

(F)Utopias: The Nationalist Uses of Soccer in Costa Rica

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In 1921 the first national soccer team was established in Costa Rica with the objective of participating in the Centennial Games, to be held in Guatemala to commemorate the first century of Central American independence. The undefeated triumph of the adult men's team, *la Sele* (short for "Selección Nacional" or "national men's team"), transformed soccer into a "patriotic game", as from then on the discursive construction of Costa Rican national identity would be fundamentally linked to the continual sequence of "nationalist dramas" staged by this representative of the nation-team. With the approach of the second centennial celebration of Central American independence, the link between nationalism and soccer remains undeniably valid, although as time passes it has acquired new nuances, modalities, and uses.

In this article we study the discursive developments in nationalist narratives associated with soccer, contrasting four specific moments: (1) the arrival of soccer to the country; (2) the first international victory and the resultant profound nationalization of Costa Rican soccer; (3) the first and most successful participation in the World Cup; and finally; (4) the qualification of the Sele for the World Cup a second time. Our hypothesis is that in national history, each of these moments was lived as an "event" (Badiou) or a "liminal moment" (Turner) in which the narratives of national identity turned out to be insufficient to account for what had occurred, making it necessary for the proclamation of a new "truth" about what it means to be "Costa Rican."¹

ORIGINS: COFFEE FOR SOCCER

According to the sports journalist Rodrigo Calvo, beginning in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, a group of young men “from the best families of high society, working in the cultivation and exportation of coffee,” including a future president of the republic, returned from England where they had been studying, bringing a copy of the rules book, as well as soccer balls and other equipment. On October 8, 1876, in La Sabana urban park, these young men, accompanied by members of the British colony who had settled in Costa Rica to do business and participate in the construction of a trolley system in San José, got together “with their strange and imported attire” to, for the first time in the country, kick a ball (*La Nación* 6/10/2001, sports section: 38–A).

The importation of soccer formed part of the desire for a mimetic, pro-European modernization perpetrated by the burgeoning coffee-growing elite, who not only constructed their own monument—the National Theater—but also promoted the establishment of new forms of entertainment, such as the development of a newer, more physical culture, in which exercise and sports would occupy a prominent place. Historical research registers the first journalistic account of a soccer game on July 4, 1899, when *La Opinión* published a story that undoubtedly accounts for the participation of wealthy social sectors in this practice from its beginnings, for the hygienic and moralistic context that marks that era, and also for the adoption of Anglicisms in the local jargon: “On Sunday we were watching [the soccer game] in La Sabana, put on by the people of our high society. It appears a fairly hygienic and rather fun distraction. **Very Well!!**”² (*La Opinión*, 4/7/1899: 3, qtd in Urbina 77).

The reception of soccer, embraced with enthusiasm by the erudite sectors of society—who considered it a positive vector of social and cultural change—wasn’t immune to the polemic of civilization and barbarity that was being disputed in Latin America. In this context, where the slogan was “educate and populate,” soccer seemed a valuable instrument to reeducate society and eradicate the “burden” of Hispanic cultural tradition inherited from the colonial era, along with local indigenous traditions seemingly still very embedded among working-class sectors:

It is time to abandon the ridiculous routine and the tasteless tradition. Our local festivals, as they have been celebrated until now, are no more than a reflection of barbarity or at least of ignorance. These grotesque masquerades, the running of the bulls and sometimes even cows, the manner in which the people amuse themselves wildly under the influence of cane liquor; that happiness manifested in brawls and the savagery of the cacophonous, shrieks, stinking of anise and dark rum; that fever of illicit gambling and limitless abuse, in no way speaks favorably of the culture and morality of the nation. Bring on the carnivals where art radiates, the