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People wondered what these 'locos ingleses' were doing The British influence on local sport

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By Eric Weil



Players of a cricket match between the Buenos Aires Cricket Club and the Rosario Cricket Club in 1916.

Herald staff

When Christopher Columbus set out to discover America in the 15th century, he did not know where he was going and when he got there he did not know where he was. But in South America he found, among other things, Indian tribes engaged in sports — “chueca”, a kind of hockey with

tree branches and sculls for balls, a mixture of soccer and rugby with the same “ball”, a kind of tennis by hand, running and swimming races, boxing and wrestling, with women also taking part.

Then came a prolonged Spanish dominance of the continent, but Spaniards were not very sporting, although one reads of stadiums for up to 5,000 people in Buenos Aires where pelota was played — a kind of squash with a ball played against a wall, mostly by hand.

True, cricket and tennis was first played here by soldiers during the 19th century British invasion and later soccer by English sailors from ships in the port area, watched by incredulous locals who wondered what these “locos ingleses” (crazy English) were up to. But in neither case can this be taken as British influence in local sport. So it was not until people from Britain came to live and work here during the 19th century that they introduced organised sport. First, the railway workers and as the British-owned railways and its employees gradually branched out to most parts of the country, so did their sport.

The Buenos Aires Football Club was founded in 1867 with T. Jackson, T. B. Smith, W. Heald, T. and J. Hogg forming its first committee. It was agreed that the first match was to take place on May 25 on a ground next to the Boca Railway Station, but it did not come off because the field was under water. Sunday soccer was taboo for the British then, so they had to wait until the next holiday, June 20, to play the first match at the Buenos Aires Cricket Club ground (formed in 1861) where the Planetarium stands today.

The Association Football League was formed in 1893 with A. Watson Hutton of the English High School as president. His team (later to become the famous alumni), Flores, Quilmes, Rosario Railway (later Rosario Central) and Lomas being the five participants. Lomas were the unbeaten champions with F. Carter, P. M. Rath, C. W. Reynolds, P. Bridger, T. Bridge, A. Buchanan, A. Anderson, F. H. Jacobs, W. and G. Leslie and W. G. Cowes. They again won the title unbeaten the following year.

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Sixty years later, British sporting spirit was still revered in Argentina. There were strong rumours of local soccer referees being bribed to fix matches, so the Argentine Football Association hired eight British referees to control matches. But we all know how Argentina became one of the world's leading soccer nations, with two World Cups, and what the game means to Argentines today.

The first tennis matches (on grass) by local residents were also played at the oldest club, the Buenos Aires Cricket Club, at Palermo in 1879. The game quickly became popular — the club's first open tournament in 1886 had 53 singles and 10 doubles entries. The singles winner was a man named Richards and in the doubles it was Richards and Hill. When the Cricket Club found that tennis was drawing too much attention, it was expelled from the Palermo fields, leading to the formation of what is today the Buenos Aires Lawn Tennis Club.

Exclusively tennis clubs were soon founded in different areas, specially in Rosario which, with its large British community, rivalled Buenos Aires in all sports. Stanley and Lionel Knight were frequent title winners in the early days, but more and more Argentines took up the game early in the 20th century. Today, tennis is one of the biggest sports with its players winning tournaments all over the world and frequently figuring in the world's 10 top-ranked players... none more so than the now-retired Guillermo Vilas.

The first news of rugby matches being played here by Britons was in 1871, but in 1973, the already mentioned Buenos Aires Football Club decided to incorporate the game under the rules of Rugby Union.

The first game was played, as many other sports, in Palermo near the present day Planetarium. In its first season there were many broken bones and the game was banned by the police and not heard of again until 1876. Ten years later many Argentines were taking up the game and early in the 20th century complete Argentine teams appeared. With the formation of the Argentine Rugby Union, with Leslie Corry Smith as its president, the first championship was held in 1899 with four British community clubs and won by Lomas, but by 1911, Gimnasia y Esgrima was the first Argentine club to take the title.

The game made great strides and today Argentina is among the leading rugby nations of the world with hardly any English names appearing among its leading players but being one of the few sports to maintain the "British sporting spirit".

Field hockey played its first known match here in 1908, though it was taught in British community schools to girls before then and there were probably unofficial games at British community clubs. Quilmes High School played Alexandra College in the first reported girls match that year and the Belgrano AC was the first club where it was played by men, though there are reports of members of the Pacific (today San Martín) Railway Club playing in 1905.

In 1908, an Argentine Hockey League, for men, was formed with Belgrano, San Isidro (now CASI) and San Martín, but the first women's championship only in 1924. The game was played by Britons and Anglo-Argentines at first, but by the 1930s more and more Argentines were joining in, specially women and today Argentina's national women's team is second-ranked in the world, also winning a World Cup.

Polo was first played here by British farmers on their ranches, the first reported game at the Estancia Negrette at Ranchos belonging to David Shennan and C. H. Krabbe, in 1874. Local farm workers, all expert riders virtually born on a horse, soon took a fancy to it. The first open tournament was at the Hurlingham Club in 1889 and the first Argentine Open in 1893. This has become the major tournament of the world and the polo stadium in Palermo is today called the "Cathedral of Polo".

Hurlingham Club were the first winners with Frank Balfour, Frank Furber, J. C. Tetley and Hugo Scott-Robinson. Yet by 1901, more and more Spanish names appeared among the players, although players from traditional polo playing families, with English names, still appear at tournaments. But to cut a long story short, Argentina are the sport's undisputed world champions, so much so that no open world championships are held. It would hardly be fair!

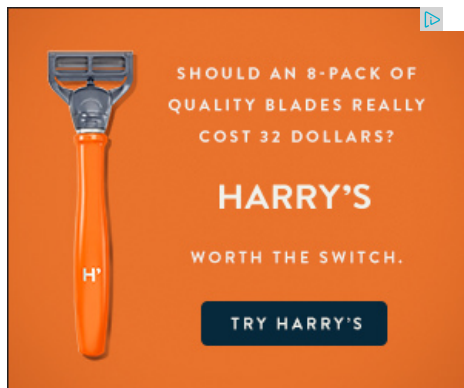
As far as can be ascertained, the Hurlingham Club laid out the first golf course in 1891, while other records say the game was first played in San Martín with Scotsmen being prominent. But there were soon more courses as the game quickly became popular. The first Amateur Golf Championship of the River Plate was played in 1895 with G. Barker from Montevideo winning it. As in other sports, more and more Argentines began playing early in the 20th century.

By 1905, there were professionals, at first instructors from the U.K. and in 1905 the first Open Championship of the River Plate was played — today the Argentine Open. Argentine professionals now win tournaments all over the world — many like the first prominent one, Roberto De Vicenzo, first “learning the trade” as caddies at clubs with British influence. Today there are over 200 courses around the country.

These were some of the sports introduced by the British which became popular and in which Argentina is now a prominent world player, but many other sports were also first played here by workers and settlers from the UK and which also continue to be played here.

Cricket was actually the first sport played in Argentina by Britishers with the climate and long summers probably responsible. The Buenos Aires Cricket Club — claiming to be the first club — was founded in 1861, also in Palermo (where the Planetarium now stands) and the Rosario Cricket Club, the first club in that city, in 1867. The game remained confined to the British and Anglo-Argentine community — locals prefer their sport with more action — and today is still only played at five so-called British community clubs, although quite a number of Argentines have taken it up.

Other sports, like bowls (confined to half a dozen former community clubs), rowing (Britons formed the earliest clubs, Buenos Aires Rowing Club and Tigre Boat Club), swimming (Anglo-Argentine Jeanette Campbell won the sport's first Olympic medal in 1936) and even athletics were some of the sports first practised here by the British... after the Indians, of course, as mentioned at the start of this article.



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