of the chapter concentrates on how the global interconnectedness created by global player markets and television placed South American countries in direct competition with these affluent European clubs for players and fans. The chapter ends with a discussion on the impact of the disparity between European and South American clubs.

Seminal texts such as *Sociology of Football* by Richard Giulianotti and “Recovering the Social: Globalization, Football, and Transnationalism” by Giulianotti and Roland Robertson provide the historical and sociological foundation for the study. I then use articles, such as “The Neoliberalization of Football: Rethinking Neoliberalism Through the Commercialization of the Beautiful Game” by Sam Dubal and “Soccer in the Age of Globalization” by Osvaldo Croci and Julian Ammirante to discuss the

commercialization of the sport, the implementation of free market principles, and the changes in the transfer market. I utilize these texts to connect the major issues of commercialization, globalization, transnationalism, and national identity with respect to soccer. Specifically, I discuss how the spread of goods and people brought about by globalization led to the development of a transnational culture and challenged national identity. Finally, I utilize several case studies on specific countries, such as Argentina and Chile to show how these changes affected South American countries.

The second chapter focuses on how the global commercialization of the sport affected Uruguay, specifically. First, I summarize the role that Uruguayan soccer and the national team held in constructing the foundation of the Uruguayan national identity in the early twentieth century. After covering the importance of soccer in the national identity, I explain the effects of the global commercialization on Uruguayan soccer in the 1990s, such as the decline of Uruguayan clubs, like Peñarol and Nacional, the exodus of players abroad, and the resulting strained relationship between the national team players abroad and the Uruguayan public. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how players' life of luxury and perceived lack of effort for the national team led to the questioning of their dedication and passion to Uruguay as a nation.

For Chapter Two, I utilize scholarly and journalistic articles that concentrate on the early decades of Uruguayan soccer and its role in the development of its national identity. For the 1990s, the information largely stems from books such as *Yo Paco: un antes y después del fútbol uruguayo* by Mario Bardanca and *La Crónica Celeste* by Luis Prats. To demonstrate how the players abroad were portrayed and perceived during that

time period I draw from the following sources: the Gallup Poll conducted after the 1990 World Cup, Luis Cubilla's famous 1991 interview, Uruguayan television clips from *Juego Limpio* after the 1994 Qualifiers, and international press articles. Unfortunately, the main Uruguayan newspapers, *El Observador* and *El Pais*, do not maintain an online archive for years before 2000, and there are no accessible holdings of these two papers in US libraries. For the years after 2000, in contrast, I was able to use their online archives, although they are cumbersome to use for lack of search functions. I looked through each day's sport's section for the years 2001-2011 and consulted all of the articles that were about the national team.

The third chapter dissects the institutional changes implemented after 2006 by coach Tabárez to overcome the negative effects that global commercialization had on the national team and to redefine the relationship between the team and Uruguayans. His reforms were aimed at improving the team's performance, but also creating greater identification with the national team. First, I delineate the difficult conditions faced by Uruguayan star players when they played for the national squad: the lack of friendlies and poor infrastructure. Then, I discuss Tabárez's long-term proposal from 2006 that aimed to restructure the youth divisions, overhaul the national team image, and provide continuity through the establishment of team policies. After describing his plan in detail, I finish the chapter by highlighting the on-the-field results that his project produced.

The main sources for Chapter Three are official documents authored by Tabárez, such as his 2005 speech at the Uruguayan Soccer Museum, "The Formation of the Soccer Player," and the 2006 project proposal entitled "The Institutionalization of the Processes

of the National Teams and the Formation of their Players”. I utilize articles from *El Observador* and *El País* as a source for details on Tabárez’s project and its results. I also draw from an array of interviews with Uruguayan players and public figures about the Tabárez Process that is found in *El Camino es la Recompensa: Conversations with Óscar Washington Tabárez*.

The fourth chapter looks at how Tabárez’s push for a new player profile strengthened Uruguayans’ identification with the players. I begin the chapter with a description of the changes that occurred on the national team during the Tabárez years; the squad became more professional and presented itself as more humble, attentive to fans, and actively involved with society. The new style improved the intra-team chemistry and camaraderie, as well as the public perception of the players. The second part of the chapter analyzes how the Uruguayan Football Association employed media to improve the national team’s image. Television ad campaigns allowed players to endorse Uruguayan products, while also highlighting their own positive values and patriotism. Social media and television provided channels for players to showcase their patriotism and the Uruguayan aspects of their everyday lives abroad. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on how Tabárez’s off-the-field changes improved fans’ relationship with the Uruguayan team.

I depend on post-2010 newspaper articles published in *El País* and *El Observador*, *Fútbol y Otros Deportes* by Ricardo Piñeyrua, and video clips from *Pasión Mundial*, *Camara Celeste*, and *Por la Camiseta* to trace the changes that occurred after 2006. *El Camino es la Recompensa: Conversations with Óscar Washington Tabárez* is again a

main source. I also used quotes from the television sports show, *La Hora del Deporte*, from before and after the 2010 World Cup to show the complete reversal of the media portrayal of Tabárez and the players from a critical, questioning one to praiseful and lauding. Finally, I utilize advertisements from several Uruguay companies to show the players' involvement in marketing campaigns.

## **Chapter One: The Global Commercialization of Soccer and National Identity**

On March 22, 2015, Lionel Messi, Neymar Santos, and Luis Suárez led the Nike and Qatar Airways sponsored FC Barcelona to a 2-1 victory over the Adidas and Fly Emirates backed Real Madrid in front of a crowd of over 98,000 people and an estimated television audience of hundreds of millions.<sup>1</sup> For the match, Lionel Messi and Luis Suárez sported Adidas cleats, while Neymar wore Nike ones due to their personal endorsement deals that complement their combined 78.6 million dollar annual salaries with an additional 43.5 million dollars.<sup>2</sup> The sky-high incomes of top players, the dominance of foreign players on most club rosters, the modern stadiums with ever-higher ticket prices, the reliance on television revenue, and the central role of sponsorship deals are all part of soccer today, but these are recent developments. Professional clubs have always been businesses, but it was not until the 1990s that they understood themselves as global companies focused on marketing and establishing a brand.

### **Commercialization: Merchandise, Sponsors, Television, and the Bosman Ruling**

The globalization of soccer permitted for the rapid evolution of the sport.

Globalization refers to the intensification of global economic, financial, and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Pete Jenson, "Barcelona 2-1 Real Madrid: Luis Suárez scores El Clasico winner . . .," *Daily Mail UK*, March 22, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Christina Settimi, "Cristiano Ronaldo Edges Lionel Messi As The World's Highest-Paid Soccer Player," *Forbes*, May 16, 2015.

flows that create an increased interdependence between countries.<sup>3</sup> According to Robertson, globalization in the last five decades has been driven by rapid advancements in technology and digital communication, the mitigation of trade and financial barriers, and the emergence of an international labor market.<sup>4</sup> The loosened borders and the virtual proximity provided by technology has permitted an increase in the movement of goods, capital, and people which, in turn, has connected the world to the point that a global culture has emerged. Globalization of soccer in the 1990s was accompanied by the commercialization of the sport, the infiltration and promotion of market-driven ideology and profit-maximizing business models into the sporting realm.<sup>5</sup> This study will refer to the processes of globalization and commercialization as global commercialization.

The commercialization of soccer began in England, but had global effects. During the Thatcher years,<sup>6</sup> English soccer clubs began to concentrate on profit maximization, transforming soccer into a commodity, a cultural product that could be bought and sold to consumers. In the 1980s, the English game had been infamous for its problems with violence and infrastructure. In order to tackle these issues, in the early 1990s, all of the standing space in stadiums was eliminated and replaced with seating areas.<sup>7</sup> The renovations improved security at the stadium as expected, but also decreased the supply of tickets available, increased the comfort and splendor of the stadiums, and raised ticket prices. The stadium renovations helped quell the hooligan problem by converting soccer

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (SAGE Publications, 1992), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson, "History: The Global Sport and the Making of Globalization" in *Globalization & Football* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Dubal, "The neoliberalization of football: Rethinking neoliberalism through the commercialization of the beautiful game," *International Review for the Sociology of the Sport*, 126.

<sup>6</sup> Croci Osvaldo and Julian Ammirante, "Soccer in the Age of Globalization", *Peace Review* (1999): 499.

<sup>7</sup> Dubal, 126.

into a luxury good. Croci and Ammirante explain that the renovations "... led clubs to begin to look at supporters as consumers to whom one could sell more than simply a match."<sup>8</sup> The stadium refurbishments and the increase in ticket prices occurred at the same time as the creation of the English Premier League which began its trajectory in 1992 with a lucrative deal with BSkyB for 304 million pounds over five years for television rights.<sup>9</sup> The English league "characterized by deliberate moves by top clubs to exploit their position as global brands, to maximize profit... and to attract corporate hospitality and the professional classes" became the new business model for professional soccer.<sup>10</sup>

The financial success of the new model promulgated similar shifts in the rest of Europe; however, South American countries were unable to follow suit. The 1990s were a positive economic time for Europe; the opening up of the East led to new trade partners and economic opportunities, so countries were able to invest time and resources in more lavish areas, such as the soccer industry. South America, on the other hand, was only transitioning to neoliberal policies at the time; the continent was too preoccupied with recovering from the "Lost Decade" of the 1980s to dedicate funds and attention to their declining soccer teams. South America did not have the resources to match European soccer developments and thus, a widening disparity between the sport in Europe and South America emerged.

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<sup>8</sup> Croci and Ammirante, 499.

<sup>9</sup> Jason Rodrigues, "Premier League football at 20: 1992, the start of a whole new ball game," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Rex Nash, "The Sociology of English Football in the 1990s: Fandom, Business, and Future Research", *Football Research Unit* (2000): 50.

These changes marked the emergence of soccer clubs as businesses competing in two arenas: game results and finances. Club finances increasingly influenced game results, because clubs with higher funding were better able to improve infrastructure and rosters. As the 1990s progressed, game days became even less central to the club as ticket sale earnings began to comprise smaller portions of clubs' revenue due to the growing importance of television rights and merchandise sales.<sup>11</sup> Clubs began to sell diverse products with the emblem and colors of the team, such as jerseys, scarves, flags, and hats to their fans in Europe, developing a brand and turning the club itself into a commodity to be consumed.<sup>12</sup> The clubs' brands have continued to grow in value in the twenty-first century as their reach has expanded with increased television coverage and the opening of retail stores worldwide. A prime example of the growth is Manchester United, which in the middle of the nineties was bringing in twice as much with merchandise sales and logo licensing than with game day sales and that by early 2015 had a brand value of \$446 million.<sup>13</sup>

While clubs depended on the sponsors for revenue, sponsors relied on the popular clubs for the creation of an emotional and cultural identification between the public and their products.<sup>14</sup> The intensification of the relationship between corporations and soccer occurred when companies began to sponsor jerseys.<sup>15</sup> Currently, more than 687 million

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<sup>11</sup> Wes Harris, "How Do Soccer Clubs Make Money?," *Business of Soccer*, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Croci and Ammirante, 499.

<sup>13</sup> Croci and Ammirante, 499.; Mike Ozanian, "The Forbes Fab 40: The World's Most Valuable Sports Brands 2015," *Forbes*, October 22, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, "How Do Soccer Clubs Make Money?"

<sup>15</sup> Ric W. Jensen, Nicolas D. Bowman, Brian V. Larson, and Yawei Wang, "Looking at Shirt Sponsorships From Both Sides of the Pond: Comparing Global Trends Versus America's Major League Soccer", *Soccer & Society* (2013): 2.

euros of the top European leagues' revenue comes from jersey sponsorships,<sup>16</sup> with the largest deal being Adidas' 10 year \$1.28 billion partnership with Manchester United.<sup>17</sup> While jersey sponsors may have sparked the relationship between corporations and soccer clubs, sponsorships can be found in other forms as well, such as Barclay's 50 million euro deal for the league naming rights for the English Premier League and BBVA's 20 million euro naming deal with La Liga, the Spanish club league.<sup>18</sup> As clubs became associated with specific brands, like Manchester United and Chevrolet or Chelsea and Samsung, players followed a similar path, endorsing products and representing corporations to the point of becoming the recognizable face of the companies. As clubs and players became more successful, both on the field and financially, sponsorships increased and the clubs became wealthier, making their brand value grow even further.

Cornel Sandvoss argues in *A Game of Two Halves* that the most important contributor to the globalization of soccer during the last few decades was television, because it "fundamentally altered notions of 'here' and 'there'."<sup>19</sup> Color, satellite, and high definition television allowed for quality international coverage of European matches, permitting soccer fans around the world to follow European club teams. International fans' novel interest in the European league allowed clubs to target the global consumer market and sell their jerseys and apparel worldwide. Clubs' widened global reach and increased popularity made them "golden marketing vehicle(s) for regional

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<sup>16</sup> "Premier League clubs see 36% rise in shirt sponsorship income," *ESPN*, February 24, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Badenhausen, "Manchester United Kit Launch Generates Millions in Social Media Value For Adidas," *Forbes*, August 5, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> "European Soccer Leagues' Revenue From League Naming Rights," *The Statista Portal*.

<sup>19</sup> Cornel Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves: Football, Television, and Globalization* (Routledge, 2003), 2.

brands across the globe.”<sup>20</sup> Television contracts increased the appeal of clubs to sponsors, commercial revenue due to international fandoms, and the brand value of the clubs overall, while also being their second largest source of revenue, an estimated \$2.7 billion dollars annually for Europe’s largest leagues.<sup>21</sup>

Merchandise, sponsorships, and television contracts increased the wealth and power of European clubs, but it was not until the mid-1990s that players’ salaries began to reflect that new reality. In 1995, the European Court of Justice ruled in favor of Jean-Marc Bosman in a court case against the Belgian league. Bosman’s contract had ended at RFC Liège in Belgium and although he wanted to leave for Dunkerque in France, he was unable to do so since his club refused to accept the transfer fee that the French team was offering.<sup>22</sup> It was as if Bosman’s expired contract had held a non-compete clause for the entire soccer industry; unless the Belgian team agreed to a fee, Bosman could not join another team. The Bosman ruling stated that clubs could no longer charge transfer fees for players whose contracts had expired,<sup>23</sup> since any laborer who became unemployed had the right to find a new employer.

The Bosman ruling improved the salary and rights of top players at the expense of clubs, especially smaller clubs. Before 1995, top clubs had seen their revenues shoot up in comparison to their costs; after the Bosman ruling, they had to spend some of that new income to retain or acquire their best players. Since players could refuse to renew their

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<sup>20</sup> Harris, “How Do Soccer Clubs Make Money?”.

<sup>21</sup> “Revenue from broadcasting rights of the Big Five European soccer leagues in 2013...,” *The Statista Portal*.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Simmons, “Implications of the Bosman Ruling for Football Transfer Markets”, *Economic Affairs* (1997): 13.

<sup>23</sup> Stefan Késenne, “Youth Development and Training after the Bosman Verdict (1995) and the Bernard Case (2010) of the European Court of Justice”, *European Sport Management Quarterly* (2011): 548.

contract and leave clubs for free, clubs were forced to offer lucrative wages and perks in order to retain players at the end of each contract.<sup>24</sup> If the renewal contracts were not attractive enough, clubs had to accept a transfer fee from another club before the players' contracts expired or risk losing the players without even receiving a fee. If a club was wealthy, then it could utilize its income from merchandise and sponsorships to offer the players an irresistible offer and force the other clubs to present very large offers to buyout players' contracts. Smaller clubs were unable to offer these lucrative contracts and thus were forced to accept any decent offers or risk losing their players for free at the end of their contracts. They became a type of farm teams — they developed young, promising players and then sold them to the more elite clubs for relatively low transfer fees. Along with increasing their power and salaries, the Bosman ruling changed the players' relationship to clubs. Prior to the court ruling, players often remained at one club for their entire career, but after it, players moved around as the transfer market mandated. This challenged the sense of loyalty that had previously existed between players, their clubs, and their fans.<sup>25</sup>

The commercialization of soccer in Europe had a sizable impact on South American soccer since the increased global flows of people and information allowed players and fans to abandon local teams for the better situated European clubs. When the Bosman Case caused an increase in both wages and transfer fees for elite players in Europe, the elite European clubs were able to use their large revenues to adjust. South

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<sup>24</sup> Simmons, 15-18.; Tom Fordyce, "10 years since Bosman," *BBC Sport*, December 14, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Alejandro Giménez Rodríguez, *La pasión laica: una breve historia del fútbol uruguayo* (Rumbo Editorial, 2007), 237.

American clubs, similarly to the small European clubs, did not earn as much revenue from merchandise, sponsorships, or television rights and thus, were unable to adjust to the Bosman ruling's ramifications. South American clubs could not offer players the wages or working conditions that Europe's best teams could, so they too became farm teams. Rather than benefitting from merchandise sales and television rights, South American clubs became dependent on the sale of players. This became an exodus, expanding from the transfer of top players straight to elite European clubs to the more systematic transfer of young talent to smaller clubs abroad that later sell the players to elite clubs if the players continue to thrive. In 2010, Argentina alone exported almost 1,000 players to all divisions of the top European leagues and more than 1,200 to other leagues around the world.<sup>26</sup> This creates a vicious cycle in which the transfer of players abroad lowers the quality of league play in South America, which deters fans from attending local matches and in turn hurts clubs and forces them to keep selling players.

The spectacle of European soccer does not only attract South American players, but also South American fans. Satellite television, high definition coverage, and live-streaming websites allow South Americans to watch the coverage of the European leagues along with the lower quality, national coverage of local clubs that are technically lacking.<sup>27</sup> Pablo Alabarces explains that for Argentinians, television coverage confirms "that their domestic game is excluded from these new global arenas."<sup>28</sup> Luis Prats writes

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<sup>26</sup> Joshua H. Nadel, *Fútbol! Why Soccer Matters in Latin America* (University Press of Florida, 2014), 50.

<sup>27</sup> Jay Coakley, "Sport and National Identity: The Case of Latin America", *Presented at the Second Conference of ALESDE* (2010): 6.

<sup>28</sup> Pablo Alabarces and María Graciela Rodríguez, "Football and Fatherland: The Crisis of National Representation in Argentinian Soccer", *Culture, Sport, Society* (1999): 128.

that in Uruguay, “international soccer steals the domestic audience...kids ask their parents for a Barcelona or Bayern Munich jersey, and know way more about Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Cristiano Ronaldo than they do about Wanderers or River Plate’s forwards.”<sup>29</sup> Fans are no longer limited to following and identifying with lackluster local clubs; they can watch star-studded teams like Barcelona and Real Madrid play in multi-million dollar stadiums in high definition every week.<sup>30</sup>

### **National Identity in the Globalized Soccer World**

In the early 20th century, South American soccer players were perceived as local heroes that represented the country. A player’s respected qualities were aspects of his character that were thought to represent the nation: leadership, glory, respect, decency, and perseverance.<sup>31</sup> The commercialization in the 1990s changed the player from the “traditional, local, and in most cases proletarian hero, to the modern global star product of Western cultural imperialism and neo-liberalism.”<sup>32</sup> Successful players became wealthy celebrities and hence, instead of human qualities and national attributes, what came to define them were their affluence and image. Their celebrity status was exploited by corporations that utilized them as public faces; this disassociated the players, their success, and their achievements from the country and reattached it to companies’ commercial brand.<sup>33</sup> Players’ new celebrity status and wealth caused fans to feel

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<sup>29</sup> Luis Prats, “Fútbol por control remoto,” *El País*, July 26, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Coakley, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Giulianotti, *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 154-155.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Turner, “From Local Heroism to Global Celebrity Stardom: a Critical Reflection of the Social Cultural and Political Changes in British Football Culture from the 1950s to the Formation of the Premier League”, *Soccer & Society* (2014): 755.

<sup>33</sup> Coakley, 5.

abandoned. In *The Neoliberalization of Football*, Sam Dubal shares a quote from a fan that is contrasting the contemporary players to those of the past by saying “you saw them getting on a bus. The same bus as the fans... you wouldn’t get that now. Just, ‘go away little boy’, it would be that kind of attitude. And that’s how it has moved away from the fans.”<sup>34</sup>

Along with the general distancing between fans and athletes as the latter became affluent, distant celebrities, the mass transfer of players to Europe jeopardized the relationship between many South American players and national fans. South Americans from countries with rich soccer histories struggled to identify with players that lived most of their lives abroad with wealthy lifestyles and that only played at home during a few national team matches each year.<sup>35</sup> As players left to have more lucrative careers in Europe, “under-performing athletes (were) often judged from a moral aspect in the public discourse.”<sup>36</sup> Fans who felt abandoned by their national players questioned the players’ passion and dedication for the country and accused them of being sell-outs and wealth seekers who gave “allegiance to clubs rather than nation.”<sup>37</sup> Instead of seeing their players as transmigrants, migrants who “develop and maintain multiple relations...that span borders”,<sup>38</sup> fans saw their players as migrants who chose to leave South America behind. The players’ adoption of European tactics and luxurious lifestyles was seen as a betrayal of their national identities.

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<sup>34</sup> Dubal, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Giulianotti and Robertson, 74-75.

<sup>36</sup> Tamás Dóczi, “Gold Fever(?): Sport and national identity: The Hungarian Case”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2012):177.

<sup>37</sup> Alabarces, 131.

<sup>38</sup> Wong and Trumper, 170.

Joshua Nadel, a Latin America and Caribbean historian, expands on this idea with the example of Lionel Messi, an Argentine who has won FIFA player of the year five times and is recognized as the best player of the world: “Critics accused him of seeming lost on the field with the national team... so used to playing with the world’s best on Barça, these critics said, he was unable to adapt... at home Messi was faulted for not ‘feeling the Argentine jersey...In short, Messi did not play the way he was expected to. He did not play *la nuestra*, the Argentine style.”<sup>39</sup> Nadel goes on to add that even though Messi turned down Spanish citizenship in 2004 in order to be able to play for Argentina, he is still often labeled as a foreigner. This issue is not unique to Messi. The accusation is made against most of Argentina’s national team members that play abroad; they are accused of having “lost Argentina’s supposedly innate style of play.”<sup>40</sup> The criticism is rooted in the fact that Argentinians are expected to play *a la nuestra*, just like Brazilians and Uruguayans are expected to play with the styles of *futbol arte* and *garra charrúa*, respectively. Nadel concludes that the national style is “embedded in the way that Latin Americans think about both their soccer and themselves.”<sup>41</sup>

Lloyd Wong and Ricardo Trumper, Canadian sociologists, present a contrasting case to Nadel’s Argentina one. Iván Zamorano was a Chilean soccer player that played abroad for more than half of his soccer career in top clubs in Switzerland, Spain, and Italy. Unlike Argentinian players who are often accused of being “foreigners”, Zamorano was seen as a successful transmigrant representing Chile abroad. Fans did not think of

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<sup>39</sup> Nadel, 48-50.

<sup>40</sup> Nadel, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Nadel, 44, 48.

Chilean players' transfers abroad as them abandoning the nation, but rather as them following the forces of the global economy. Chile did not have a history of soccer accomplishments, so the transfer of players to the elite European leagues was seen "not so much as the deterritorialization and transnationalism of players, but rather as a marker of the increasing improvement of Chilean commodities abroad."<sup>42</sup> Even though he was wealthy, lived in Europe, and had multiple nationalities, Zamorano was a "core element in the making and remaking of the edifices of Chilean identity."<sup>43</sup> This was thanks to his "ineffable Chilean demeanor and personality that (had) not been corrupted or refined by the profits."<sup>44</sup> Since the media played many of his games from Europe, Zamorano "... was still playing in Chilean living rooms...He played at the same time for Internazionale and, by being a Chilean, for Chile."<sup>45</sup> Zamorano and other Chilean soccer players in Europe were points of pride for Chile; they were proof that Chileans could compete in the outside world.

Argentina and Chile present two opposing ways that South American countries have perceived the exodus of their players and the emergence of transnationalism, an interconnection of people and groups across borders, that has accompanied recent globalization.<sup>46</sup> National identity is based on shared imagery and stories, so when soccer players, members of society that had once been protagonists of the shared national stories, are far away and living a different lifestyle, their relationship with the imagined

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<sup>42</sup> Lloyd L. Wong and Ricardo Trumper, "Global Celebrity Athletes and Nationalism," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (2002): 80 .

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson, "Recovering the Social: Globalization, Football, and Transnationalism", *Global Networks* (2007): 6.

community is threatened. For that reason, Argentina, a country that once had a strong internationally renowned league and had consistently fought for the World Cup title, sees players' emigration and the rise of a transnational culture as "the collapse of the mythological coupling of soccer and nation."<sup>47</sup> The players are seen as foreigners, immigrants who have chosen another style and way of life over the Argentinian ones. On the other hand, the Chilean players' experiences abroad are taken as Chilean stories and images; they are part of the national narrative and contribute to the country's national identity. The Chileans, who did not have a strong soccer history, see their players as more of transmigrants; they live and adopt European qualities, but are still seen as Chilean. Zamorano and other athletes "embody transnational cultural and capitalist business practices, and at the same time, willingly serve as national cultural icons for the formation and reaffirmation of national identities."<sup>48</sup> Chileans do not see the players' transfers as them giving up their Chilean characteristics, but as them going out into the world to represent Chile.

The cases of Argentina and Chile are examples of opposing interpretations by scholars of the global commercialization's effects on national identity and soccer. As globalization has progressed, scholars disagree over whether national identity and soccer culture have become damaged, reimagined, or strengthened by globalizing trends. Some scholars argue that the shift of importance from national to international has led to the dulling of the "radiance of the nation", the breaking down of identities, and the

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<sup>47</sup> Alabarces, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 168.

weakening of national unity.<sup>49</sup> These scholars can point to cases like Argentina's where global commercialization has threatened the relationship between soccer and national identity;<sup>50</sup> the players that were once symbols of the nation are now perceived as "foreigners". Others insist that external pressures have been met with measures seeking to reaffirm the peculiarities and uniqueness of the nations. These scholars, on the other hand, look to countries like Chile that have utilized their citizens' success as a source of national pride. Jean Harvey states that "the global does not mean the disappearance of the local... globalization has been accompanied by an explosion of nationalism."<sup>51</sup> Countries have reacted to the transnational and global homogenization by emphasizing the local and national, fortifying old identities or cultivating new ones in relation to the new global setting.<sup>52</sup> Some countries, and governments, in particular, have sought to affirm current national identities through soccer nationalism or worked to construct new distinct identities through soccer in the new global context.<sup>53</sup>

The last decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new business model for professional soccer, a profit-maximizing model that relies heavily on merchandise sales and sponsorships. The commercialization of the sport began in England, but the interconnectivity provided by television and the international labor market spurred by the Bosman ruling caused it to spread throughout Europe. European

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<sup>49</sup> Frank J. Lechner, "Imagined Communities in the Global Game: Soccer and the Development of Dutch National Identity", *Global Networks* (2007): 221.

<sup>50</sup> Jean Harvey, G. Rail, and L. Thibault, "Globalization and Sport: Sketching a Theoretical Model for Empirical Analyses", *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (1996): 266-267.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 260, 266-267.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-274.; Lechner, 226.

<sup>53</sup> Agnes Elling, Ivo Van Hilvoorde, and Remko Van Den Dool, "Creating or awakening national pride through sporting success: A longitudinal study on macro effects in the Netherlands", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2014): 132.

soccer became a spectacle: multi-million dollar brand values, stadiums, and salaries; it drew fans and players from around the world. Due to the size of their local market and their inability to develop an international following, South American clubs were not able to keep up with the changes in Europe and thus lost players and fans to Europe. This weakened the identification between the fans and the players in countries with rich soccer histories and challenged the role of soccer in South American national identities.

## Chapter Two: From Local Heroes to *Repatriados*

Throughout the last century, soccer has held a central place in Uruguayan society. In the first half of the twentieth century, soccer victories gave Uruguayans a rallying point and a common culture; they contributed many of the stories and images on which Uruguay's shared sense of nationhood was founded. The celebrated national team players were everyday Uruguayans, struggling proletariat, that prevailed against larger and richer countries with dedication, passion, and *garra charrúa*, the characteristically Uruguayan drive to overcome unlikely odds and improbable situations. The glory fostered a close relationship between national players and soccer fans, who saw the players as worthy representatives of the country's characteristics. Soccer became an important element of the Uruguayan identity; it provided the country with heroes and epics that "fill the vacuum of a country that feels itself an orphan of History."<sup>1</sup> When the national team no longer had the same success in the second half of the century, initially soccer continued to be a prevalent identity marker for Uruguayans due to national clubs' success in international competitions. By the 1990s, however, with the national team and the national clubs nowhere near their old glory, the relationship between the distant, wealthy

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<sup>1</sup> Manuel Frau, "Fútbol e Historia: la esquizofrenia oriental", *Caravelle* (2007): 135.

superstars and Uruguayan fans began to deteriorate, challenging the historic role of the national team in the Uruguayan national identity.

### **Uruguay's Early Glory Days**

Soccer's importance in Uruguay is due to the national team's success during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1924, the Uruguayan soccer team won the country's first Gold Medal in the Olympic Games.<sup>2</sup> Four years later, Uruguay returned to the top spot of the podium, confirming that the best soccer in the world was being played in South America. The national team's success in the 1920s led to the country's hosting of the first FIFA World Cup in 1930, which it also won.<sup>3</sup> Uruguay returned to the World Cup stage in 1950, making it to the final game of the round robin tournament and defeating the host nation, Brazil, 2-1.<sup>4</sup> The victory continued Uruguay's undefeated streak in international competition and marked the culmination of its glory days.

Government support contributed to the quick improvement and success of Uruguayan soccer in the early twentieth century. In *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*, Eduardo Galeano explains that "Uruguay's success at the '24 and '28 Olympics, and its subsequent World Cup victories in 1930 and 1950, owed a large debt to the government's policy of building sports fields around the country to promote physical education."<sup>5</sup> In 1913, there were only two fields in Montevideo. Fifteen years and two Olympic Gold

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<sup>2</sup> Luis Prats, *La crónica celeste: historia de la Selección Uruguaya de Fútbol: triunfos, derrotas, mitos y polémicas, 1901-2010* (Fin de Siglo, 2010), 75-79.

<sup>3</sup> Prats, 70.

<sup>4</sup> [www.FIFA.com](http://www.FIFA.com)

<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Soccer in Sun And Shadow* (Verso, 1998), 52.

medals later, there were 118.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it was the government established newspaper, *El Dia*, that “transformed the triumphs of the amateur team at the Olympic games in Colombes (Paris) into a national gesture.”<sup>7</sup> On the day of the 1924 victory, the newspaper described the players as symbols of the nation with language that could be found in a national anthem:

“You are Uruguay. You are now the homeland, boys ... They all stand, move forward gallantly, determinedly inflating their chests ... Finally seeing, far away in the distance, swaying proud ... soaked in the blue of space ...receiving from the sun its golden streams ... the emblem of that almost invisible dot on the map ... which has been growing, growing, growing.”<sup>8</sup>

After the 1924 and 1928 victories, the government offered to host and fully fund the first FIFA World Cup in 1930 in order to celebrate the centennial of the signing of the constitution and connect the growing national sentiment around soccer to the country’s political history.<sup>9</sup>

The soccer victories of the first three decades of the 1900s “played an important role in fostering a more unified nationalism” by “help(ing) integrate new populations and provid(ing) the nation with a national - as opposed to political - rallying point.”<sup>10</sup> The pride generated by success transformed the national team into a common cultural symbol for Uruguayans. Andrés Morales wrote that when the national team won the 1930 World Cup, one was not “from Montevideo, nor the interior, nor creole, nor ‘gringo’ (name given to the immigrants by the locals), nor black nor white, nor poor nor rich. One was

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<sup>6</sup> March L. Krotee, “The Rise and Demise of Sport: A Reflection of Uruguayan Society”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* (1979): 144.

<sup>7</sup> Frau, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Krotee, 144.

<sup>10</sup> Joshua H. Nadel, *Fútbol! Why Soccer Matters in Latin America* (University Press of Florida, 2014), 24.

‘Uruguayan’.”<sup>11</sup> As soccer united the nation, it became a central component of Uruguayan national identity; the “tournaments became gestures that overshadowed the nineteenth century battles: the captains resembled the caudillos of the Independence movement, the history of Uruguayan soccer began to be told from generation to generation, and its victories and losses sung about during Carnaval.”<sup>12</sup> The country that had lacked historical figures and events around which to unite and identify, began to look to players and improbable victories to fill those voids.

The epic win in the 1950 World Cup against Brazil cemented the players’ place in the national imagination. In the country’s collective memory, the players’ victory was demonstrative of the national character of perseverance. It was taken to confirm one of the most prevalent myths on which Uruguayan nationalism was constructed: “the incommensurability between size and achievement; the disproportionality between the smallness of origin and the grandness of destiny.”<sup>13</sup> After the first Brazilian goal in the 1950 World Cup, the Uruguayan captain, Obdulio Varela, approached the English referee to complain about the offside goal. This action, which is said to have stalled the Brazilian momentum and allowed the Uruguayans to compose themselves, was seen as a personification of a “modern Uruguayan” that was valorous, determined, and capable of overcoming any situation.<sup>14</sup> Uruguayans saw Obdulio Varela as a mirror of Uruguayan

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<sup>11</sup> Andrés Morales, “Fútbol, política, y sociedad,” *La Gaceta Revista A.P.H.U.*, August 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Frau, 132.

<sup>13</sup> Alejandro Giménez Rodríguez, *La pasión laica: una breve historia del fútbol uruguayo* (Rumbo Editorial, 2007), 145.

<sup>14</sup> Giulianotti, 51.

society and his success as proof of what Uruguay could accomplish. Given the large role of these individuals in Uruguayan history,

“it is paradoxical, that in all of the Montevideo city center, there is not one street, not one square that memorializes the champion’s names, triumphs, or grand achievements. There is one modest monument...a monument that Montevideans are not familiar with...on the outskirts of the Estadio Centenario, in the middle of the park, on a small plot of land called Maracaná Square.”<sup>15</sup>

Varela and the rest of the players of the early twentieth century were not celebrity figures memorialized with grandiose monuments, but simple representatives of the Uruguayan society who proved the country’s identity as a small, but formidable nation.

### **The Decline of the National Team**

After the mid-1950s, the national team faltered. In the 1954 World Cup, Uruguay lost to Hungary in the semifinals, a game that is to this day recognized as one of the greatest soccer matches in the sport’s history. The years following the Hungary loss saw the beginning of Uruguay’s decline.<sup>16</sup> Between 1954 and 2000, Uruguay qualified to only six out of the eleven World Cups and won just five of its twenty-four games.<sup>17</sup> Rafael Bayce, a Uruguayan sociologist, claims that the national team’s decline was “hastened by the twin processes of unrealistic public expectations and hostility towards its football.”<sup>18</sup> The country’s shared sense of nationhood was grounded in stories of glory and triumph, so Uruguayans refused to celebrate anything but victory. Uruguay’s fourth place finish in 1970, its best result in twenty years, was a disappointment to Uruguayan fans who had expected a third World Cup title. Twenty years later, Gallup included a question in one of

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<sup>15</sup> Frau, 136.

<sup>16</sup> [www.FIFA.com](http://www.FIFA.com)

<sup>17</sup> [www.FIFA.com](http://www.FIFA.com)

<sup>18</sup> Giulianotti, 141.

their polls that asked individuals in which place they thought each of the sixteen participants of the 1990 World Cup would finish. From those poll results, Bayce calculated the “unreality coefficient”, a comparison between the place that each country ranked itself and the placement of that same country in the final, overall poll results. Every country saw itself performing better than other countries expected it to, thus all had an unrealistic coefficient larger than one. Uruguay had the single highest “unreality coefficient” of the entire poll at forty-nine.<sup>19</sup> Even after decades of failing to qualify for the tournament or getting eliminated early on, Uruguayans had not adjusted their expectations. For Uruguayans, it was the soccer success experienced in the glory days that had become part of their national identity, and they were not ready to accept any less.

With the weight of the glorious past and the pressure to live up to the idiosyncratic Uruguayan style, players “resorted to a nervous, physical style of play” by the end of the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> Giulianotti describes Uruguay’s adoption of the violent tactics as a change to “a safer, more aggressive and physical style that reflect(ed) the media and public thinking on football as war by proxy.”<sup>21</sup> National team players adopted violence in the name of *garra charrúa*, the defining Uruguayan characteristic seen in Obdulio Varela’s courage and grit during the 1950 World Cup. Uruguay may not have had the best or fastest individual players, but it gave the most effort, had the most guts, and played with the most *garra*. The country’s “regressive nostalgia” for the glory days and teams of the past impeded “the exploration of new tactics and playing styles”, leaving the team to

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<sup>19</sup> FESUR, *Nunca más campeón mundial?: aportes del Seminario Uruguay, Nunca Más Campeón Mundial? Fútbol, Deportes y Política en Uruguay* (LOGOS, 1991), 60.

<sup>20</sup> Giulianotti, 141.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

perform with effort, aggression, and little else.<sup>22</sup> More so, the national team's new "style" earned the country a horrific reputation, one that was confirmed in the 1986 World Cup when Uruguay had a player sent off forty seconds into the game, the fastest red card awarded to this day.<sup>23</sup> The national team, once central to the Uruguayan identity due to earning the country a positive external identity, developed a negative reputation.

The national clubs' performances in two international competitions, the Copa Libertadores and Intercontinental Cup founded in 1959 and 1960, respectively, offered an opportunity to continue the narrative of Uruguay as a powerful soccer nation.<sup>24</sup> Peñarol and Nacional, the two main Uruguayan clubs, made it to the finals of one of the two tournaments ten times between 1960 and 1971 and five times in the 1980s, winning the competitions fifty percent of the time they reached the finals.<sup>25</sup> The success of the clubs allowed the ties between Uruguayan national identity and soccer to remain strong. Even though the national team was not performing well, the country was still producing internationally successful club teams; they were still a soccer nation. This would only change in the 1990s, when the global commercialization of soccer led to the decline of the Uruguayan clubs, as well: they lost stadium attendance, quality, players, and international prestige.<sup>26</sup> However, they did not lose their centrality in Uruguayans' lives. Fans could still associate with a national champion.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>23</sup> Giulianotti, 154.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>25</sup> CONMEBOL, <http://www.conmebol.com/es/copa-libertadores-2015/historia>

<sup>26</sup> Giulianotti, 148-149.

The back and forth competition and success of the two main club teams sparked emotions and excitement in Uruguay and caused club loyalty to displace the unity once created by the national squad. Uruguayans still closely followed the national team and had high expectations, but fans mostly cheered and supported their own club's players rather than the national squad as a whole. The antipathy between the opposing clubs' fanbases was so large, that authorities had to physically separate the two crowds during some national team matches.<sup>27</sup> In 1986, Uruguay's friendlies against Nacional and then Peñarol were "... a sad display during which the Nacional fans cheered for Nacional and the Peñarol fans cheered for Peñarol..."<sup>28</sup> More than two decades later, the Peñarol portion of the Uruguayan crowd whistled the substitution of Luis Suárez, a Nacional player, for Diego Forlán, who had once been a Peñarol man. Suárez expressed his frustration after the game, "I do not understand it, this is the Uruguayan jersey, we are all here for the same reason... the club jerseys should be left aside."<sup>29</sup> Two months later, when Nacional's Sebastian Abreu and Peñarol's Carlos Bueno were fighting for a starting spot on the national side. Bueno asked the public to "stop saying Abreu or Bueno, because one is identified with one part of the country and the other with another... we cannot lose sight that we need to support Uruguay."<sup>30</sup> The national team no longer overcame the country's divides as it had during the glory days; it was seen as a collection of club players rather than a unified representation of the country.

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<sup>27</sup> "Corazón partido," *El Observador*, June 14, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Andrés Reyes, *El propio fútbol uruguayo: una guía ideal para comprender el fútbol más incomprensible del mundo* (Palabra Santa, 2012), 85.

<sup>29</sup> Jorge Señorans, "Uruguay vs. Uruguay," *El Observador*, February 7, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> "Sería bueno que terminaran de hablar del tema por la gente'," *El Observador*, June 11, 2008.

The fans did not have as much patience with the national team as they did with their club teams. In 2008, Coach Tabárez explained:

“I have previously stated that the national team does not have fans and that you can see that when if within ten minutes we do not score, there is silence and then something else. A fan of a club has a greater tolerance for suffering. It is clear in the case of Peñarol, the fans supported even when things were not going so well, something that with the national team does not occur.”<sup>31</sup>

Uruguay’s coach from 1999-2001, Daniel Passarella, had to request to stop playing in Montevideo due to the insulting whistling he would get from the crowds.<sup>32</sup> In 2004, Alvaro Recoba, a player with a successful club career abroad who had been unable to hit his stride for the national team, was whistled off the field in Montevideo by forty thousand people due to a poor performance.<sup>33</sup> Jorge Fossati, the national team coach expanded on this: “in recent times, it gets to the point that the player himself prefers to play away.”<sup>34</sup> Four years later, one journalist wrote, “It is very rare that Uruguay gets to play at home. But the times that it does, it plays against its rival and against the people...”<sup>35</sup> Uruguayans’ frustrations with the national squad due to decades’ long losing streaks caused even home games to be a hostile environment for the players.

### **Locals and Repatriados: The Player-Fan Relationship**

Due to commercialization and the player exodus to Europe, the national team began to be comprised of both local players and *repatriados*, players under contract with

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<sup>31</sup> “Hinchas sin identidad,” *El Observador*, June 12, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Señorans, “Uruguay vs. Uruguay”.

<sup>33</sup> “Figueredo y Fossati le pusieron paños fríos,” *El Observador*, November 24, 2004; Daniel Rosa, “Es hora de que aparezca el clamoroso Recoba,” *El Observador*, September 4, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> “Fossati pide un ataque incesante e insistente,” *El Observador*, November 16, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Señorans, “Uruguay vs. Uruguay”.

clubs abroad. The *repatriados* played abroad because they were the best, which made fans question why their inclusion in the national team did not yield better results for the national team. The media and the public began to distrust the returning players and the term *repatriados* developed a negative connotation. Fans, unable to comprehend why players performed well abroad, but not at home, blamed the passion and dedication of individual players. This caused the relationship between the national team and the Uruguayan fans to flag.

The suspicion and distrust of the *repatriados* reached a climax in the 1990s, when Luis Cubilla, the national team coach between 1990 and 1993, openly criticized the *italianos*, the *repatriados* playing in the Italian league, when expressing his interest in taking over the national squad:

“I cannot call a player that changes his mentality, that thinks that he wins \$20,000 a month, that he has the best clothes, that he has the best car and comes to pretend like he is fair with his teammates. He hurts them when he says no, if they don’t pay \$1,000, then we will not play with La Celeste because in soccer you earn a lot of money and you have to exploit it, and the player must earn money...”<sup>36</sup>

His comments clearly show the negative perception and questioning of *repatriados* in Uruguay. As a response to his statement, the *italianos* announced that they would not defend the sky-blue shirt until the coach retracted his statement.<sup>37</sup> The media spun this as further proof of the players’ arrogance and their abandonment of the Uruguayan fans and said things like “the players... said no to the people.”<sup>38</sup> The media’s criticism continued even when the players accepted to return to the national team for the 1994 World Cup

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<sup>36</sup> Prats, 188.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>38</sup> Video Excerpt from *Juego Limpio* (1994): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQX0KpimNNg>.

qualifiers. Journalists avoided in-depth analysis and blamed the team's failure to qualify for the World Cup on the *italianos*' delayed arrival and lack of Uruguayan identity:

“...the Brazilians, who when they succeed keep doing samba, keep wearing flip flops, and keep going to the bakery in Copacabana to drink beer with the guys from their neighborhood. Never would they park a sport car at the door, because they know that that is a clash with our way of life... those that let go of the national identity...they were italianos”<sup>39</sup>

These events exposed the tension present between the Uruguayan public and players abroad as Uruguayans felt abandoned by the players and failed to identify with them.

This marked the beginning of two decades of tension between fans and players.

As European soccer became richer, the exodus of Uruguayan players accelerated. Between 1997 and 2001, 502 Uruguayan players left the country, the equivalent of more than forty-five starting line ups.<sup>40</sup> On August 2, 2007, Jorge Señorans, a Uruguayan journalist, addressed the exodus:

“Many times, it is proposed that perhaps it would be best to create a base for the national team with local players and just reinforce it with the ones from abroad. But the issue is that there is not a professional group of local players, because if they perform well and have a good enough level to be on the national team then they sleep with their suitcases packed.”<sup>41</sup>

Señorans highlighted the thirteen national team players that had emigrated in the previous year and emphasized how the exodus changed the composition of the national team. By the end of the qualifiers for the 2010 World Cup, the Uruguayan team fielded only players that had contracts with clubs abroad.<sup>42</sup> The increase in the number of players from abroad meant that the distrust that had existed between the fans and the *italianos* during the *repatriados* crisis of the 1990s now affected a large part of the national side.

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<sup>39</sup> Video Excerpt from *Juego Limpio* (1994): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQX0KpimNNg>.

<sup>40</sup> Señorans, “Uruguay transfirió 12 equipos en 2001,” *El Observador*, January 21, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Señorans, “En un año de proceso, Tabárez perdió un equipo,” *El Observador*, August 2, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Avila, “Uruguay se arma con repatriados para ultimo paso Mundial,” *Reuters*, October 30, 2009.

Fans wanted players to perform as they did with their clubs abroad, but did not want the players to become dependent on the comforts that had become part of modern sports.

Giulianotti explains that “supporters criticized their (*repatriados*) efforts as corrupted by the lazy, rich, unpatriotic, lifestyle that (was) allegedly enjoyed in foreign climates.”<sup>43</sup> In

1994, Julio Toyos, a Uruguayan journalist, had expressed that very concern — that players were becoming too dependent on the work conditions that they had abroad:

“And today, we must admit it, unfortunately, that they are good players, but they are missing that something needed to carry the team on their back... that which Gambeta had, that Obdulio had... the old Uruguayan soccer lineage. These guys have changed their habits because they changed their environment. It is different when one changes in the dressing rooms in Central and Sudamerica than when one begins to frequent the frilly dressing rooms with air conditioning and hair dryers...”<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately for the players, global commercialization had made fans perceive players more as part of the “them” of the outside world rather than as representatives of the Uruguayan “us”.

The Uruguayan Football Association, the national governing body of soccer, was able to hide its own flaws by joining the fans in the criticism of the players. The national association’s lack of reliable revenue streams due to a small domestic audience and a declining club league inhibited it from providing good training and traveling conditions to the players. While many of the national team’s failures could have been due to the Uruguayan national team’s lack of modern facilities, the Uruguayan Football Association passed the blame on to the players. In 2002, the executives announced that they wanted to find players with a different kind of mentality for the national team, because they were

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<sup>43</sup> Giulianotti, 142.

<sup>44</sup> Video Excerpt from *Juego Limpio* (1994): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQX0KpimNNg>.

displeased with the existing poor attitudes of the players on and off the field.<sup>45</sup> The media fanned the flames further. Journalists shared stories and poor experiences with the players whom they said had never had the “decency to say good afternoon” and reported that fans’ overwhelmingly agreed about the lack of humility, respect, professionalism, modesty, and dignity found in their ‘superstar’ national players.<sup>46</sup> They published quotes about the Uruguayans’ frustrations over players’ lack of national characteristics, such as the following: “to wear *la celeste* (sky-blue shirt) you must first be *celeste*” and “even if the players are all coming from abroad, when one returns to this country, one drinks mate (the traditional Uruguayan tea).”<sup>47</sup> Both statements suggested that in order to play on the national team, players needed to both play and behave the Uruguayan way. The media’s negative narrative towards the players was still present in 2004 when journalists in Uruguay referred to the players returning from abroad with phrases like “big names that blind us”, “lacking good attitude”, “prefer to lose without the famous ones”, and “in need of more dignity”.<sup>48</sup> Players did not take the attacks well and often expressed their frustrations with the media, hoping that they would stop accusing them of not giving their all.<sup>49</sup>

During the early glory days, the team had been made up of working men, normal Uruguayans. While at the end of the century, the local clubs still consisted of this type of players, at least before they left to go abroad, the *repatriados* were seen as spoiled

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<sup>45</sup> Señorans, “Un cambio de frente,” *El Observador*, July 3, 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Señorans, “Un cambio de frente,” “Hinchas reclaman disciplina, mano dura, y humildad”.

<sup>47</sup> Señorans, “Hinchas reclaman disciplina, mano dura, y humildad,” *El Observador*, July 8, 2002. ; Señorans, “Técnicos avalan informe de FIFA,” *El Observador*, September 27, 2002.

<sup>48</sup> “Culpan a directivos y repatriados por la vergüenza ‘celeste,’” *Terra*, June 7, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Luiz Inzaurrealde, “Insiste con tres atrás,” *El Observador*, June 3, 2004.

celebrities with bad attitudes.<sup>50</sup> Giulianotti describes the shift using the example of Enzo Francescoli who “reflect(ed) the bourgeoisification within South American football. His nomadic pursuit of wealth and success (was) the antithesis of Varela’s satisfaction with more frugal civic rewards for more definitive and glorious deeds.”<sup>51</sup> The *repatriados*’ alleged greed was contrasted with the ‘hunger’ experienced by the figures of the past and those still struggling with the poor salaries of Uruguayan clubs.<sup>52</sup> The lyrics of *Orsei*, a song written by the Uruguayan band Rumbo, exposes the tension that grew between fans and players by telling “the story of a garbage worker who stops himself acclaiming a goal by his football hero after reflecting on the huge salary differences between them.”<sup>53</sup> Commercialization turned the Uruguayan national players from everyday heroes to wealthy celebrities, impeding Uruguayans from being able to identify with them and challenging the historic connection between the national team and Uruguayans.

Uruguayans saw themselves as a soccer nation, because the sport was both the cultural symbol that united the country internally and the one that provided them with an identity abroad. The 1950 World Cup victory was the last major success of the Uruguayan national soccer team, but the decline of the team’s caliber did not eradicate the role of soccer in the national identity. As the national team lost international prominence, national clubs filled the void. This allowed Uruguay to retain its identity as a soccer country, but rather than uniting the country as the national team had, the clubs

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<sup>50</sup> Señorans, “Cerrarán las puertas de la celeste a los empresarios.” *El Observador*, February 13, 2007; “Las críticas molestaron a los jugadores celestes,” *El Observador*, September 11, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Giulianotti, 151.

<sup>52</sup> Señorans, “En un año de proceso, Tabárez perdió un equipo”.

<sup>53</sup> Giulianotti, 143.

created opposing sub-communities within it. The national team no longer contributed images and stories to foster the Uruguayan people's shared sense of nationhood; instead, club experiences served to divide the country. The club based division persisted even as commercialization in the 1990s brought about the clubs' economic decline and resulting lack of competitiveness, because, unlike with the national team, fans were able to keep identifying with the local club teams' players. Whereas fans had once been able to identify with the simplicity and humbleness of all national team players, see themselves reflected in their heroes, and feel represented by the team, global commercialization's effects led fans to only be able to identify with those that were in the local leagues.

### **Chapter Three: *El Maestro* Tabárez's Long Term Project**

Since the 1990s, the game of soccer has undergone major changes in terms of its tactical orientation and infrastructural modernization. However, the Uruguayan national team has struggled to keep up with these fundamental shifts. In its attempt to return the national squad to old glory, the Uruguayan Football Association hired and fired twelve coaches between 1990 and 2006, never allowing any of them to complete an entire World Cup Qualifying cycle.<sup>1</sup> When Óscar WASHINGTON Tabárez became coach in 2006, he implemented a long-term plan to return Uruguay to a competitive level and adapt to the changes of commercialization. Rather than trying to revive the glory days, Tabárez aimed to reclaim Uruguay's relevance in the globalized game by fixing the structural and institutional flaws of the national game and giving it a new domestic and international image.

#### **The Troubles of Uruguayan Soccer**

One indication of Uruguay's institutional failures was the team's struggle to find opponents for friendly matches.<sup>2</sup> The national association could not pay other teams to travel to Montevideo and did not have the FIFA rankings or results in international

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<sup>1</sup>“Los celestes cambian de DT como de camiseta,” *El Observador*, April 07, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>“Uruguay se queda sin rival para jugar el 18 de agosto”, *El Observador*, August 05, 2004.

tournaments to be invited for friendlies elsewhere. Rather than test its squad against good opponents, Uruguay often ended up playing against amateur Uruguayan squads, which in turn led to even lower FIFA rankings.<sup>3</sup> During the 2006 World Cup Qualifiers, the team went an entire year without playing any friendlies.<sup>4</sup> This made it difficult to develop teamwork and game strategies with players under contract abroad. Moreover, European clubs regularly refused to release their players or did so late for official national team games, causing Uruguayan coaches to have to reshuffle the team and have only one or two practices to train with the entire squad.<sup>5</sup> A lack of cohesiveness on the field was the result. It also affected the camaraderie of the team off the field; fights between coaches and players were not uncommon. Both on and off the field, the team acted as a group of individuals rather than a unit, fueling the portrayal of players as arrogant, selfish stars playing for themselves rather than the country or each other.

For players used to the organizational standards of European clubs, the Uruguayan national team could not offer adequate conditions. To improve its standing, the team depended on these star players, but it did not offer them the facilities and support they needed to be successful. The players complained, for example, that the team's training complex had never fully been completed when it was constructed and that they had to sleep on old mattresses.<sup>6</sup> The conditions for away matches were not better; the Uruguayan Football Association often bought economy class flights for players,

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<sup>3</sup> "La práctica de la fecha FIFA", *El Observador*, August 19, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> "Hora de los rebeldes", *El Observador*, November 13, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> "JR tendrá un día para trabajar con el equipo titular," *El Observador*, March 19, 2004.; "Fossati tendrá una practica para preparar el equipo", *El Observador*, November 09, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> "Tranquilos muchachos van a viajar en primera," *El Observador*, May 08, 2007.; "Hora de los rebeldes," *El Observador*, November 13, 2005.

meaning that prior to playing a professional soccer match players had to spend an uncomfortable overnight flight with their “knees up by their chest”.<sup>7</sup> These poor accommodations likely contributed to the disparity between players’ performances for their clubs vs. for their country.

### **Óscar Wáshington Tabárez’s Diagnosis**

After Uruguay failed to qualify for the 2006 World Cup in Germany, the Uruguayan Football Association contacted Óscar Wáshington Tabárez to conduct a study on the state of soccer in Uruguay. Tabárez, sometimes referred to as *El Maestro*, had had a long coaching career in Uruguay, but he had also coached abroad which gave him the outside perspective to analyze the flaws of the national game and understand the forces of the transnational labor market. He had begun his coaching career with the youth divisions of a small Uruguayan club, Bella Vista, while working at an elementary school in order to make ends meet. With limited time, resources, and available players, Tabárez led Uruguay to its first Pan-American Games’ gold medal in 1983. Four years later, he led Peñarol to the Copa Libertadores title which put him in the spotlight and earned him the appointment as the Uruguayan national team coach for the 1990 World Cup.<sup>8</sup> Fired after a Round of 16 elimination at the World Cup, Tabárez coached club soccer first in Boca Juniors in Argentina and then first division clubs in Italy and Spain, where he had a chance to observe the advances of the global game.

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<sup>7</sup> “Hora de los rebeldes,” *El Observador*, November 13, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> “Tabárez, the coach who returned elite football to Uruguay,” [CONMEBOL.com](http://CONMEBOL.com), May 14, 2014.

Tabárez has been a close observer of Uruguayan soccer for a long time, and he knew how it compared to the game in leading nations abroad. Already after his first stint as Uruguayan coach in 1990, Tabárez had presented an analysis at a seminar on the disparity between Uruguayan and global soccer.<sup>9</sup> In 2004, at a time of “constant sporting and organizational crisis...”, Tabárez identified the issues plaguing the national sport and called for a leader to look past the immediate results, prioritize, and set realistic goals.<sup>10</sup> A year later, he gave a formal presentation at Uruguay’s Museum of Soccer in Montevideo on the topic. In his speech, he stated that the movement of players to Europe was interrupting players’ development and that changes needed to be made so that players would be more prepared prior to leaving. He emphasized that to truly prepare players, training needed to include human and professional aspects and not only technical ones from an early age.<sup>11</sup> Tabárez wanted to emulate the work that José Pékerman had done with Argentina’s youth divisions to provide continuity, cohesion, and identity to the national team process.<sup>12</sup> Tabárez also called for changes from the Uruguayan Football Association, explaining that to keep up with elite football, Uruguay needed to improve velocity and therefore needed better-maintained fields for players to train on and more modern training facilities.<sup>13</sup> Uruguay, he argued, needed to rethink its approach to the game, reign in unrealistic expectations before matches, and cut back on excessive

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<sup>9</sup> FESUR, *Nunca más campeón mundial?: aportes del Seminario Uruguay, Nunca Más Campeón Mundial? Fútbol, Deportes y Política en Uruguay* (LOGOS, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Horacio López, *El camino es la recompensa: conversaciones con Óscar Washington Tabárez* (Prisa Ediciones, 2012), 273.

<sup>11</sup> López, 275.

<sup>12</sup> “Los frutos de Pekerman,” *El Espectador*, January 6, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> López, 280.

criticism after games. Tabárez concluded his presentation by explaining that if Uruguay followed his advice and modernized its training methods, the national team would once again see positive results.<sup>14</sup>

Tabárez was nominated for the national team coach position in 2002 and 2004 by Daniel Pastorini, a member of the Executive Board of the Uruguayan Football Association, but failed to garner enough votes.<sup>15</sup> In 2005, the Executive Board of the Uruguayan Football Association finally offered him the position because it recognized the potential of his long-term plan for the national team.<sup>16</sup> Figueredo announced that Uruguay would “need to begin to reformulate everything: the youth divisions, local players, the experience with the players abroad. There (would) need to be a study and a complete five-year plan.”<sup>17</sup> Pastorini explained that “the most important thing is that the project is for all of the national teams, starting from the very bottom with the youth teams, from the base, and reaching the national side. It is important to begin a long-term project.”<sup>18</sup> Tabárez returned to the position as national team coach because the Association accepted a different project; he would have declined to be hired under the same conditions as in 1990.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>15</sup> “Figueredo quiere a De León y Pastorini a Tabárez,” *La Red 21*, November 26, 2002.; “Todo encaminado,” *El Espectador*, April 8, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> “Tabárez inicia hoy su segunda era,” *El Observador*, March 08, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> “Van por el Maestro,” *El Observador*, February 11, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> “Maestro en ilusiones,” *El Observador*, March 07, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> “El Maestro termino con su insomnio,” *El Observador*, March 09, 2006.

## **Playing the Long Game: *El Maestro's* Project**

At his first press conference as coach, Tabárez distributed a folder to the media with the label, “The Institutionalization of the Processes of the National Teams and the Formation of their Players.”<sup>20</sup> It was his proposal to modernize Uruguayan soccer and respond to the effects of global commercialization. It offered a diagnosis of the state of Uruguayan soccer, clear, concise goals for the project, and player development objectives based on José Pekerman’s work with Argentina’s youth divisions and Barcelona’s recipe for success in Europe. Tabárez attributed the poor state of the national sport to the exodus of players, often at a very young age, and the discontinuity of organization and strategic coordination of the national team.<sup>21</sup> He proposed to establish continuity and stability in Uruguayan soccer by instituting standardized policies and practice routines for all levels of the national team, organizing all practices and games in advance to fit both national and international calendars, and guaranteeing friendlies and competition for the national side. Tabárez became the first Uruguayan coach to utilize computer software to analyze opponents and past games, have the main team’s coaches also oversee the youth divisions, and employ a psychologist to attend to the players.<sup>22</sup> Although these practices were common in successful European clubs and national teams, they faced heavy criticism from conservative Uruguayan journalists until Tabárez backed them up with results.

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<sup>20</sup> Ivan Castagnello, “Orgullosa de usted, ‘Maestro’,” *La Red 21*, June 28, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Óscar W. Tabárez, “Institucionalización de los procesos de las selecciones nacionales y de la formación de sus futbolistas,” (2006): 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-10.; Felipe Arocena, *Lessons from Latin America: Innovations in Politics, Culture, and Development* (University of Toronto Press, 2014): 173.

Tabárez's proposal outlined a tactical orientation, practice outlines, and numerous other technical improvements, but it also concentrated on the pursuit of structural changes in the Uruguayan Football Association, primarily in the way the youth divisions were run. He had observed Pekerman's work with the Argentina youth and wanted to apply the approach in Uruguay. Tabárez sought to "coordinate the objectives and activities of the national teams at all age groups to reach long and mid range objectives."<sup>23</sup> Thus, Tabárez and his staff would oversee the work of the junior squads to guarantee continuity.<sup>24</sup> The proposal also stated that the coaching staff would "pay attention to the intellectual development and the players' connections with the cultural universe (through their curriculum and other activities that positively influence their personal, and eventually, professional, development)."<sup>25</sup> Youth players would be encouraged to continue their education and efforts were put into place to assist players' who lacked it.<sup>26</sup> For him, the youth needed to be able to learn more from soccer than technical skills; he sought to teach them about social networking, communication, and teamwork, as well.<sup>27</sup>

Tabárez maintained that the Uruguayan coaches needed to find a way to instill a passion for the national team in the youth players before they left the country. He maintained that "no team, no matter how deep its wallet, can have the luxury to be missing organized youth divisions that identify with where they are, with the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>25</sup> Ricardo Piñeyrua, *Fútbol y Otros Deportes* (Biblioteca Nacional de Uruguay): 12.

<sup>26</sup> Tabárez, "Institucionalización de los procesos de las selecciones nacionales y de la formación de sus futbolistas," (2006): 6.

<sup>27</sup> López, 311.

institution.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, Tabárez designated time for his young players to learn and discuss the history of country’s team, the importance of the national soccer culture, and the privilege that it was to play on the team.<sup>29</sup> He added that “reading, learning about *Maracaná*, about the generation from the Olympics, is part of the player’s formation or training...they need to feel a part of a historical continuum...of an identity that makes us known abroad.”<sup>30</sup> He sought to ensure that even after moving abroad, players identified with the team, its history, its culture, and in turn, with the country. His reforms would ensure that players understand the privilege of playing on the national team, willingly return to play for the country in spite of the inferior conditions, and give it their all “for the sky-blue jersey”. Tabárez aimed to embed Uruguayan traditions into the players, so that even if they left Uruguay at a young age they would have an attachment to the national team and the country; he prepared the players to be transmigrants.

To tackle the issue of excessive stardom and individualism that had hampered team cohesion, Tabárez defined an ideal profile for players on the national team. Diego Aguirre, a seasoned Uruguayan club soccer coach, described Tabárez’s emphasis on the character of players: “for him it is more of the human aspect, the profile of player that one needs to find...he maintains that the most important thing is the wood...that afterwards one can carve it.”<sup>31</sup> The players would need to demonstrate solidarity, effort,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>29</sup> Tabárez, “Institucionalización de los procesos de las selecciones nacionales y de la formación de sus futbolistas,” (2006): 7.

<sup>30</sup> López, 344.

<sup>31</sup> López, 249.

respect, and sacrifice and accept their respective roles on the team.<sup>32</sup> To him, part of solidarity and respect was having low profiles and being humble, and allowing “the only star (to be) the team”.<sup>33</sup> It was also about the right image to project to the rest of the world. Tabárez aimed to counter the Uruguayan reputation of aggression and dirty play by encouraging a different kind of *garra* from his players: they were to play cleanly and strive for the *Fair Play* trophy.<sup>34</sup> Concentrating on low profile players willing to play within the rules of the game was Tabárez’s approach to saving Uruguayan soccer.

### **On the Field Results under *El Maestro*’s Project**

In an interview in March 2016, the 2010 team captain, Diego Lugano, was asked what had allowed for Uruguay’s return to success on the global stage. He replied:

“When the world credits our generation for this comeback, I am always very analytical. I always point to the project, one that for the first time in Uruguayan history, was concentrated on more than the result. . . We lost, we played poorly, and we still received support. . . We had a historical privilege. We were not even close to being the best generation of Uruguayan soccer players; we were just lucky to have the support of a type of project that is now fundamental in modern soccer.”<sup>35</sup>

When the FIFA soccer ranking began in 1993, the Uruguayan team’s annual ranking was seventeenth place. After a sharp decline in the late 1990s, Uruguay returned to around the same level at which it had begun and stayed there until 2010. Since then, Uruguay has managed to stay in or near the top ten. The graph below shows the team’s recent return to the global stage, but also why the long-term process was crucial. The commitment to a

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<sup>32</sup> Tabárez, “Institucionalización de los procesos de las selecciones nacionales y de la formación de sus futbolistas,” (2006): 6.; “El proyecto Tabárez mas allá del fútbol: Una cancha sembrada,” *Políticas: un país en construcción y cambio* (October 2011): 19.

<sup>33</sup> López, 217.

<sup>34</sup> López, 335.

<sup>35</sup> “Lugano Afirma Que Confrontos Entre Brasil E Uruguai ‘sempre São Lindos’,” In *Bem, Amigos!*, SporTV, March 08, 2016.

long-term program yielded results: the Uruguayan national team is again internationally competitive.



Uruguay left South Africa in July 2010 with its best World Cup performance since 1970: fourth place. Diego Forlán became the first Uruguayan since 1970 to be placed on the World Cup All-Star team and the first one in history to be selected as the best player of the tournament.<sup>36</sup> The tournament legitimized the Tabárez process with the successful introduction of several youth division players that had played in the 2007 U-20 World Cup, such as Luis Suárez, Edinson Cavani, and Martín Cáceres, and one from the 2009 U-20 World Cup, Nicolas Lodeiro.<sup>37</sup> The seamless transition from the youth divisions and the main squad worked.

The success continued after the 2010 World Cup. The following year, Uruguay won its fifteenth Copa América, becoming the country with the most Copa América championships in history. The first place finish, like the fourth place in the World Cup,

<sup>36</sup> Ian Chadband, “World Cup 2010: Uruguay striker Diego Forlán makes big splash to win Golden Ball award,” *The Telegraph*, July 12, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> “El semillero de Tabárez,” *El País*, June 22, 2014.

provided financial relief for the Uruguayan Football Association through prize money; it also assured improved friendly schedules for the following years.<sup>38</sup> At the Copa América, Uruguay won the Fair Play Award for the most sportsmanlike and clean team in the tournament. National team player Sebastian Abreu joked after the tournament that giving the Fair Play Award to Diego Lugano, the team captain always seen as an aggressive defender, was like giving the Nobel Peace Prize to bin Laden.<sup>39</sup> Luis Suárez was awarded Best Player of the Tournament, while Sebastián Coates was given the award of Best Young Player of the Tournament.<sup>40</sup> Both Suárez and Coates had come out of U-20 squads, illustrating how the long-term project led directly to player development and success.

By mid-2012, Uruguay was second behind only Spain in the FIFA Ranking, its highest placement since the ranking system began in 1992, and it participated in the Olympic soccer tournament for the first time since its 1928 Gold Medal.<sup>41</sup> In 2013, Uruguay qualified for its third U-17 World Cup, while the U-20 squad became the first in the world to qualify to four consecutive U-20 World Cups.<sup>42</sup> At the 2013 U-20 World Cup, many of the players that had contributed to the second place finish in the 2011 U-17 World Cup in Mexico led Uruguay to the second place spot behind France.<sup>43</sup> The young Uruguayan players cultivated teamwork on the field and camaraderie off it before even

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<sup>38</sup> “El Campeón de la Copa América se llevará 6,5 millones de dólares,” *FutbolRed*, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Wilson, “Uruguay under Óscar Washington Tabárez can claw way to World Cup,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> “Suárez y Coates lo mejor de la Copa,” *Referi*, July 24, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> “Londres 2012: Uruguay vuelve al fútbol olímpico luego de 84 años,” *El Comercio*, July 18, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Piñeyrua, 15.

<sup>43</sup> “El semillero de Tabárez,” *El País*, June 22, 2014.

joining the main national squad. Just two months after the U-20 second place finish, one of the starting defenders, José María Giménez, debuted with the national team at a “win or be eliminated” World Cup Qualifier. After falling out of the top four, the only direct qualifying slots in the South American Qualifiers, Uruguay had had its back against the wall. In order to keep its World Cup dreams alive, it had to beat Colombia. Giménez helped shut out Colombia in a 2-0 win and allowed Uruguay to continue its path to the 2014 World Cup.<sup>44</sup> In November 2013, Uruguay qualified, yet again, through an intercontinental playoff due to finishing fifth in the South American Qualifiers; this marked the first time since 1990 that Uruguay attended two World Cup tournaments back to back. After captain Diego Lugano suffered a knee injury during the first game of the 2014 World Cup, Giménez, one of Tabárez’s youth players, ably replaced him in the victories against England and Italy, Uruguay’s first wins against European opponents since 1966.<sup>45</sup> Under Tabárez, Uruguay has experienced its most successful period since the early twentieth century. The success owes much to strong teamwork and a tactical orientation that is taught all the way down the youth levels; young players are able to quickly fill the voids left behind by aging players.

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<sup>44</sup> “Grande: a Giménez la 2 no le pesó nada,” *El País*, September 12, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> “Uruguay rompe maleficio de 44 años ante rivales europeos tras vencer a Inglaterra,” *Reuters*, June 19, 2014.

## Chapter 4: The Reinvention of *La Celeste's* Image

Óscar Washington Tabárez recognized that the negative attitude towards players was a result of soccer's global commercialization, but also of the glorification of the past and the comparison between "those authentic champions and the ones from now".<sup>1</sup> The contemporary players' affluence and celebrity status marked a stark difference from the profiles of past players and the traditional Uruguayan self-perception. The players of the glory era, such as José Nasazzi in 1930 and Obdulio Varela in 1950, contributed to the formation of the identity of the "us", the Uruguayan identity that is characterized by its simple, humble, and down-to-earth nature. On the other hand, Uruguayans questioned contemporary players who had moved abroad for their lack of Uruguayan characteristics; they were not always seen as part of the "us". Tabárez claimed that the best strategy to address the veneration for past glories was to "combat...with effort, a certain image, and results" and to "connect the past and present to build the future of the national team."<sup>2</sup> Tabárez's plan looked to develop a player-team relationship like that of the past, but within the limitations and context of the new globalized game.

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<sup>1</sup> "Tabárez: 'España tuvo su gran desarrollo deportivo cuando participó de la bonanza económica de la zona europea'," *El Imparcial*, October 20, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> "Tabárez: 'Me felicito de estar todavía en este mundo y haber visto todo esto que ha hecho Guardiola'," *El Imparcial*, February 5, 2013.

## **The New Profile: Discipline, Humility, and Solidarity**

Tabárez, inspired by the image of Barcelona players, “their professionalism, good manners, respect for their rivals and the public”,<sup>3</sup> put an emphasis on highlighting the human qualities. He sought to take advantage of the national team’s platform to promulgate positive value systems, such as “setting challenges, overcoming them, having goodwill... and respect, the solidarity that comes with everything that is done with a group, and the feeling of belonging.”<sup>4</sup> Tabárez insisted that “when one is a child, young, one has the necessity to have idols, role models, and if we work towards having certain types of role models, that relay certain values, show certain things, we will have good teams.”<sup>5</sup> The national team was to represent the country well internationally and the players to act as role models for Uruguayans. Tabárez asked for a polished appearance, so as to emulate the professionalism displayed in European club and national soccer. Players were to wear suits and ties during travel in order to make the team look put together and professional and emphasized the players’ appearances in press conferences.<sup>6</sup>

One of the main areas that Tabarez focused on was the players’ communication skills. For years, journalists had portrayed players as rude and arrogant, and videos of inarticulate press conferences had made them look uneducated. Tabárez recognized that communication and speaking were among the professional players’ new responsibilities in a media-driven soccer business and noted that “everyone laughs at the soccer players,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Tabárez: ‘Me felicito de estar todavía en este mundo y haber visto todo esto que ha hecho Guardiola’,” *El Imparcial*, February 2, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Horacio López, *El camino es la recompensa: conversaciones con Óscar Washington Tabárez* (Prisa Ediciones, 2012), 327.

<sup>6</sup> “El éxito integral de Uruguay,” *El Mundo*, July 20, 2011.

but no one helps them.”<sup>7</sup> Looking to prepare players while they were still in the youth divisions, he implemented role-playing exercises during which individuals took turns answering questions while the rest of the team gave feedback on their deliveries.<sup>8</sup> His efforts were recognized after the 2010 World Cup when the Uruguayan Academy of Language, a public institution that strives to preserve, enrich, and promote the development of the national language and culture in Uruguay, wrote Tabárez a letter congratulating him for the players’ simple, respectful, and appropriate way of speaking.<sup>9</sup>

Tabárez also encouraged the national players to be humble and amicable towards fans. “No one is better than anyone else” is a famous Uruguayan expression that “Uruguayans have inscribed in their DNA...”<sup>10</sup> Humility is a central pillar of Uruguayan identity and thus, the Uruguayan public found it difficult to see famous, high-profile players as mirrors of the Uruguayan society. Tabárez encouraged humility which made players seem approachable, but also more Uruguayan; this encouraged the narrative that players were able to retain their national identity even when spending the majority of their time abroad. *El Mundo*, a Spanish newspaper, praised the Uruguayan players in a 2011 article that labeled Uruguay as the “team of the people”: they are “always with a smile. Always signing autographs for fans when they leave the hotel. No one is denied. With order and professionalism, Uruguay is the model for the rest of the teams to imitate.”<sup>11</sup> Team captain Lugano showed leadership in this area and set a goal for himself

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<sup>7</sup> Federico Bassahun, “Uruguay ya ganó: su proyecto a largo plazo funciona como un reloj,” *Perfil*, July 23, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> “El proyecto Tabárez mas allá del fútbol: Una cancha sembrada,” *Políticas: un país en construcción y cambio* (October 2011): 16-19.

<sup>10</sup> “La austeridad en la clase política de Uruguay no empezó con Mujica,” *El País (España)*, June 3, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Luis Villarejo, “Uruguay, el equipo del pueblo,” *El Mundo*, July 22, 2011.

to never deny his autograph or picture.<sup>12</sup> The fans were granted access to the players while they were in Uruguay or at tournaments, which helped to counteract the remoteness between fans and players that was caused by the global commercialization of the sport. The team's openness kept the players grounded, while showing appreciation, kindness, and humility to the fans.

The players' involvement with Uruguayan society did not end with autographs and selfies. Tabárez's 2010 World Cup team founded *Fundación Celeste*, a nonprofit conceived by the players at the World Cup and founded with a portion of their World Cup winnings. In addition, many players had individual projects to give back to society, such as benefit games, traditional parties in their hometowns, and visits to hospitals.<sup>13</sup> The players also used their high profiles to call attention to serious issues. For example, following a deadly tornado in Uruguay on April 15, 2016, the national team players sent videos of encouragement and shared information on their social media page about donation drives for those affected.<sup>14</sup> Tabárez encouraged this openness of the squad to the public, but the philanthropic actions, such as the nonprofit and the players' individual endeavors, were player-driven initiatives. The players wanted to use their privileged position to have a long-term impact on their society.<sup>15</sup> The players' work for their local communities helped change the narrative that had haunted the *repatriados* of the national team for decades; it helped debunk the notion that moving abroad had severed their

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<sup>12</sup> López, 300.

<sup>13</sup> López, 223.; "El mejor gol," *Montevideo Portal*, December 23, 2014.; "Lugano, 'Cebolla', y el 'Tata' en la Fiesta del Gaucho," *El País*, December 23, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> "Cavani y un saludo a Dolores," *El País*, April 16, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> "Los jugadores de Uruguay crearon su Fundación Celeste," *Agencia EFE*, July 14, 2010.

connection and passion for Uruguay. They showed that they had interests and relations that spanned borders. They were transmigrants.

The “no one is better than anyone else” mentality and the emphasis on solidarity translated into improvements of the team’s chemistry. Before Tabárez, individual star players from different clubs had struggled to create a cohesive team.<sup>16</sup> Tabárez managed to create a group unlike previous Uruguayan teams, one in which each player accepted his role and problems with stars and divas did not exist.<sup>17</sup> The squad’s solidarity became just as much of identity marker for the Uruguayan national team as *garra charrúa* had been for decades.<sup>18</sup> Luis Suárez, later to become Uruguay’s all-time top scorer, praised the dynamics of the national team before he was a regular starter: “...no one thinks they are better than anyone else... no, we are all the same and that makes the group feel good, happy. The fact that all 23 players that are on the team know that they have the chance to play. It unites the group.”<sup>19</sup> In 2011, Sebastián Eguren, a midfielder on the 2010 Uruguay team, stated, “I have never seen a group like this one, there is magic. The ‘us’ prevails over the ‘I’”,<sup>20</sup> a sentiment similar to the one shared by Diego Lugano in 2010 when he credited the result achieved in South Africa to the unity and friendship that Tabárez had encouraged.<sup>21</sup> The team’s unity and the players’ humble attitude earned the respect and

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<sup>16</sup> López, 291.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 220, 359, 361-362. ; Andrés Franco, “Uruguay: solidaridad y amor por la camiseta,” [goal.com](#), June 24, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> “Acto de solidaridad,” *El País*, June 6, 2014. ; Franco, June 24, 2014. ; “Gabriel Gutiérrez (psicólogo deportivo): El maestro Tabarez es diferente,” *El Espectador*, July 7, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> López, 295.

<sup>20</sup> “El éxito integral de Uruguay,” *El Mundo*, July 20, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> “A country full of gratitude defies freezing weather to honor Uruguay’s soccer team,” *Merco Press*, July 14, 2010.

admiration of Uruguayans who saw the players as mirrors of society — and it prevented conflicts within the team.

### **The Role of Technology During the Tabárez Era**

The later years of the Tabárez era coincided with an increase in access to cable television and the internet in Uruguay. In 2011, 52.4% of Uruguayans had cable or satellite television subscription, while 33.5% of households had internet access. Those numbers increased to 68% and 57.4%, respectively, by 2014.<sup>22</sup> As cable and internet access increased in Uruguay, European clubs began to gain more regular followers from Uruguayan soccer fans. As affinity to national team players grew and access to the international leagues increased, following the performances of Uruguayan players abroad became a shared experience for Uruguayans; the game scores and player performances became part of everyday conversations. It was the teams with successful Uruguayan players, such as Liverpool, Barcelona, and Paris St. Germain, that gained the most fans. For example, the French league only began to gain traction in Uruguay when Edinson Cavani and Diego Rolan began playing there in 2013.<sup>23</sup> The increased access to foreign games was accompanied by increased media coverage. In 2013, the national newspapers began to publish a weekly list of all of the Uruguayan players abroad, the date and time of their games that week, and the channel on which they could be seen.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, local news channels began to show video compilations every day of Uruguayan goals

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<sup>22</sup> “Fútbol por control remoto,” *El País*, July 26, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *El País* Online Archive.

around the world for those that could not watch the games. The increased access to technology allowed Uruguayans to stay up to date with the games of Uruguayan players abroad, watch their highlights, and feel involved in their successes and failures.

Television also allowed the team's new image to be promulgated by an array of marketing campaigns. The national team players endorsed a wide range of products, everything from laundry detergent to snacks had a *celeste* special edition.<sup>25</sup> By being spokespeople for everyday Uruguayan products, the players encouraged the narrative that they maintained a Uruguayan lifestyle. While the Uruguayan players benefitted from aligning themselves with national brands and products, marketing firms profited from using the national team as a vehicle to connect their products with the people.<sup>26</sup> These marketing firms tied their products to the players that were beloved by the public, but at the same time legitimized the fact that the team's lessons and values were just as important as their results. Marketing campaigns incorporated themes like respect, family, and self discipline into their commercials. Antel, a telecommunication company, made a commercial with Diego Forlán in which he talked about giving it your all, pushing yourself, and studying.<sup>27</sup> UTE, an electricity company, had an ad with captain Diego Lugano in which he stated that "together we can do more" and that "sometimes you lose, sometimes you win, but what is important is knowing you tried your best."<sup>28</sup> The marketing firms facilitated the dissemination of Tabárez's' new value-centered player profiles and encouraged fans to place value in the effort and not the results.

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<sup>25</sup> "Los avisos de famosos lideran el top of mind," *El País*, June 28, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> "Los valores celestes, un vehículo para conectar a las marcas con los hinchas," *El País*, July 11, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Antel, "Pelotazos," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idIuMl8K1W8>.

<sup>28</sup> UTE, "Spot de UTE," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S74LxfLT3C8>.

The Uruguayan Football Association's own marketing firm, Punto Ogilvy, actively promoted the importance of the team's non-soccer successes. The firm explained the special appeal of Tabárez's group: "more than in sporting results, we Uruguayans see the values of our society in this group of professional athletes, the ones that keep showing us that through those values one gets results. Even more importantly, they reaffirm our way of being, our culture, and our identity."<sup>29</sup> In 2014, Punto Ogilvy created a marketing campaign for the Uruguayan Football Association that focused on these non-soccer aspects. The campaign was named "*Valores Celestes* (Sky-Blue Values) —Made in Uruguay". The promo spot showed a montage of game clips while a dramatic narrator said:

"The result always matters, but it is not everything. *El Maestro* already said it: The journey is the reward. We can do spectacularly well, we can do fine, or we can even do poorly, but for us Uruguayans the only possible result is to put our hearts into each thing that we do. To complete each play with respect, teamwork, confidence, discipline, courage, talent, and love. That is Uruguay. Those are our values. Let's go *La Celeste*. You can see who we are... on the field."<sup>30</sup>

Punto Ogilvy and the Uruguayan Football Association took Tabárez's focus on the journey and used it to promote an identification with the team that depended on values rather than results. This helped construct the narrative that what made the players Uruguayan symbols was not triumphs or glory, but their Uruguayan values.

Social Media and the internet allowed the public to get to know its national team players on a more personal, human level within the context of the new globalized world. The intimacy of the relationship between players and fans that formed in the early

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<sup>29</sup> "Los valores celestes, un vehículo para conectar a las marcas con los hinchas," *El País*, July 11, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

twentieth century -- when they lived next to each other, saw each other on the street, and shared a lifestyle -- was impossible in the new era of international transfer markets.

Social media and the internet, however, allowed for a new type of connection to exist, similar to that between Uruguayans and family members outside of the country. The technology could not offer the same immediate contact as living next to each other, but they did permit shared experiences to continue long distance. By seeing the day to day lives of the players, fans were able to feel connected. In 2010, Diego Forlán published pictures and public updates, “because he once had been a fan and (knew) that having the possibility to know what a player lived day by day (was) nice.”<sup>31</sup> The internet and social media both served to close the emotional gap between players and fans by allowing Uruguayans stuck on the other side of the ocean to have a first hand account of events.

Television programs, such as *Cámara Celeste* and *Pasión Mundial*, began to follow the teams to tournaments to show a more in-depth account of the players’ lives. The shows highlighted arbitrary, non-soccer every-day moments throughout the players’ experience, which helped the narrative of the players’ normalcy. For example, during the 2010 World Cup, *Cámara Celeste*, a show filmed with a shaky handheld camera, showed interviews with the players in the airport duty-free shop buying perfume and signing autographs, the hotel pool drinking *mate*, and on the plane listening to music or sleeping.<sup>32</sup> The show, which was more like a home video, made the players appear like normal Uruguayans, not distant celebrities. Sebastian Abreu, a forward on the national

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<sup>31</sup> Silvia Vinas, “Uruguay: Las redes sociales mantienen informados a los fanáticos de La Celeste,” *Global Voices*, June 10, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> *Cámara Celeste*, [YouTube.com](http://YouTube.com).

side, pursued a similar project when he recorded the team's experience at major tournaments to later share with the public; he wanted to allow the fans to see the tournament from their point of view.<sup>33</sup> In 2015, the show *Por la Camiseta* used informal interviews to show the day to day lives of nine Uruguayan players in Europe and to “get to know the person more and the player less.”<sup>34</sup> The show did display the elite lifestyle of the players, but it mostly concentrated on how each of the players maintained Uruguayan traditions, whether it be food or music, in their everyday lives, and how each of them, even though they were superstars, gave everything “for the (Uruguayan) jersey”.<sup>35</sup> These television shows put on display the lives of the national team players, highlighting characteristics and values that demonstrated that the players were transmigrants, representatives of the “us” even while living among the “them”.

### **A New Connection Between Players and Fans**

In his first official meeting with the players in May 2006, Tabárez asked them for *adhesión*. He asked them to take part in his project and ignore the hostile atmosphere in Uruguay that had sparked controversies and early player retirements from the national side in the past. During that first encounter, well aware that the public was at odds with the national team, Tabárez appealed to the players and asked that they have faith in his project. He said, “You guys know what they may say in Uruguay about you. That you don't try as hard on the national team as you do at your clubs, that you won't give it your

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<sup>33</sup> Luis Villarejo, “Uruguay, el equipo del pueblo,” *El Mundo*, July 22, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> “Nueve cracks,” *El País*, April 11, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> *Por la Camiseta*, [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...).

all, even that they think you come to steal money. You guys already know all of this. So I ask that you never allow that to be a justification to stop doing things.”<sup>36</sup> He asked his players to buy into the project even in bad times, because he knew that the public would not grant its support until it saw positive results. When referring to the fate of the project, Tabárez pointed to “a film by Woody Allen, *Match Point*, that starts with a tennis ball running along the net, while a voiceover says that the story he is going to tell will be one if it falls to one side and another if it falls to the other.”<sup>37</sup> Tabárez’s appeal to the team was parallel to the opening scene; he claimed the success and the public opinion of the project depended entirely on the results.

To Tabárez’s and the players’ surprise, however, the public valued and applauded the changes made off the field even before the team produced positive results at the 2010 World Cup. On the eve of their departure to South Africa, over 2,000 fans went to the Montevideo Airport to watch the team depart, a crowd that shocked the players and executives. Edgard Welker, the Vice President of Peñarol at the time, reacted to the crowd at the airport, “(the players) have a lot of ‘feeling’ with the people. Honestly, it is unbelievable. When I got here, I could not believe it... all the people that are here.”<sup>38</sup> The Vice-President of the Uruguayan Football Association, Miguel Sejas offered his explanation, “one sees the fervor of the Uruguayan public, the hope. I think that more than the achievements on the field, it is the attitude of the team that has caused this current relationship.” Diego Lugano, the captain of the Uruguayan squad, explained the

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<sup>36</sup> “El proyecto Tabárez mas allá del fútbol: Una cancha sembrada,” *Políticas: un país en construcción y cambio* (October 2011): 19.

<sup>37</sup> López, 347.

<sup>38</sup> *Camara Celeste*, [YouTube.com](http://YouTube.com), June 6, 2010.

crowd's size by highlighting that "the Uruguayan people identify with the group and the group identifies itself with the people."<sup>39</sup> The crowd's size demonstrated that the improvement in the team-fan relationship did not occur merely as a result of the 2010 tournament; the public supported the Tabárez process and the players even before the team achieved positive results.

The fan support was particularly surprising in light of the negative media portrayal. A compilation of videos collected by Channel 10 in Uruguay, called "Tabárez vs. Journalism", highlights the continual barrage of criticism that the coach and players received prior to 2010. Julio Ríos, a Uruguayan sports commentator and journalist complained in July 2007, "Tabárez manages the players as if this was European soccer. Which is not the way to work with the player from the River Plate or a Uruguayan." Two years later, he was still at it: "this is a European team. I ask myself if Uruguayan soccer is like that or if it is more of an undisciplined style." Uruguayan soccer identity had been tied to a violent interpretation of *garra charrúa* for decades, leading journalists to criticize the overemphasis on respect, solidarity, and values as a move away from the Uruguayan way. Alberto Sonsol complained in August 2008 that "they say 'the group is great', 'they're all respectful', 'that they all get along'... but I want them to win. What do I care if they get along or not?" In June 2009, he pushed that winning was all Uruguay should aspire to: "Uruguay is a slave of its rich history...History obligates us."<sup>40</sup> Tabárez's

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> "Maestro Tabárez vs. Periodistas," *Bendita TV*, [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...).

emphasis on the human aspects of the players was seen as too much of a shift away from the traditional association of soccer with national glory.

The identification between the fans and players grew stronger throughout the 2010 World Cup. When Uruguay won its second group stage game against the hosts in June, many young Uruguayans took to the streets to celebrate. When asked by journalists if the celebrations were too premature, the people responded that they were not.<sup>41</sup> This showed the mentality change that the country was undergoing. Luis Ubiña, the captain of the 1970 Uruguayan team, compared the happiness experienced in Uruguay during the 2010 World Cup to that from 1950, stating that even back then people had not been as joyful as they were during the South African tournament.<sup>42</sup> For Uruguayans, all teams had always been compared to the 1950 squad, which is why in 1970, fourth place had been seen as a failure. In 2010, however, that mindset changed and fourth place was accepted and celebrated as a big accomplishment. A song written as a fundraiser for Fundación Celeste after the tournament has the lyrics “today like yesterday, in 1950.” It equates the fourth place finish of the 2010 World Cup to the glory days of the past.<sup>43</sup> In 2010, a fourth place finish was seen as a victory and the players as heroes.<sup>44</sup> Journalists joined the choir once the World Cup results were in. Julio Ríos complimented Tabárez for a serious project and having chosen such an admirable player profile. Sonsol, who had been insisting that only the result mattered, named the solidarity of the group as Tabárez’s

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<sup>41</sup> Tabárez: ‘España tuvo su gran desarrollo deportivo cuando participó de la bonanza económica de la zona europea’,” *El Imparcial*, October 20, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Diego, Torres, “Hay más alegría ahora que en 1950,” *El País (España)*, July 1, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> “Grito de Gol,” *Fundación Celeste*.

<sup>44</sup> “De regreso a casa sin la Celeste,” *El País*, Aug 27, 2015.

biggest virtue and stated that “as Tabárez said in one of his press conferences, one cannot be so perverse as to just celebrate World Cup titles.”<sup>45</sup>

On the day after their return from South Africa, Tabárez and the team paraded from the team’s training complex to the Legislative Palace on a bus that was decorated with the slogan *Orgullo Celeste*. The thirty kilometer trip lasted five hours due to the sea of people that engulfed the bus as it made its way through the Montevideo streets.<sup>46</sup> Once at the Legislative Palace, the President of Uruguay, José Mujica, greeted and welcomed the team, before allowing the players to talk, sing, and tell jokes to the massive crowd that had gathered in front of the stage. Tabárez closed the ceremony with a reminder that the results only served to legitimize a process that had been underway for almost four years. Before thanking the crowd, he stated that “success is not only the result, but the difficulties one endures, the continuous efforts, the spirit to take on new challenges, and the will to overcome them. The journey is the reward.”<sup>47</sup> His closing statement was a reminder to the Uruguayan people to not depend on the final score for happiness and a source of identity as they had in the past, but to recognize and enjoy “effort above titles, *garra* over wins, and soccer over victory laps.”<sup>48</sup>

After the fourth place finish in the 2010 World Cup and the 2011 Copa América victory, Tabárez and the players were recognized for their success in transmitting positive values to the public and for showing the Uruguayan people what those values, such as

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “A country full of gratitude defies freezing weather to honor Uruguay’s soccer team,” *Merco Press*, July 14, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> López, Prologue.

<sup>48</sup> “De regreso a casa sin la Celeste,” *El País*, Aug 27, 2015.

hard work, respect, solidarity, and discipline, could achieve.<sup>49</sup> Tabárez was named “Champion for Sport” by UNESCO “in recognition of his commitment to promote education and sport programs for vulnerable children in Uruguay, his charitable activities in the framework of the Tabárez Project, and his dedication to the ideals and aims of the Organization.”<sup>50</sup> The players’ Uruguayaness was no longer questioned— in fact, it was celebrated. The players were recognized for “personifying the basic values of the Uruguayan culture” after their performance at the 2010 World Cup and honored by the Uruguayan Post Office after their 2011 Copa América victory for “being examples of the values that make up the country.”<sup>51</sup> They were praised for being good role models for the rest of society, especially kids. In 2013, two years after their Copa América victory, *Selección de Valores y Actitudes: Para educar con ejemplo* (National Team of Values and Attitudes: To educate by example), an educational book about the values exemplified by the Uruguayan squad was published and distributed for free to educational centers around Uruguay. The book used the national team’s solidarity and teamwork to teach about behavior.<sup>52</sup> In sharp contrast with past players that had been portrayed as arrogant stars and traitors, these players were admired and respected for their characters and value systems.

Uruguayans had begun to identify with the Uruguayan players, the team, and the coach, rather than the idea of a distant and successful past. As Ricardo Piñeyrua, a sports

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<sup>49</sup> López 307; Camilo Delelli, “Más allá del fútbol: el tipo de sociedad que expresa el maestro Tabárez,” *Factum Digital*, June 20, 2014. ; Veronica Psetizki, “Recibimiento de campeones para la selección uruguaya,” *BBC Mundo*, July 13, 2010. ; “A cartas vistas,” *Montevideo Portal*, August 11, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> “Óscar Washington Tabárez, named UNESCO Champion for Sport,” *UNESCOPRESS*, January 27, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> “A cartas vistas,” *Montevideo Portal*, August 11, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> “La celeste también inculca valores,” *El País*, September 23, 2013.

journalist, explained, they went “from feeling obliged to win to trying to win,” and realized that “the result (was) no longer the only goal, and that the image and, more so, the behavior also matter(ed).”<sup>53</sup> Triumphs had always played a role in the national identity, but thanks to the Tabárez process, losses, challenges, and controversies also began to be seen as experiences that contributed to the national identity. For decades, Uruguayans had failed to adjust their expectations to the new globalized soccer world, leading to disappointment and disapproval of players. Tabárez’s emphasis on the non-soccer aspects of players allowed the public to identify with the team rather than the idea of glory, allowing a new reference point for Uruguayan soccer to emerge.

Uruguayans’ acceptance of the players as part of the “us” rather than the “them”, as true mirrors of society, was showcased during the 2014 World Cup. On June 24, 2014, Luis Suárez bit the Italian defender Giorgio Chellini in a first-round World Cup match. Some Uruguayans claimed he had not bitten the player, some claimed he had, but that it was not a huge deal, and others, albeit fewer, condemned it as a barbaric act. When FIFA announced the penalty for the bite, the country rallied around the player.<sup>54</sup> FIFA kicked Suárez out of the tournament, banned him from the national team for almost two years, and forbid him from entering any soccer field for four months. Even those that had condemned the biting rushed to defend Suárez against what they viewed as a large corporation making an example out of a player that lacked a powerful association to defend him.<sup>55</sup> For Uruguayans, Suárez vs. FIFA was David vs. Goliath. Daniel Renfrew,

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<sup>53</sup> Ricardo Piñeyrua, *Fútbol y Otros Deportes* (Biblioteca Nacional de Uruguay): 10.

<sup>54</sup> “#DeOficioTodosoNinguno’ llegó a ser la mayor tendencia mundial,” *El País*, June 26, 2014.; “Indignación en las redes sociales por fallo de FIFA.” *El País*, June 26, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Renfrew, “Love Bite: Why Uruguayans Rever Luis Suárez,” *Huffington Post*, July 11, 2014.

an anthropologist, explained that “defending Suárez turned into a national cause, regardless of what people thought of his actions on the field that day...Suárez has *garra*...and he is us.”<sup>56</sup> For the Round of 16 match, a television company set up a screen outside of Suárez’s home for the more than a thousand fans that were standing in solidarity out in the cold. The fans held up a banner that read “3 million sky-blue hearts, 6 million arms to help you back up”, stickers that said “We are all Suárez”, and Suárez masks that had been printed that day under a newspaper headline that read “we are all one”. Even after the game ended in a loss, the crowds cheered “Let’s go Uruguay” and “Olé, olé, olé, olé, Lucho! Lucho!”.<sup>57</sup> Uruguayans did not blame Suárez for the World Cup elimination; they saw him, a millionaire soccer player, as a small, weak Uruguayan, that was a victim of the powerful, outside world.

The Round of 16 elimination in the 2014 World Cup, which more than one thousand Uruguayans watched outside of Suárez’s home, was the equivalent of the 1990 result that had led to the firing of Tabárez and the tension of the *repatriados* crisis. The poor result could have undermined the Tabárez project and the relationship between players and fans again, but instead, the Uruguayans’ reaction to the 2014 World Cup elimination was one of support. More than 4,000 people went to the Montevideo airport to welcome the players home from Brazil. In an article describing the warm reception, the journalist Diego Pérez wrote:

“if one tells somewhere else in the world that four thousand Uruguayans welcomed the team...after a Round of 16 elimination...few would understand it. But this group has achieved that. There is an identification between the *pueblo* and this team, or even more

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “Mañana, todos somos Suárez,” *El Observador*, June 23, 2014.

so, with this process... If today there is such fervor for *la Celeste*, it is because these players have, with their attitudes outside of the field, earned affinity and recognition that goes further than winning or losing.”<sup>58</sup>

The reaction of the Uruguayans to the Suárez Case and the 2014 World Cup elimination demonstrated that the relationship built between players and fans under Tabárez was no longer entirely dependent on results. The fans identified with the team and players rather than purely the glory. In the face of losses, they did not question the dedication and passion of their players even in the face of an international controversy, but instead identified with their effort and challenges.

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<sup>58</sup> “Más de 4.000 personas recibieron a la selección,” *El País*, June 30, 2014.

## **Conclusion**

Soccer played a central role in Uruguay's national identity throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The national team's triumphs in the first half of the century were seen as proof that the small nation could perform on a world stage. The mutually reinforcing relationship between soccer success and national identity weakened after 1950 when the national team stopped winning and when it entered into profound crisis in the 1990s as Uruguayan star players began leaving the country to play in better leagues abroad. The national team no longer provided the country with glory and the players were no longer mirrors of Uruguayan society. Through his 2006 project, Tabárez tackled both of these problems. First, he implemented institutional reforms to modernize Uruguayan soccer and assure continuity and youth development. Second, by reinventing the image of the national team, Tabárez created a new relationship between players and fans. He reconstructed the relationship within the context of global commercialization by showing that transnational players could still be national representatives and members of the nation — the physical distance separating the players and the country did not diminish their contribution to Uruguay's national identity. Third, Tabárez emphasized that triumphs were not the only stories that contributed to Uruguay's shared sense of nationhood and thus, that challenges and failures after valiant struggle could also contribute to the country's national identity. By deemphasizing physical space and triumphs as constitutive

for the nation, Tabárez reshaped the relationship between soccer and national identity in Uruguay.

Uruguay was one of the best teams in the world in the first half of the twentieth century, winning two Olympic gold medals and two World Cups. The second half of the century, however, saw the Uruguayan national team falter; the team lost its international competitiveness and failed to even qualify for many of the World Cup tournaments.

Paradoxically, at the turn of the century, even after decades of poor results, Uruguayans continued to base their expectations on the glories of the past rather than the reality of the present; this was due to the fact the Uruguayan national identity was not connected to soccer in general, but soccer success specifically. Instead of recognizing that the machine itself was outdated, Uruguayans blamed the individual parts for the lack of effort. After each disappointment, rather than looking for the root of the problem, such as the poor infrastructure or the organizational chaos of the Uruguayan Football Association, Uruguayans blamed the players who held contracts abroad. This friction between players and fans was due to the disconnect created by the players' transfers abroad — putting on the sky-blue jersey was not enough to convince fans that the national team players were passionate and dedicated Uruguayans. Uruguay's national soccer association did not adapt to the changes brought about by global commercialization of soccer until Tabárez became head coach in 2006. Tabárez understood the roots of the Uruguayan national team's lack of success and initiated reforms on two fronts.

He initiated both tactical and technical changes to tackle the team's systemic problems and to make it competitive within the globalized, commercialized world of

soccer. Before Tabárez, it was unclear whether a small country like Uruguay could compete with larger, wealthier countries at all in the globalized and commercialized context. Tabárez showed that with adaptations and careful, long-term planning it was possible. Rather than pushing against it or ignoring it, Tabárez accepted the new reality brought about by global commercialization and implemented standardized policies, practice routines, and tactics to adapt to it. Tabárez also redesigned the Uruguayan youth division to better fit the new reality. He connected all young players with potential to the Uruguayan national team early on and then followed their development abroad to determine which players would serve Uruguay best. He recognized that while Uruguayan clubs could produce top players, they could not help them mature and become elite soccer players due to a lack of resources. Tabárez showed that Uruguay could be competitive in the globalized, commercialized game by adapting and taking advantage of some of its aspects, such as the European clubs' elite player development. His success proved that Uruguay could adapt to and accept the new reality of soccer without sacrificing the cohesiveness and Uruguayan nature of the national team.

Tabárez's also worked to reconcile the national identity with the new globalized reality of soccer by changing the team's culture. Several of Tabárez's reforms helped reinvent the connection between the national team and Uruguayans in the new global context, so that the team could still have a role in constructing Uruguay's shared sense of nationhood. The increase in focus on the youth divisions, television coverage of youth games, and successful results of Uruguay's U-15, U-17, and U-20 teams in international tournaments allowed Uruguayans to associate the youth players with the sky-blue jersey

from an early age. Fans began to see these players as potential members of the national team before they even moved to Europe; this meant that Uruguayans could follow their transfer abroad, watch them develop, and monitor their improvement all in hopes that they would one day be good enough to join the national squad. Uruguayans followed the actions of their players abroad with the national team in mind; this challenged the old version of national identity that depended on proximity and space.

Through his reforms, which took advantage of modern technology, Tabárez deemphasized the relationship between space and national identity by showing that the players did not need to be in Uruguay to be Uruguayan. Essentially, Tabárez taught Uruguayans to accept that players in the age of globalized soccer live as transmigrants. Tabárez required the players to act and communicate in a Uruguayan way, but he also took advantage of aspects of global commercialization itself. The media attention and press conferences that had previously detrimentally affected the image of the players were utilized to showcase players' positive value systems and Uruguayan demeanor. Similarly, the technology that had led to the decline of the country's domestic club league became a tool that benefitted the Uruguayan national team; the commercials, sponsorships, social media, and television shows worked to show fans that even though the players had left the country at a young age, they were still invested in Uruguayan society. The fact that players' training facilities, playing strategies, and standards of living were becoming more European was less threatening since the players were mirrors of Uruguayan society in attitude, behavior, and values. By constructing a new team image, Tabárez tamed the critiques against the players and revitalized the relationship between

the people and the team. He encouraged Uruguayans to see their players as part of the Uruguayan collectivity rather than outsiders; Uruguayans began to see the members of *La Celeste* like the Chileans saw their players, as transmigrants.

Tabárez also deemphasized the relationship between glory and national identity by encouraging realistic expectations and the concept of “the journey is the reward”. In the past, Uruguayans had identified with the early glory days; the shared experiences that had created the dynamic between national identity and soccer had all been triumphs, so that is what Uruguayans demanded from the national team. In the new globalized and commercialized reality, the Uruguayan national team could not be expected to win the World Cup every time. If the fans maintained their unrealistic, high expectations and only identified the national team with glory, the reinvigorated relationship between fans and players would be short lived. Tabárez recognized this and explicitly encouraged fans to begin to identify with the team and their efforts instead of the results. The players were embraced not because they were champions, but because they represented the Uruguayan society each time they stepped onto the field, be it for nation or club. This cultivated a fanbase that was more emotionally attached to the team than to the victories, thus providing more leeway to the coaches and players to bring about positive results. Tabárez’s reforms assured that Uruguayans saw players as transmigrants, not “foreigners”, and that as a result, they identified with their challenges and efforts rather than championships.

## **The Current State and Future of the Uruguayan National Team**

The question many fans and observers ask is whether the success that came with the Tabárez reforms is there to last. At first glance, it certainly appears to be the case. In its first match of the 2018 World Cup South American Qualifiers in October 2015, Uruguay beat Bolivia in La Paz for the first time in history. The games that followed included two victories, 3-0 wins against Colombia and Chile, and a narrow 2-1 loss to Ecuador in Quito. These results were impressive, not least because the matches were played without Luis Suárez, the country's top all-time scorer, due to his ban from the 2014 World Cup. The team's success without its big star supported Tabárez's message that "no one is more than anyone else", as the Uruguayans like to say; the national team is about the group, not individual stars. After Suárez's return to the national team after a two year absence, Uruguay tied Brazil 2-2 in Recife and beat Peru 1-0 in Montevideo. It looks very likely that Uruguay will qualify for the 2018 World Cup, which would be the first time since 1974 that Uruguay has qualified for three consecutive World Cups.

The future beyond the 2018 World Cup is less certain, however. Tabárez has created a team that the Uruguayan people have become invested in; most Uruguayans believe that this group is composed of true Uruguayans that passionately defend the sky-blue jersey and represent the Uruguayan society. The fans trust this team and have stuck by its side through good and bad moments. The relationship between the fans and the team has not suffered as some standout players have left the national squad. Diego Forlán, the Most Valuable Player from the 2010 World Cup, and Diego Lugano, the team captain, were two of the faces of the successes in 2010 and 2011, but as they retired, the

fans supported the new leaders: Luis Suárez and Edinson Cavani as the new team forwards, José María Giménez as the new central defender, and Diego Godín as the new captain. Importantly, all of the new players had something in common; they had come up through Tabárez's youth divisions and represented the type of player he wanted. The central questions are: will that continue after the 2018 World Cup when Tabárez is 71, his contract runs out, and he does not sign on for another four years? Will the Uruguayan Football Association maintain his reforms? Will the players continue to fit his player profile? Will the public continue to support them?

The Uruguayan Football Association will likely not maintain all of Tabárez's reforms after his exit unless the public demands it. During the ten years that Tabárez was coach, there were five different Uruguayan Football Association presidents; Tabárez had to convince each one to keep supporting the project. Each time that executives tried to cut the budget for the youth divisions or attempted to push Tabárez out, they met public uproar. This was due to the high popularity of the Tabárez process that was rooted in the team's success, but also in Tabárez's personal integrity. Tabárez had the players' *adhesion* and the fans' support before even the 2010 World Cup; it was the respect and trust that he instilled in those two groups that pressured the Uruguayan Football Association to stand behind him and his reforms each time that the budget was tight or results were not great. After Tabárez's exit, it will become clear whether the fans' trust lies in the reforms themselves or in the old, philosophical coach, *El Maestro*. If the fans have become adherents of his process and they continue to pressure the Uruguayan Football Association to prolong it, then the success of the Tabárez years may continue. However,

if the fans belief is in Tabárez and “Tabárez’s players”, solely, and not in the “Tabárez process”, then the “Tabárez era” will likely be followed by a decline of the Uruguayan national team. The uncertainty over the future of the Uruguayan national team arises from the realization that each aspect of the current national team revolves around, as is shown by the translated sayings presented in the previous sentence, a man that will likely no longer be the coach in two years.

The national association’s finances only add to the worry that it will be unwilling to continue many of Tabárez’s reforms if fans do not demand that they continue once Tabárez leaves. In January 2016, Mario Rebollo, Tabárez’s assistant, revealed that the national team coaches had not been paid for four months or for any of their games in 2015, including friendlies, Copa América games, and World Cup Qualifiers.<sup>1</sup> Two months later, it was announced that the national association was still behind on the coaches’ salaries and that it did not have the money to pay, because it was two million dollars short in its budget due the freezing of Full Play’s, the company that was to pay the national association for the television rights for the World Cup Qualifiers, assets as a result of the FIFA corruption scandal.<sup>2</sup> Without Tabárez there to insist on the importance of long-term investment, it is possible that money woes could lead to cuts in the low (short-term) profit areas, such as the youth divisions, and decreased funding to high cost areas, such as comfortable travel. Cuts like these would imperil the progress made by Tabárez’s institutional reforms, but also the new dynamic between national identity and soccer. For

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<sup>1</sup>“La AUF nos debe 4 meses, es una falta de respeto,” *República.com.uy*, January 9, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Se le debe a Tabárez, los clubes se endeudan, y la AUF no tiene plata,” *Referi*, March 15, 2016.

example, if the youth are not taught the expected behavior and tactical orientation of *La Celeste* or if players do not have comfortable working conditions, they may not perform at the same level in Uruguay as they do abroad. This could once again lead to the wrongful allegations of lack of passion and dedication to Uruguay and the breakdown of the player-fan relationship. However, if the Uruguayan Football Association recognizes the benefits of long-term investment and protects Tabárez's reforms from future budget cuts, then then the gains made under Tabárez will continue.

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