

**WHITE MESTIZAJE**  
**SOCCER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ARGENTINE RACIAL IDENTITY, 1924-  
1930**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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White Mestizaje: Soccer and the Construction of Argentine Racial Identity, 1924-1930  
(Under the direction of John C. Chasteen)

Both Argentines and foreigners commonly perceive Argentina as a bastion of racial European-ness in a continent populated by people of non-European, or mixed-race descent. While scholars and intellectuals have revealed the inaccuracies of this characterization, it has nonetheless proven durable. When and how did Argentines come to understand and project themselves this way? What specific negotiations and historic processes allowed these constructions of racial identity to be so widely accepted? Focusing on the 1920s, this thesis identifies and analyzes popular sports media that catered to the burgeoning, literate working classes of era. The popularity of soccer and the institutionalization of international soccer tournaments gave newspaper commentators unprecedented opportunities to publish formulations of Argentine racial identity. Drawing from racial Eurocentrism as well as from *mestizaje* ideology, notions of the “Argentine race” constructed during the course of the 1920s provided the basis for racial identities which have survived until the present day.

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## **White Mestizaje: Soccer and the Construction of Argentine Racial Identity, 1924-1930**

On the night of February 4, 1925, an Argentine soccer team gathered at Buenos Aires' south dock to travel to Europe. The members of the fifteen-man squad belonged to Boca Juniors Athletic Club, and, accompanied by a small group of club functionaries and diplomatic representatives, were to commence a competitive tour of Spain, Germany, and France. The Boca Juniors soccer team, consisting almost entirely of first- and second-generation immigrants, was to be the first-ever representative of Argentine soccer to travel overseas. Some members of the *porteño* press were present at the departure celebration, noting that the crowds gathered at the docks to see the team off consisted primarily of immigrant families from the predominantly Italian neighborhood of La Boca, where Boca Juniors was founded and where its playing field was located.<sup>1</sup> Boca spent five months on tour, playing nineteen total matches and winning fifteen of them. On July 11 of the same year, upon returning to Buenos Aires at the conclusion of the tour, Boca players met with an astonishing sight. Tens of thousands of jubilant people lined the docks and surrounding streets to welcome the delegation home. Observers emphasized that this time, the broader Buenos Aires population turned out to cheer on the players—"the whole neighborhood [of La Boca] and half of Buenos Aires," wrote one reporter<sup>2</sup>—not just fans from La Boca.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*La Nacion*, 2/5/1925; *La Razon*, 2/5/1925. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup>*El Gráfico*, 7/18/1925, no. 315, p.2.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, *La Razon*, 7/19/1925, p.8-9.

According to the press reports, the crowd noisily accompanied the players back to La Boca, where residents and visitors celebrated the victory into the night with banquets and festivities. Argentina's "true ambassadors," archetypes of the "new Argentine race"—as one newspaper had described them—had triumphantly returned.<sup>4</sup>

It had not always been so. Because it is widely known that many Argentines are of European descent, and because European immigrants have in many senses been integrated into larger Argentine society, it is difficult to evoke the acute discord surrounding immigration during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Argentina's move toward the socio-cultural assimilation and wider acceptance of European immigrants was in fact turbulent and, at times, violent. The most extreme manifestation of anti-immigrant sentiment occurred in the 1872 Massacre of Tandil, during which a group of xenophobes killed thirty-six immigrants in a small provincial town near Buenos Aires.<sup>5</sup> In Buenos Aires and other urban centers like Rosario and Córdoba, tensions over immigration peaked from 1909-1920. These conflicts, which ranged from journalistic vitriol to sanguinary confrontations between nativist vigilante groups and immigrants, were directed largely toward Jewish and Eastern European immigrants accused of belonging to anarchist movements, and well as toward immigrant labor activists.<sup>6</sup> These examples help to illustrate the broadly felt hostility that European immigration elicited in many sectors Argentine society. The overwhelming public support

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<sup>4</sup>*Crítica* 2/5/1925, pp. 13-14; *Crítica* 2/17/1925, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>John Lynch, *Massacre in the Pampas: Britain and Argentina in the Age of Migration* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 82-83. Although occurring some fifty years before the sports journalism analyzed here, the Tandil Massacre was by no means the peak of Argentina anti-immigrant conflict. Rather, it was merely the first—and most bloody—of xenophobic reactions occurring from 1870-1930.

<sup>6</sup>Carl Solberg, *Immigration and Nationalism: Argentina and Chile, 1890-1914* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1970), 112-116. See also Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State Press, 2002), 30-31.

that Boca Juniors received from the *porteño* public in 1925 demonstrates a new level of acceptance of immigrants. It is within this historical context of conflict that the symbolic value of Boca Juniors' victorious return to Buenos Aires can be appreciated.

The willingness of an enthused sports press to posit Argentine soccer players as racial and cultural ambassadors of Argentine-ness is in some ways not surprising. Like wars, sports competitions tend to elicit patriotic responses from national populations. They allow observers—be they politicians, reporters, or the general populace—to identify with the participants in powerful ways.<sup>7</sup> During the first decades of the twentieth century, soccer games provided Argentine sports pages with particularly potent occasions to cultivate this sense of national belonging. Soccer's usefulness to this end was contingent on the notion and institutionalization of a “national” soccer team that could compete with other national teams in organized games or tournaments. Matches between “Argentina” and “England,” “Uruguay,” or “Brazil” allowed the mass media to utilize soccer competition as an examination of typically “Argentine” characteristics as expressed through the physical performances of the players and also through the behavior of the public at the matches.<sup>8</sup> Since identity is so often formed in relational terms, vis-à-vis *other* entities, these soccer games between national teams allowed the mass media to construct narratives of player and fan behavior, and to either differentiate or liken their nation to that of their opponents.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Boca Juniors as well as the Argentine national team were overwhelmingly made up of European immigrants and the children of those

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<sup>7</sup>Mike Cronin and David Mayall, eds., *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration, and Assimilation* (London: F. Cass, 1998).

<sup>8</sup>Eduardo Archetti, “Estilos y virtudes masculinas en *El Gráfico*: La creación del imaginario del fútbol argentino” in *Desarrollo Económico* [Buenos Aires] 35:139 (October-December 1995), 430-436.

immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, this essay tells a story of immigrant integration into modern Argentine society. However, integration is only part of this story of changing identities. Argentine identity itself was in flux. To begin with, it now meant winning soccer competitions. From 1924-1930, Argentine club and national teams were overwhelmingly victorious against both European and American teams. According to Argentine sports journalists and political figures interviewed in sports pages, the soccer victories of Argentine teams over European and other Latin American teams seemed to reflect Argentina's destiny as a regional and world power.

For many sports writers and politicians, to be representatively Argentine also meant to be considered racially superlative when contrasted with European or other American countries. In fact, Argentina's racial superiority vis-à-vis other nations was affirmed precisely to explain its players' distinction in international soccer tournaments and its destiny as a regional and world power.<sup>10</sup> Sports writers and politicians articulated a unique formulation of racial identity that was two-pronged: 1) in perfect accordance with Eurocentric Spencerian thought, Argentine sports writers and politicians agreed that the degree of mass immigration to Argentina from Europe distinguished it from its Latin American neighbors. Argentina was to be considered Euro-descended in a region where indigenous peoples, descendants of Africans, *mestizos* and mulattos were seen as racially

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<sup>9</sup>The compilation of biographical data on the individual Boca players is original to this research and has been gathered from a variety of sources. These materials include secondary sources such as Walter Duer's *The Book of the Xentenary*, 49-53; Héctor Alberto Chaporick's *Historia del fútbol argentino* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Eiffel, 1955), 3 vol. Newspapers have also been used exhaustively to compile biographical information about most of the Boca Juniors squad. See interviews with Domingo Tarascone, *Crítica*, 1/14/1925, p.14; with Alfredo Elli, *ibid.*, 7/16/1925, p. 13; with Manuel Seoane, *ibid.*, 1/9/1925, p.11; and with Americo Tesoriere, *ibid.*, 7/13/1925, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Along with Argentina's burgeoning economy, one of the principal reasons for this sense of grand destiny was World War I, which caused different Argentine intellectuals to see Europe as intellectually, morally, and biologically in decline. According to this line of thinking, post-World War I Argentina would be a world power. See Tulio Halperín Donghi, *Vida y muerte de la República verdadera (1910-1930)* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2007), 81-84.

predominant. 2) Much less widely acknowledged is a discourse emphasizing and valorizing racial mixture. Influenced by hemispheric intellectual trends culminating during the 1920s, the Argentine “race” was considered superior to European “races” because it was a new fusion of blood. Embracing the discourse of nationalistic *mestizaje* made internationally famous by José Vasconcelos, Argentine sports writers agreed that what made the “Argentine race” strong was the fact that it was a New World admixture, differentiating it specifically from Europe.<sup>11</sup> Buttressed by the writings of Argentine thinkers like Carlos Octavio Bunge and José Ingenieros, sports writers and politicians formulated a construction of Argentine racial identity that was animated by the tropes and forms of *mestizaje* ideology while still emphasizing the whiteness of the Argentine race’s individual components. The fusion of these two ideologies enabled the millions of European immigrants that arrived in Buenos Aires during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to be seen as favorable to Argentina’s racial makeup, creating a white-*mestizaje* population that set it apart from other American countries, including, as I shall demonstrate, the United States.

### **Scientific Racism and *Mestizaje* Ideology as a Reaction**

Argentina’s ideology of white *mestizaje* thus perpetuated claims concerning the superiority of European or white vis-à-vis indigenous or African races. White supremacy and scientific racism have a deep-rooted, illustrious tradition in Argentina.<sup>12</sup> In his

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<sup>11</sup>For reasons to be discussed later, Argentine racial identity was often conflated with Uruguayan racial identity. The term *raza rioplatense*, or Rioplatine race, was widely used—and interchangeably used with “Argentine race”—throughout the second half of the 1920s.

<sup>12</sup>Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1991), 138-139.



intellectual history *The Invention of Argentina*, Nicolas Shumway traces the development of Argentine racial thought starting with figures considered Argentina's founding statesmen, such as Mariano Moreno and Bernardino Rivadavia. According to the ideologies put forth by these men in the early nineteenth century, only by "recreating Europe in the Southern Cone," as Shumway puts it, would Argentina be able to overcome its economic and socio-political problems for which mixed race was assigned the blame.<sup>13</sup> During the latter half of the nineteenth century, other influential Argentine statesmen and thinkers like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi became conversant with European positivist pioneers like Herbert Spencer and August Comte, incorporating theories about race into Argentine state-building projects.<sup>14</sup>

In the first decades of the twentieth century, however, some Argentine intellectuals, politicians and newspapers writers began to reject the notion of European cultural and racial superiority.<sup>15</sup> This was part of a broader cultural consciousness sweeping all of Latin America. The writings of Jose Enrique Rodó and Miguel Unamuno were prominent in and representative of this movement.<sup>16</sup> In books and newspaper editorials they attempted to

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 108. See also 24-46; 81-111.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 138-139. See also Rafael Plá León, "La idea del mestizaje en representantes del positivismo en Argentina y México en el siglo XIX" in *Islas* 98 (January-April 1991), 137. Exemplifying these intellectual trends is Sarmiento's most famous publication, *Civilización y Barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, [1845] 1977). The following excerpt effectively encapsulates Sarmiento's views on race in Argentina and Latin America: "A homogenous whole has resulted from the fusion of the races [in Argentina]. It is typified by love of idleness and incapacity for industry, except when education and the demands of a social position succeed in spurring it out of its customary crawl. To a great extent, this unfortunate outcome results from the incorporation of the native tribes through the process of colonization. The American aborigines live in idleness, and show themselves incapable, even under compulsion, of hard and prolonged labor. From this came the idea of introducing Negroes into America, which has produced such fatal results" (*Civilización* 15).

<sup>15</sup>Richard Graham, *The Idea of Race in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 2-3. See also Zimmerman, 26-27.

valorize the “spiritual” aspects of Latin American culture, focusing on “Hispanic” language and art forms as elements that unified and exalted Spanish-speaking America, differentiating it from Northern Europe and the United States, which were theretofore held in highest esteem in international racial hierarchies.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, José Vasconcelos, a Mexican intellectual, departed from these assumptions and spearheaded a unique approach toward displacing Spencerian and Darwinian racial hierarchies. Using a mixture of biological and cultural idioms, Vasconcelos argued that the mixture of races and cultures was progressive and beneficial to Latin America, rather than a hindrance.<sup>18</sup> Under this view, *mestizaje* became an important part of Latin American character, allowing people to feel that—for reasons to be explored later on in this essay—mixed indigenous and African heritages made Latin Americans superior to Europeans. As shall be discussed, two Argentine intellectuals in particular embraced this new racial valorization of Latin America, for within this ideological framework, Argentina, too, could be seen as the culmination of a new race. However, the Argentine incorporation of the concept of *mestizaje* was quite distinct.

The Argentine sports pages synthesized the seemingly antithetical discourses of Eurocentric white superiority and nationalistic *mestizaje* into a new racial expression of

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<sup>16</sup>José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, ed. Belén Castro Morales (Madrid: Anaya & M. Muchnik, 1995). Miguel de Unamuno wrote about Spanish America, but was particularly active in Argentina. Compilations of his Argentine-specific writings include *Artículos en La Nación de Buenos Aires, 1919-1924*, ed. Luis Urrutia Salaverri (Salamanca, Spain: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1994); *De patriotismo espiritual: artículos en La Nación de Buenos Aires, 1901-1914*, ed. Victor Ouimette (Salamanca, Spain: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1997); and *Temas argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Elefante Blanco, 2002). See also Abellán, 206-207, for a useful study comparing and contrasting Unamuno’s Pan-Hispanic discourse with the more biological racialized formulations of Vasconcelos.

<sup>17</sup>Isidro Sepúlveda, *El sueño de la Madre Patria: Hispanoamericanismo y nacionalismo* (Madrid: Fundación Carolina; Centro de Estudios Hispánicos e Iberoamericanos; Marcial Pons Historia, 2005), 217-218. As shall be noted, this Hispanist ideology was supported in Argentina by thinkers such as Leopoldo Lugones, Ricardo Rojas, and Manuel Gálvez.

<sup>18</sup>Marilyn Grace Miller, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 28.

national identity. They simultaneously emphasized qualitative differences vis-à-vis Europe and the United States with a rhetoric clearly influenced by the discourse of *mestizaje* ideology. However, the new Argentine race that was characterized in the sports pages as superior to North America and Europe was also subtly presented as superior to its Latin American neighbors' version of *mestizaje*. Argentina's neighbors, whom members of the Argentine sports press associated with non-European racial genealogies, were relegated to a lower place in this idiosyncratic hierarchy. Argentina's supposed superiority was based on the view that, because millions of Europeans immigrated to Argentina during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Argentine race could be viewed as a progressive mixture of purely European blood. This particular formulation of identity, widely disseminated on a popular level, was unmistakably exclusivist: the indigenous, mestizo, and African elements of the Argentine population were not included in this construction of Argentine-ness. Ironically, the sports pages identified and extolled the specific characteristics of the new *raza argentina* employing an idiom that was classically Eurocentric.

There is a significant degree of coherence between the racial formulations of the Argentine sports pages and the ideas put forth by certain Argentine intellectuals, such as Carlos Octavio Bunge and José Ingenieros. The work of Ingenieros, for instance, contrasts Argentina with its Latin American neighbors, explaining its potential for material success in racial terms:

Chile is a highly militarized country, with ideals of domination and conquest, prodded by compelling territorial needs. . . Brazil, on the other hand, has two major and highly respectable advantages over Argentina: the extent of its territory and superiority in numbers.' But 'Chile has neither territory nor fertility. Brazil lacks the proper climate and the proper race. Argentina possesses all four variables: a vast territory, a fertile soil, mild weather, and a

white race.’ . . . ‘Territorial extension, fecundity, a white population, and mild weather, all predestine Argentina to apposition of guardianship over the other nations of the continent.’<sup>19</sup>

In an influential book entitled *Nuestra América (ensayo de psicología social)*, Carlos Octavio Bunge makes a similar argument.<sup>20</sup> He asserts that the unique mixture of white races that constituted the new Argentine racial type was “as imaginative as the aborigine of the tropics and as practical as the dweller of the cold climates, one complex and complete type, which could appear to be the total man, the model of the modern man.”<sup>21</sup> Even Vasconcelos, himself one of Latin America’s pioneering theorists of *mestizaje*, contradicted his earlier statements by writing that some geographical sites of *mestizaje* in Latin America could be considered more “productive” than others. He considered Argentina’s racial mixture to be unique and, above all else, productive, because it represented “the mixture of similar races, all of them of European origin.”<sup>22</sup> He concludes: “It can be readily stated that the mixture of similar races is productive, while the mixture of very distant types, as in the case of Spaniards and American Indians, has questionable results.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Marcelo Monserrat, “The Evolutionist Mentality in Argentina: An Ideology of Progress,” in *The Reception of Darwinism in the Iberian World: Spain, Spanish America, and Brazil*, eds. Thomas F. Glick and Miguel Angel Puig-Samper (Dordrecht, Germany; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 23.

<sup>20</sup>Carlos Octavio Bunge, *Nuestra América (ensayo de psicología social)* (Buenos Aires: Vaccaro, 1918), 157-163. Bunge’s opus was first published in 1903 and was released in revised editions in 1918 and 1926. See also Zimmerman, 28-32.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Aline Helg, “Race in Argentina and Cuba, 1880-1930” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 39-40.

<sup>22</sup>José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica; misión de la raza iberoamericana; notas de viajes a la América del Sur* (Paris: Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1925), 5. See also Miller, 41.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

The newspaper discourse analyzed here was produced during the 1920s, a period of profound change and transition in Argentine history.<sup>24</sup> By 1914, most of Argentina's waves of immigration had ended. Intellectuals and politicians set about the complicated business of articulating and disseminating a sense national identity for the benefit of both new and long-time inhabitants. The writings of major Argentine intellectuals mentioned above—from Rojas and Lugones to Ingenieros and Bunge—reflect a shared goal of dissolving the ethnicities of immigrants and the children of immigrants in order to create a uniquely “Argentine” sense of belonging.<sup>25</sup> By no means was one discourse prevalent in the attempted dissolution of Argentina's diverse ethnic collectives. Different approaches were used in defining and imposing a sense of national belonging. As indicated above, the approach of intellectuals such as Ricardo Rojas, Manuel Gálvez, and Leopoldo Lugones emphasized Hispanic spirituality and culture rather than whiteness. This Hispanist discourse, while not necessarily antithetic to the more scientific rhetoric of Ingenieros and Bunge, focused on imprinting a Hispanic cultural sensibility on Argentina's new inhabitants. The much more biological and positivist emphasis of Ingenieros and Bunge was certainly not as widespread in intellectual circles as the Hispanist discourse favored by other thinkers. In major sports pages, however, the white mestizaje discourse of Ingenieros and Bunge was peerless.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Halperín Donghi, 31-32.

<sup>25</sup>Even though Argentines' optimistic vision of their future was buttressed by a post-World War I period in which it was convenient to view Europe as morally and biologically degenerate, their purpose was to unify the nation rather than antagonize their neighbors. White mestizaje discourse was borne of domestic political pragmatism rather than geo-political strategizing. This purpose was likely shared, whether consciously or not, by newspaper writers who wrote about the Argentine national soccer team or Boca Juniors. They were attempting to articulate ideas of belonging and social practice in the context of Argentine nation formation. Argentina's domestic needs—an inward gaze rather than an outward one—produced the discourse of white mestizaje. See *ibid.*, 81-84.

<sup>26</sup>A major exception to this is identified in Eduardo Archetti's study about *El Gráfico*, a popular Argentine sports daily that, after 1928, focused on a discourse that emphasized *criollo* as a shared Argentine culture rather than a shared race. See Archetti, “Estilos y virtudes masculinas en *El Gráfico*” for a study of this unique

Sports writers generally utilized the biological rhetoric of Ingenieros and Bunge to explain Argentina's soccer greatness. The Argentine sports pages allowed the ideology of white mestizaje to trickle down to a tremendously broad reading audience. Because of their popularity among Argentina's working classes, and because these sports pages were circulated on a national level, it is likely that the white mestizaje discourse was far more widespread and influential than that the more commonly cited intellectual writings of Lugones, Rojas, and Gálvez. This essay attempts to serve in part as a modest reassessment of the importance and influence of the white mestizaje discourse originally articulated in the works of José Ingenieros and Carlos Octavio Bunge.

### **Reading Race in the Sports Pages**

While each individual affirmation of "Argentine" identity within the sports pages is inspired by essentialist impulses, it is important to note that there was no universal understanding of the term "race" in this source material. Formulations of race and Argentine-ness varied from newspaper from newspaper, from day to day, and even from columnist to columnist. As Eduardo Archetti writes in his exploration of Argentine football discourse throughout the twentieth century, relativist articulations of identity are positional and strategic.<sup>27</sup> Each formulation emerges from specific situations, contingent on variables such as the motivations or temperament of the writer, or the context of the subject at hand. As historian Eduardo Zimmerman notes, each iteration is a unique product of specific

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discursive strain—one that, as shall be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis, eventually became predominant under the presidencies of Juan B. Justo and Juan Domingo Perón.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 201. See also

historical moments and cultural environments.<sup>28</sup> This study will emulate Zimmerman in allowing specific sources within the sports pages to assign their own meanings to “race,” while identifying and analyzing inter-textual patterns throughout the source base.

Even though this essay avoids employing itself or limiting its analysis to any exclusive signification of the word “race,” the ideological genealogy of racial discourse during this time period can be broadly characterized. It can also be mischaracterized. Scholar José Luis Abellán argues that use of the term *raza* in Spain and Hispanic America does not convey meanings rooted in positivism and scientific racism, which he says is most typical of the “Anglo-Saxon world.”<sup>29</sup> *Raza*, he contends, as it was employed during the 1910s and 1920s in the Spanish-speaking world, was a reaction to positivism rather than derived from it. For Abellán, the term was employed in a sense that bore “no relation with any possible racist” connotations, differentiating itself markedly from the positivist “Anglo-Saxon” understanding of “race.”<sup>30</sup>

Evidence from the Argentine sports pages directly contradicts, or, at the very least, problematizes Abellán’s thesis. To be certain, this essay embraces the idea that racial identities are negotiable and in a constant state of reconstitution. However, collectively the formulations of race in Argentine sports pages are surprisingly coherent, with broadly identifiable commonalities. They were strongly influenced by a rejection of Eurocentric positivism yet paradoxically rooted in the idioms and basic assumptions of positivism and scientific racism. While this study will not attempt to draw broad conclusions about how the

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<sup>28</sup>Eduardo Zimmerman, “Racial Ideas and Social Reform: Argentina, 1890-1916,” in *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72:1 (1993), 27-28.

<sup>29</sup>José Luis Abellán, “Una manifestación del modernismo: La acepción española de ‘raza’” in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 553-54 (July-August 1996), 204.

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

term *raza* was employed or can be understood in the larger Spanish-speaking world, the way it appears to have been used in the Argentine sports pages of the 1920s and 1930s contradicts the fundamental distinctions Abellán asserts between Anglo- and Ibero-American racial concepts.

Sports journalism afforded sports reporters and politicians a privileged, potent, far-reaching medium through which to declare what it meant to be Argentine. Surprisingly, sports pages have not been widely credited as agents of cultural change or as major influences in defining Argentine national belonging and national identity.<sup>31</sup> In supporting its thesis, then, this essay is drawing from an influential and largely untapped source base. The sources analyzed here were widely circulated among all sectors of the Argentine public during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>32</sup> *La Nación* catered to the Argentine upper classes, while the more populist *Crítica* was most widely read by new working classes in urban centers, but formulations of Argentine racial identity in their respective sports sections are extraordinarily alike.<sup>33</sup> Even socialist newspapers like *La Vanguardia*, all contributed to this racialized discourse of nationalism in their sports sections—a nationalistic construction of race that, in spite of the nuances and variations in this discourse from newspaper to newspaper, is

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<sup>31</sup>Notable exceptions include Eduardo Archetti, “In Search of National Identity: Argentinean Football and Europe,” in *Tribal Identities: Nationalism, Europe, Sport*, ed. J.A. Mangan (London and Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, 1996): 201-219; Archetti, “Estilos y virtudes masculinas en *El Gráfico*”; Matthew Karush, “National Identity in the Sports Pages: Football and the Mass Media in 1920s Buenos Aires,” *The Americas* 60:1 (July 2003): 11-32; Julio D. Frydenberg, “Prácticas y valores en la popularización del fútbol: Buenos Aires 1900-1920,” in *Entrepasados: Revista de Historia* 6: 12 (1996): 7-31; Frydenberg, “Boca Juniors en Europa: El diario *Crítica* y el primer nacionalismo deportivo argentino,” Unpublished article, 2006; and Pablo Alabarces, *Fútbol y patria* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2002).

<sup>32</sup>See Sylvia Saítta, *Regueros de tinta: El diario Crítica en la década de 1920* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1998), 49, for circulation statistics. See also Carlos Ulanovsky, *Parén las rotativas: Historia de los grandes diarios, revistas y periodistas argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Espasa, 1997), 31-32, 38.

<sup>33</sup>See Ulanovsky, 12, 31, for readership demographics of *La Nación* and *Crítica*. See also Karush, 14-16.



remarkably coherent. In terms of source base and methodology, the “Argentine sports pages” can be understood as inhabiting the same discursive universe.

In the remainder of this essay, I will explore constructions of race in two of the big international stories followed by Argentine sports journalists in the 1920s, each revealing a different dimension of the country’s evolving national identity. More particularly, each story shows that white *mestizaje* was being imagined in explicitly racialized terms.

First, we will return to the 1925 European tour of the Boca Juniors soccer team. As described in the introduction to this thesis, Boca Juniors was a traditionally immigrant soccer club that left the isolation of its neighborhood to undergo an extensive tour of Europe, thus becoming the first-ever Argentine-based soccer team to compete in Europe with other European teams. As was the case with the Argentine and Uruguayan national team tournaments, the Boca Juniors tour produced considerable commentary in the sports press, providing the historian with specific window through which the process of Argentine racial identity formation can be documented. An analysis of this discourse reveals tensions as to whether or not the Boca Juniors players (and fans), notoriously Italian at the moment of their departure, could be considered racial and cultural ambassadors of Argentina. The tour, in other words, occasioned a kind of journalistic referendum on white *mestizaje* in process.

Next, I will examine the celebration of white *mestizaje* surrounding the Argentine and Uruguayan national teams during various international soccer tournaments in the 1920s. The success of the Argentine and Uruguayan national teams against other national team allowed the sports press to produce a triumphant consensus on the characteristics of the Rioplatine physical type, in which white *mestizaje* had supposedly produced a highly successive, indeed, superlative mixture, the *raza rioplatense*. The formulation of this Rioplatine race

was articulated in a way that emphasized, in different ways, its constituent European traits and rejected the possible intervention of any non-European racial elements.

Today, many forms of popular discourse in Argentina are still inhabited by expressions of national racial belonging and regional exceptionalism. While claims of material superiority to Europe have disappeared, a strong sense of racial exceptionalism endures in various tropes of Argentine discourse.<sup>34</sup> The fact that these notions are still reproduced and accepted today is a testament, not only to the appeal and durability of these specific formulations of (inter)national belonging, but also to the importance of this formative moment in the history of identity formation in modern Argentina. The emergence and initial negotiations of these ideas on a popular level can be documented through the Argentine sports pages, possibly the most widely read print media of the day.

### The Boca Juniors Tour: Testing White *Mestizaje*

The 1925 Boca Juniors tour of Europe constituted a unique test for the Argentine sports press. Boca Juniors was not the Argentine national team, but rather, an Italian-descended team from a peripheral part of Buenos Aires that the press nonetheless attempted to convert into racial and cultural ambassadors of Argentine-ness. Of the millions of

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<sup>34</sup>This discourse is most salient among the *porteño* middle class. For an introduction into present-day popular Argentine conceptions of whiteness and regional exceptionalism, see Galen Joseph, "Taking Race Seriously: Whiteness in Argentina's National and Transnational Imaginary Identities," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 7:3 (2000), 333-371. See also Arnd Schneider, *Futures Lost: Nostalgia and Identity among Italian Immigrants in Argentina* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang Publishers, 2000); and Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler, *On Argentina and the Southern Cone: Neoliberalism and National Imaginations* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group; Routledge, 2005), 3-9, 119-121.

immigrants Argentina received from 1860 to 1914, 47 percent were Italian.<sup>35</sup> Even by 1914, when the population of Buenos Aires had reached 1.6 million—the result of an influx of a host of other, non-Italian immigrant groups, such as Spanish, French, and Eastern European—some 20 percent of the population was still Italian-born.<sup>36</sup> The scale of Italian immigration into Argentina during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presented large challenges of assimilation and stimulated nationalist anxieties. Incorporation of the Italian contingent, the most prominent new element of the *raza rioplatense*, was crucial to the construction of the ideology of white *mestizaje*.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Boca Juniors was an amateur league team founded and located in the immigrant in Buenos Aires neighborhood of La Boca. The players were largely Italian immigrants and the descendents of Italian immigrants. In 1925 the extraordinary opportunity arose for Boca Juniors to tour various European countries and compete in exhibition matches against European teams—the first international tour of an Argentine sports team of any kind, three years before Argentina’s participation in the 1928 Olympics. During the course of the tour, as well as during the months preceding it, the Argentine mass media struggled to define what Boca Juniors’ relationship was to Argentina. Because of its marginality in terms of the peripheral location of La Boca within Buenos Aires, and also in the sense that Boca Juniors players and supporters were largely immigrants, the sports pages reflect a telling tension: complicated ruminations about the degree to which the performances of Boca Juniors abroad—its losses and victories—could be considered representative of the Argentine race. The wide media coverage of the tour

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<sup>35</sup>Samuel Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 54.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

allowed for an unprecedented examination of Argentine racial characteristics and national belonging on a popular level. The study of Boca Juniors allows us to identify a dialectic in the media that oscillated between positing the team, on one hand, as representatives of the Argentine “type,” whose playing styles contrastively typified Argentina’s differences from Europe, and on the other hand as subjects for negotiating players and fans’ identities, and exploring the degree to which integration of immigrants into a national whole was taking place. Studying the 1925 Boca Juniors tour allows us to document the mass media’s debates over whether or not Boca Juniors players and fans represented Argentine-ness, particularly vis-à-vis Europe.

The postulation of Boca Juniors players as Argentina racial archetypes was eased by sports pages that, from the outset, promoted the Boca tour with a distinctly nationalistic vocabulary. A month before the tour began, one reporter wrote, “It is the first time an Argentine team goes to the Old World, from whence many people [in Argentina] have arrived . . . . Boca Juniors’ trip abroad has the potential of obtaining the biggest success yet for that institution, for the sport, and for our country.”<sup>37</sup> An interview in *Crítica* with López Páez, the president of a Hispanic cultural center in Buenos Aires, echoed these sentiments. Páez emphasized the “patriotic significance” of the tour, referring to Boca Juniors players as Argentine “ambassadors.”<sup>38</sup> Businessman Félix Isasmendi, a soccer promoter who originally had proposed the idea of a national team tour to the Asociación Argentina,<sup>39</sup> told *Crítica*: “The mission of Boca Juniors will prove itself amply fulfilled . . . as regards the patriotic part

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<sup>37</sup>*Crítica*, 1/2/1925, p.14.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 2/2/1925, p.14.

<sup>39</sup>*La Razón*, 11/25/1924, p. 8.

[of it], which consists of propaganda in favor of our country.”<sup>40</sup> Such rhetoric reached a fever pitch with Boca’s departure from Buenos Aires in February 1925. The day Boca set sail for Europe, *Crítica* published a capsule under the headline, “THE TRUE AMBASSADORS.”<sup>41</sup> “Boca Juniors,” the text reads, “is sailing . . . to [visit Europeans] who are acquainted with our people only as colorlessly displayed by ambassadors, plenipotentiaries, or consuls.” Boca Juniors, on the other hand, had the potential to be “true ambassadors of the Argentine soul before the multitudes.”<sup>42</sup> Such interviews and commentaries reflect the newspapers’ determination to ignore the Italian background of the players and cast them as national types, although, as shall be shown later, other articles and columns exoticized players and fans as non-Argentine.

Even as newspapers such as *Crítica* and *La Razón* produced a discourse that emphasized the Argentine-ness of Boca players, a close reading of the same sources reveals a simultaneous, ubiquitous undercurrent questioning that legitimacy. The same newspapers that purposefully attempted to cast the Boca Juniors players as “true ambassadors of the Argentine soul” sometimes emphasized their non-Argentine customs and language within the very articles and cartoons postulating Boca players as national types. During question-and-answer sessions with Boca players, interviewers occasionally saluted or momentarily addressed the players in Italian rather than Spanish.<sup>43</sup> *Crítica* periodically dispatched reporters to La Boca to interview fans. Their published transcriptions of these interviews

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 1/27/1925, p.14.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 2/5/1925, p.14.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>In one notable instance involving Boca player Domingo Tarascone, the interviewer facetiously salutes him with, “*Alto che Tarascone!*”, cheekily describing the player’s pleased reaction to the exclamation. Ibid., 1/14/1925, p. 14.

consistently signaled the grammatical and linguistic errors of the interviewees, changing the spelling and syntax of Spanish words to evoke the heavy Italianized speech ostensibly used by Boca fans.<sup>44</sup>

Cartoons in particular served to challenge the Argentine-ness of Boca fans and players. Boca's first defeat in the tour came early, against Celta Vigo in Galicia. One caricature published the day after the loss depicts two shabbily dressed men in tears, speaking in broken, heavily Italianized Spanish, consoling one another in the wake of Boca's defeat. The caption reads, "While Celta's victory was applauded in Spain, in La Boca it had all the signs of a tragedy."<sup>45</sup> A sign posted on a business door behind the men reads, "CLOSED BECAUSE OF NATIONAL PAIN." The wording of this sign—"national"—seems tongue in cheek. Which nation is intended? Do the fans suffer as Argentines or as Italian immigrant fans of Boca Juniors Italian immigrant players? These two ill-dressed and weepy Italians in the heart of La Boca do not seem to offer a favorable representation of Argentine-ness.

Another series of cartoons also serves to emphasize the non-Spanish, non-Argentine background of Boca Juniors players. One (captioned, "As the Argentines enter the soccer field, the [Galician] public gives them a standing ovation") depicts four Galician fans, commenting on the attractive play of the Boca Juniors squad. "Look!" one of them says to his companion. "There you can see that they have Galician blood in them."<sup>46</sup> Galicians were among the most numerous immigrants to Argentina in the period. Argentina's white

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<sup>44</sup>See *Crítica*, 3/7/1925, p.22; *ibid.*, 3/9/1925, p.5; *ibid.*, 7/15/1925, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 3/9/1925, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 3/7/1925, p. 22.

*mestizaje*, suggests the cartoonist, is appreciated even in Europe, allowing Galician spectators to claim some national credit for the Boca Juniors skills—at least before their defeat in the game. In another cartoon, Boca Juniors captain Alfredo Elli embraces the Celta Vigo captain in a traditional pre-game ceremony. The caption reads, “Both captains hug one another, getting emotional, exchanging a kiss.”<sup>47</sup> The unflatteringly rendered Celta captain says, in a heavy Galician accent, “Boy, I’m giving you this kiss as if you were my cousin who is over there [in Argentina].” Elli looks stiff and unhappy, responding in Ligurian with, “Daguele, Daguele!”—a slang term meaning, more or less, “Let’s go!”<sup>48</sup> Here, white *mestizaje* has produced something of an embarrassment. The strongly otherized representation of the Celta captain and his unwelcome affection toward his putative “cousin” demonstrate the tensions over racial identities and immigration integration that were in play in mid-1920s Argentina.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, in both of these cartoons, Boca players serve as visual symbols of an Argentine racial type that contrasts with that of their European adversaries.

The newspaper *La Razón* rather insistently questioned the legitimacy of the Boca Juniors delegation as representatives of Argentine-ness. One way *La Razón* did this was by citing the negative reaction of the European press to Boca’s playing style—and to the

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid. Presumably, Elli is uncomfortable, anxious for the formalities to end and for the match to begin.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid. These newspaper cartoons depicted a bitter exchange between caricatured Galician and Italian immigrants in Argentina, at odds over Celta’s triumph over Boca. On the same page, *Crítica* also published one of its distinctive humoristic “dispatches,” sending a reporter to interview Galician immigrants in “Galician cultural centers” to gauge their reaction to Celta’s victory. The second half of the dispatch involves interviews with Italian *boquenses*, who offer their own anguished thoughts on Boca’s loss. The responses of both immigrant communities are rendered in broken Spanish, and interviewees from both communities are depicted as veering off-topic into matters of Spanish or Italian politics, something the interviewer finds humorous. In short, Boca’s tour seems to have given *Crítica* personnel the opportunity to produce visual commentary on immigrant communities in Buenos Aires beyond the *boquense* Italian collective. The discursive exoticization and otherization of immigrants—while simultaneously offering those immigrants a place within the definition of what was racially or culturally “Argentine” was not just limited to Italo-Argentine Boca fans.

players' ethnic backgrounds. Boca's final roster of seventeen players included fourteen Italian surnames. Of the three non-Italian players, two were non-Boca players conscripted into the tour as substitutes.<sup>50</sup> While Boca was on tour in Madrid, a Spanish columnist named "Angelo" commented on the predominance of Italian surnames in an editorial written for the newspaper *España Deportiva*, which *La Razón* reproduced in its entirety. The fact that this editorial was prominently reproduced in a major Argentine newspaper illustrates the tensions over the ethno-racial compatibility of Italian immigrants into a citizenry founded and defined by Hispanics. "We have no problem accepting that the Tarascones, Tesorieris, Cochranes, Médicis, Ellis, and the Bidoglios could be brothers of the Spanish," the editorial reads. "At the end of the day we are all brothers. And we think any excuse to talk about the brotherhood of Latin peoples, about the mother country [Spain], and about transoceanic love, is a good excuse."<sup>51</sup> While allowing for the possibility that Hispano- and Italo-Argentines could be considered "brothers," the passage also serves to emphasize the non-Hispanic origin of the Boca players. While not directly responsible for the article in question, the *La Razón* staff did elect to reproduce it in its entirety and publish it in a prominent page. A different article, this one written by *La Razón* columnists in the aftermath of Boca's worst loss of the tour (a 4-1 setback against Real Iruta of Spain), flatly rejected the notion that Boca represented Argentina. "Boca Juniors is not the highest expression of Argentine soccer . . . . What does the prestigious club represent, at the end of the day? At most, *porteño*<sup>52</sup> soccer—

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<sup>50</sup>The final roster reads as follows: Americo Tesoriere, Ludovico Bidoglio, Ramón Muttis, Segundo Médi, Alfredo Elli, Mario Busso, Domingo Tarascone, Antonio Cerrotti, Dante Pertini, Carmelo Pozzo, Carlos Antraygues, Alfredo Garasini, Octavio Díaz (substitute), Roberto Cochrane (substitute), Manuel Seoane (substitute), Cesáreo Onzari (substitute) and Luis Vaccaro (substitute).

<sup>51</sup>*La Razón*, 4/24/1925, p.8.

<sup>52</sup>A term meaning literally "from the port," but used in Argentina to describe anyone or anything from the city of Buenos Aires.



a branch of porteño soccer, not an Argentine one, because Buenos Aires is not the nation.”<sup>53</sup>

This declaration contrasts with what *Crítica* and *La Razón* writers had asserted, before and during the first months of the tour, but perhaps it is not so surprising in the wake of a humiliating defeat.<sup>54</sup>

However conflictive the discourse over whether or not Boca Juniors could be considered Argentine, it is clear that Boca players saw themselves as Argentine and sought to project this to the Argentine public through the sports press. After a banquet with various municipal officials in the Galician city of Vigo, *Crítica* correspondent Hugo Marini reported that Boca player Ramón Muttis entertained his Spanish hosts by singing “three Argentine folk songs along with some of [Argentina’s] most popular tangos,” allowing the player to articulate his apparent self-identification as an Argentine.<sup>55</sup> In an interview given to the Argentine press upon Boca’s return to Buenos Aires, goalie Americo Tesorieri was asked what the “most emotional moment” of the tour had been. “Whenever our matches were over,” he responded, “as soon as we’d get back to the hotel, we would all sing the national anthem together. The memory of the faraway motherland always makes us emotional.”<sup>56</sup> These anecdotes depict Boca players as patriotic Argentines, willing and able to assume a quasi-diplomatic function while touring Europe. Such anecdotes, reproduced *en masse* by the sports press, must have helped the Argentine population to accept those players as “true ambassadors” and fine specimens of white *mestizaje*.

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<sup>53</sup>*La Razón*, 4/17/1925, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup>See, for instance, *Crítica*, 1/2/1925, p. 14.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 3/3/1925, p.14.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 7/13/1925, p. 13.

At times *Crítica* cartoons present Boca players as bridging a perceived gap between the broader, already assimilated Argentine public and their immigrant-dominated fan base in the neighborhood of La Boca. There is a consistently clear differentiation between the way Boca players and Boca fans are portrayed in interviews and cartoons. As mentioned earlier, *Crítica* and *La Razón* featured numerous interviews with Boca players. In the resulting transcriptions, the interviewers sometimes direct salutations toward Boca players in Italian, and, unlike interviewed fans, the Boca players infallibly respond in perfect and eloquent Spanish.<sup>57</sup> Photographs and cartoons depict Boca players in suits, well-groomed and sophisticated, comparatively fine-featured.<sup>58</sup> The faces of Boca players are rendered in a way that is stylistically different from those of their fans, whose depictions border on caricature: rural laborers with wizened, blunt facial features, pathetically imitating gaucho styles of dress, emitting crude mixtures of Spanish and Italian.<sup>59</sup> While sports page accounts made it clear that Boca players understood Italian, were attached to La Boca district, and were in constant contact with their fans, graphic depictions of the players differentiates them physically from their less-integrated fans. Physically, the Boca players appear nearly identical to the “Argentine” types found in other cartoons of the period.

A cartoon in *Crítica* neatly addresses and synthesizes these points. Published immediately after Boca’s return to Buenos Aires in July 1925, the cartoon depicts a shabby Italian immigrant with an enormous plate of *fainá*, the Genovese version of the Italian dish *farinata*. Hanging from the plate is a sign rendered in Italianized Spanish, crudely stating,

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<sup>57</sup>See interviews with Domingo Tarascone, *Crítica*, 1/14/1925, p.14; with Alfredo Elli, *ibid.*, 7/16/1925, p. 13; with Manuel Seoane, *ibid.*, 1/9/1925, p.11; and with Americo Tesoriere, *ibid.*, 7/13/1925, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 3/9/1925, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup>See *ibid.*; see also *ibid.* 3/7/1925, p. 22 and 7/14/1925, p.14.

“For the Boca Juniors boys: fresh fainá.”<sup>60</sup> Several suit-clad hands—their bodies off frame—are shown reaching eagerly for the fainá, ostensibly belonging to Boca Juniors players who are ravenous for Genoese cuisine after their 6-month European sojourn. The caption reads, “The best way to welcome Boca Juniors.” This depiction of players and fans side-by-side provides a severe physical contrast between the two. Still, the two parties connect over food, over Italian culture, presenting Boca players as links between “Argentina” and the Italian community in La Boca. They are the intermediary step between unassimilated immigrants and the fully-crystalized *raza rioplatense*.

#### Argentina vs. Uruguay: Celebrating La Raza Rioplatense

*Hermanos en la Gloria! El triunfo de una raza. Argentinos y uruguayos, al vencer en varonil lucha deportiva, a todos los conjuntos mundiales que enfrentaron, han puesto de manifiesto, en forma elocuente, la potencialidad de la raza rioplatense, fuerte, sobria e inteligente.*<sup>61</sup>

On June 14, 1928, a prominently placed announcement appeared on page 5 of the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación*, precipitated by an international sporting event. The day after the advertisement was published, the Argentine and Uruguayan national soccer teams were to play each other as part of the 1928 Olympic Games, held in Amsterdam. Having defeated, between them, such world powers as Italy, Yugoslavia, Holland, and the United States, the

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<sup>60</sup>*Crítica*, 7/14/1925, p. 14.

<sup>61</sup>*La Nación* 6/14/1928, p.5. Five different newspapers were analyzed in this section: *La Nación*, *La Razón*, *Crítica*, *La Vanguardia*, and *La Epoca*. Other major newspapers from the period in question, such as *La Prensa* and *El Gráfico*, were not available in the United States. Also, not all of the five dailies listed above were available for the date ranges analyzed in this essay. Further research is needed to analyze a fuller representation of each newspaper for all of the date ranges interrogated here, as well as to include the discourse reproduced in the newspapers not available in the United States.

Argentine and Uruguayan squads had earned the right to face off in the gold medal match.<sup>62</sup>

The Argentine press saw the moment as transcendent. In the previous Olympic tournament—the 1924 games held in France—Uruguay had been the first and sole Latin American team to send a soccer delegation to the competition. The Uruguayans had won the 1924 Olympic gold medal with ease, and many Argentines had celebrated Uruguay’s victory as their own.

Now, four years later, Argentina dispatched its first soccer delegation to the Olympics, and found itself matched up against Uruguay in the final. The sports commentary surrounding the event characterized the match as symbolic of Argentina’s material progress. However, as the announcement cited above helps to demonstrate, a significant amount of the commentary is dedicated to observations about how the soccer triumphs were due to, and representative of, racial traits unique to inhabitants of the Río de la Plata region. Argentine sports journalist seemed to shed their earlier ambivalence about white *mestizaje*, a phenomenon that Argentina supposedly shared with Uruguay, and give themselves over to frank celebration of “the Rioplatine race.”

Separated by the Río de la Plata estuary (hence “Rioplatine”) Argentina and Uruguay have a history of economic, political, and cultural interconnectedness.<sup>63</sup> During the colonial period, Argentina and Uruguay were part of the same Spanish viceroyalty, and after independence, *porteño* statesmen battled with Portuguese, Brazilian, Uruguayan, and provincial Argentine forces for control of present-day Uruguay. The *República Oriental*, as

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<sup>62</sup>The match in question was actually the second in a series of two gold-medal matches between Uruguay and Argentina. The first had ended in a draw. In an competitive era in which extra time and penalty shoot-outs did not yet exist, a draw in an elimination match necessitated a rematch.

<sup>63</sup>See Carolina González Laurino, *La construcción de la identidad uruguaya* (Montevideo: Universidad Católica, 2001), 43, for a more general discussion of Uruguay’s historical and cultural connections to Argentina.

Uruguay became known—denoting its spatial relationship to western-lying Argentina—achieved definitive “independence” in 1830 with the help of England, which worked to establish present-day Uruguay as a buffer state between Argentina and Brazil in order to facilitate smoother commercial relations in the area.<sup>64</sup> Because of similar topographies and agricultural conditions, Uruguay’s economic activities have always been analogous to those of Argentina’s littoral region, based largely on the export of agricultural commodities such as hides, tallow, and, later, refrigerated beef and grain. Dependent on the same external and internal contingencies, then, the Argentine and Uruguayan economies were intimately connected. Both nations enjoyed the same financial booms and endured the same economic busts. Cultural similarities abound as well: a shared rural culture emphasizing cattle-raising and carnivorousness, and even a comparable spoken accent point toward additional similarities between the two countries. And, crucially for the brotherhood of white *mestizaje*, Uruguay had received masses of European immigration during the same time period as had Argentina.

All this allowed Buenos Aires journalists of the 1920s and 1930s to claim Uruguayan sporting successes as Argentine successes. Countless references from the sports pages demonstrate this tendency. In the wake of Uruguay’s gold medal victory in the 1924 Olympics in France—a competition in which, as mentioned, Argentina did not participate—the traditional Argentine daily *La Nación* reproduced and celebrated an editorial written by the editor of the Uruguayan daily *El Día*. It reads in part:

The Argentine soul and the Uruguayan soul have vibrated in unison in these times of clamorous jubilation. The hearts of these two peoples have had palpitations that have made it seem, at times, that only one heart was beating. Before now, it often upset us [Uruguayans] . . . that we were referred to as an

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<sup>64</sup>David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1985), 102-103.

Argentine province. But this time we have happily embraced that misunderstanding: with pleasure we have wanted to show the world that the two countries on the shores of *La Plata* are brothers, not in a trivialized externalization of a merely courteous formula, but in the profound and cordial fullness of unmatched affection.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, an editorial in the socialist daily *La Vanguardia* declares—during the 1928 Olympic tournament—that Argentina and Uruguay “have the same destiny.” The socialist writer found it natural that Argentines and Uruguayans be “always united in rejoicing over triumph and anguishing over defeat.”<sup>66</sup> The conclusion of one copy writer for *La Nación* succinctly sums up the conflated identities extant throughout Argentine sports pages: “In football as in other activities...Argentina and Uruguay are one country.”<sup>67</sup> This repeated tendency to relate and conflate the two countries would allow for Uruguayan and Argentine sporting triumphs to catalyze racialized identity construction during sporting events, based on characteristics identifiable in either one or both of the countries.

It is within this discursive context, then, that the specific notion of *raza rioplatense* was developed and came to be synonymous with the “Argentine” race. As indicated in the introduction, this essay neither utilizes nor limits its analysis to any one specific definition of race. The identities posited by the Argentine sports media, always centered on the term *raza*, were relativist and relational rather than essentialist. Each invocation of race denoted at once many meanings. Still, there are broadly identifiable traits in the sports pages’ invocations of race. Collectively, they dwell on physical characteristics, contradicting José Luis Abellán’s thesis that *raza* had no scientifically racist significance as it was employed in the Spanish-speaking world during the first decades of the twentieth century. The different characteristics

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<sup>65</sup>Quoted in *La Nación* 6/12/1924, p.2.

<sup>66</sup>*La Vanguardia* 6/11/1928, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup>*La Nación* 6/14/1928, p.4.

attributed to the Argentine and Uruguayan national team players—from physical appearance to age, from perceptions of players’ intellects to descriptions of their playing style—are all part of the classically positivist deployments of the term *raza* and its centrality to the formation of Argentine racial identity.

The physical proximity of Argentina and Uruguay led commentators to identify their citizens as constituting the same race. “Just one strip of water separates us: the same clouds visit [both of] us,” mused one Argentine bank official in an interview in *Crítica*.<sup>68</sup> During the inaugural World Cup tournament, held in Uruguay in 1930, the socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* affirmed that Argentina and Uruguay “constitute a psychological and ethnic unity.”<sup>69</sup> The final match of the 1930 World Cup, pitting Argentina and Uruguay, prompted *La Vanguardia* to publish an editorial that elaborated further: the match, the anonymous writer proclaims, would consist of “twenty-two men who ethnically, geographically, and psychologically constitute a unity, a unity universally recognized by the name *rioplatense*.”<sup>70</sup> An interview with a soccer bureaucrat in *Crítica*, published during the 1928 Olympics, goes a step further: “Argentines and Uruguayans have the same [physical] conditions in every sense. Physically, they belong to the same race, they live in countries with the same characteristics, with the same climate. In sum, with respect to their organic constitution, they are identical, more identical than Argentines [living in] different latitudes.”<sup>71</sup> Positivist-style environmental determinism was integral to the idea of the *raza rioplatense*.

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<sup>68</sup>*Crítica* 6/3/1928, p.4. Interview with Jaime G. Corchs, president of the Argentine Banco Hipotecario.

<sup>69</sup>*La Vanguardia* 7/19/1930, p.6.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 7/31/1930, p.4.

<sup>71</sup>*Crítica* 6/11/1928, p.3. Interview with Juan Pignier, Vice President of the Asociación Amateur, Argentina’s newly-created premier domestic soccer league.

But if the environment was American the inherited biological traits, the genes themselves, were to be strictly European. Physical characterizations of the *raza rioplatense* reoccur throughout the different newspapers. Physically, they are described as “Mediterranean, dark and of medium height.”<sup>72</sup> Describing the Uruguayan style of play during the 1924 Olympics, a reporter for *La Nación* writes that the Rioplatines athletically perform “within typical Latin modalities, that is to say, with greater vivacity [than their rivals], quickness, and more movement [than their rivals] due to an inability to gauge a precise sense of distance.”<sup>73</sup> While the allegation of an inability to judge distance seems idiosyncratic to this document, the description of Argentine and Uruguayan characteristic as “Mediterranean” and “Latin” was not. And the description of “quick and vivacious” Mediterranean types contrasts them to large, slow, and cumbersome northern-European types.

Physical flexibility was another standard characterization of the *raza rioplatense*. Terms such as “acrobatic” and “agility” were commonly used to convey the physical traits that differentiated the “new” Argentine race from older, inflexible European racial type. Typical of this is an interview with an Argentine soccer official during the 1924 Olympics, during which the interviewee comments, “The Uruguayan—like the Argentine—is much more agile and flexible than any other player. . . . The Rioplatine soccer player is much more clever than the European, and he intuitively combines a precise sense of moment with agility, promptness and even elegance in its movements.”<sup>74</sup> The flexibility and agility of the *raza*

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<sup>72</sup>*La Nación* 6/6/1924, front page. “*Los uruguayos, meridionales, son morenos y de media altura.*”

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.* “Los uruguayos ya inciaban su labor particular dentro de las modalidades típicas Latinas, que es decir la mayor vivacidad, la rapidez y el movimiento por falta del sentido preciso de la medida.” Interview with Aníbal Falco, retired Uruguayan soccer player.



*rioplatense* was accepted not only by Argentine newspapers, but, apparently, abroad as well.

A Parisian newspaper, whose proclamations are triumphantly quoted in *La Nación*, reports that “the Uruguayans have a fiery vivacity, an acrobatic mobility and agility.”<sup>75</sup> In similar fashion, *La Vanguardia* quotes a Dutch paper’s observations about Rioplatine agility.

Referring to the fact that neither of the two teams playing in the gold medal match were European, the quoted Dutch article enthuses,

Does this mean Ibero-American football is superior to that practiced in old Europe? That the sportsmen from the banks of the Rio de la Plata are the quintessential exponents of the world’s most popular sport? Are the physical conditions, the almost feline agility of the South Americans, superior to the cold science and the reflexes of the Anglo-Saxons?<sup>76</sup>

The result of white *mestizaje*, as it emerged generally from the sports discourse of the 1920s, was a specific physical type--small, quick, and agile. Such terms are completely inexplicable within a merely spiritual, civilizational understanding of *raza*. To the contrary, the *raza* in *raza rioplatense* was more akin to what the word would mean in describing a race horse.

And yet, Latin and Mediterranean traits were not all. If this was a breed, it was decidedly a mixed breed. White *mestizaje* had produced something new, according to another discursive motif evident through the sports pages, an emphasis on youth—always, implicitly—vis-à-vis Europe. Newspaper references to “youth” and newness are in perfect accord with the positivist-inspired notion that the *raza rioplatense* was a new, evolutionarily produced scientific creation. A celebratory editorial in the socialist daily *La Vanguardia* notes that the “Rio de la Plata is forceful, strong, and agile because of its

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 6/10/1924, p.3. Interview with Dr. Tedín Uriburu, President of the Asociación Argentina, then one of Argentina’s two premier domestic soccer leagues.

<sup>75</sup>Quoted in *La Nación* 6/6/1924, front page.

<sup>76</sup>Quoted in *La Vanguardia* 6/10/1928, p.5.

youth.”<sup>77</sup> An even more explicit, rambling editorial in *Crítica* remarks, “The old, old Flemish and cold Saxons who in a not-so-distant past dominated in the field of sports, have been dislocated by the robust and enthusiastic Latin boys who represent a youthful and nascent America.”<sup>78</sup> Another celebratory editorial, published the following day in *Crítica*, reads, “This is the enduring lesson of the [gold medal match between Argentina and Uruguay]: an assuredness that, in the face of the decadence of European youth, America is crystallizing its racial vigor, giving a magnificent example of strength and of culture.”<sup>79</sup> This allegation that Europe had become biologically decadent also appears in the writings of conservative Argentines such as José Ingenieros, Leopoldo Lugones, and others. The horrors of World War I, which were played out in Argentine newspapers in great detail, indicated to Ingenieros and other writers that a moral perversion permeated *old* Europe.<sup>80</sup> The biological degeneration of Europe as described in the Argentine sports pages, which offered a convenient contrast to the success of Argentine athletes in sports competition, had its roots in larger disillusion with and moralistic condemnations of the world that existed after the Great War.

An evaluation of playing style was also used to distinguish Argentines and Uruguayans from Europeans in the sports pages. These judgments adhered to a tone steeped in scientific racism, suggesting that natural combination of advantageous characteristics had achieved an ideal, evolved result in the Rio de la Plata. The “cold science” of the Anglo-Saxon racial type was a common characterization of Northern Europeans. And the playing

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<sup>77</sup>*La Vanguardia* 6/12/1928, p.4.

<sup>78</sup>*Crítica* 6/9/1928, p.12-13.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 6/10/1928, p.2.

<sup>80</sup>See, for instance, *Jose Ingenieros, Las fuerzas morales* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1925; 2002), 16-17.

style of a young, new race was naturally modern and scientific. An editorial in *La Vanguardia* declares that the 1928 Argentine Olympic team is “one of the most *complete*, most homogenous, and most scientific teams that has ever been seen on the [European] continent” [emphasis added].<sup>81</sup> Yet their playing was not “coldly scientific,” because it was leavened by an ambiguously and essentially “Argentine” psychological element, an innate cleverness, alternately described as *criollo* or “Latin.” This was the touch that, above all, characterized the *raza rioplatense* on the soccer field. An Uruguayan soccer player interviewed in *La Nación* during the 1924 Olympics says, “I think Rioplatine soccer is quite different from European soccer. We mix Saxon reflexes with rapid *criolla* intuition that, combined with [Rioplatine soccer’s] unique boldness, disconcerts any [opposing] defense no matter how good they are.”<sup>82</sup> Another article in the same edition echoes the idea that the Argentine style of play can be characterized as a progressive, evolved combination of formal English instruction with innovative and intuitive *criollo* components. “The great teachers were the English, whose technique and art has been uniformly recognized. If the exceptional physical and psychological conditions of the Rioplatine type are added to that good, basic [English] education,” victory for the Rioplatine teams was virtually guaranteed from the tournament’s onset.<sup>83</sup>

One of the most explicit statements of white *mestizaje* ideology to appear in the sports pages was made during an interview with Dr. Amado G. Grandi, Director General of Immigration for the Argentine government, in *Crítica*. According to Grandi, the fact that the 1928 gold medal match was being contested by the two Rioplatine national teams

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 6/1/1928, p.5.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 6/10/1924, front page.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p.3.

demonstrated “the degree of vigorousness resulting from the old European races as they mix and unite in America.” He goes on: “This point, extremely important from a social standpoint, cannot be denied: [the Olympic triumph] has been achieved by an immigrant continent that is taking the best blood lines from the world to fuse them . . . producing a product whose characteristics and achievements are treating the world to the present athletic jousts of Amsterdam.”<sup>84</sup> Grandi’s vision of Argentine racial identity emphasizes the familiar tropes of Argentine whiteness while employing the forms and values of Vasconcelian *mestizaje* discourse. White *mestizaje* had combined “the best bloodlines.” It had been the sort of *mestizaje* that Vasconcelos called most “productive.” Its result was a young, agile, clever, and scientific *raza rioplatense*, with no trace of African or indigenous American origin.

The discourse of white *mestizaje* allowed sports journalists to have their cake and eat it, too. While abounding on the above-described physical characteristics of the *raza rioplatense*, they might, on other occasions, elide the term seamlessly with *raza americana*, extending Rioplatine characteristics to Latin American nations as a whole. These rhetorical gestures of fraternal pan-Latin Americanism are markedly vague (in contrast to specific discussion of the rioplatense physical type). For example, in the build-up to the 1924 gold medal match between Uruguay and Switzerland, *La Nación* published an editorial capsule which read, “We reaffirm...our faith in the triumph of the men who, from young America went to represent a new civilization against the centuries-old [European] civilizations.”<sup>85</sup> Similarly, an editorial originally published in the Uruguayan newspaper *El País* in the wake of Uruguay’s 1924 gold medal and republished on the front page of *La Nación*, reads:

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 6/11/1928, p.3.

<sup>85</sup>*La Nación*, 6/8/1924, supplementary section, front page.

All of Uruguay, all of America, vibrated jubilantly yesterday with the announcement of Uruguay's triumph and the triumph of America, triumph of the countries who educate their youth in healthy and noble manifestations of sport, which invigorates our race, also contributing to the cultivation of improved spiritual virtues. We had been awaiting this hour of definitive consecration.<sup>86</sup>

The United States is excluded from this Hispanist *raza americana*, which seems to have the spiritual, civilizational meaning of *raza* proposed by Abellán.<sup>87</sup>

But the pan-Hispanist *raza americana* is a strained, highly ad hoc construction in the sports pages, overdetermined by the desire to differentiate or affirm identity. For example, one cartoon depicts players from the United States as balding, feeble representatives of an “old” race while their youthful Argentine competitors are “new” products of *mestizaje*.<sup>88</sup> Never mind that the United States could lay its own claim to white *mestizaje*. Argentine pride, not logical consistency, was the point.

## Conclusion

*Este entusiasmo deportivo que unifica los espíritus de una cosmopolis donde mil razas forman colonias aisladas, este alegre rumorear de voces inglesas, alemanas, rusas y españolas, es la manifestación saludable de un nacionalismo deportivo que forma una corriente unica, avasallante, triunfadora. Nacionalismo propio de un país joven y moderno, sentimiento varonil de esta época gloriosa para el deporte, que gobiernos encastillados y anticuarios no saben comprender ni estimular.*

- *Crítica*, 7/29/1930, front page:

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<sup>86</sup>Quoted in *La Nación* 6/11/1924, front page.

<sup>87</sup>Referring to a match previously played between Argentina and the United States during the 1928 Olympics, an editorial in *Crítica* recollects that it involved “two representations of different races. The North American and the South American.” *Crítica* 6/9/1928, p.12.

<sup>88</sup>*Crítica* 5/30/1928, p.10. See Appendix A, Figure 2.

Thus waxed lyrical an anonymous *Crítica* columnist on the eve of the Argentina-Uruguay championship match during the inaugural 1930 World Cup. The editorial conveys and resolves, writ small, some of the major tensions addressed in this essay. The writer is conscious of the immigrants that swelled the population of Buenos Aires during the early decades of the twentieth century. He is also conscious of the power of soccer matches—and, self-evidently, of the sports press—to unite “one thousand races” into “one single current.”

One of the most popular cartoonists from *Crítica*, Dante Quinteros, published a series of humorous cartoons during the late 1920s that conveyed this very same sentiment.<sup>89</sup> His cartoon series, “Aventuras de Don Gil Contento,”<sup>90</sup> depicts the comings and goings of a “typical” Argentine named Don Gil, whose life consists of humorous encounters with caricatured representatives of different immigrant groups. The *ruso* (Jew), the *tano* (Italian), the *gaita* (Galician) and the “Englishman,” amongst others, make reoccurring appearances, each with a different body type, costume, and, of course, accent. On June 8, 1928, shortly before the Argentine-Uruguayan 1928 Olympic final, Don Gil bumps into four of his immigrant acquaintances on the street. After speaking to each of them and understanding, through their broken Spanish, that they’re all going to the government offices to become Argentine citizens, Don Gil exclaims, “Stop a moment! Can you tell me why you all, *rusos*, *gaitas*, *ingleses* and *tanos*, are in such a hurry to take out Argentine citizenship?” The Jew advances and responds in ostensibly Yiddish-laced Spanish, “It’s quite obvious, my dear!

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<sup>89</sup> See Appendix A, Figure 3.

<sup>90</sup> “The Adventures of Mr. Guy.”

Who wouldn't be proud to be Argentine, with the decisive victories of the soccer boys in [the] Amsterdam [Olympics]?"<sup>91</sup>

The 1910s and 1920s was a moment of transition in which Argentines sought to consolidate a sense of national belonging in the face of massive immigration. In the idiom of the day, construction of nation was linked to *raza*. Intellectuals like Ingenieros and Bunge attempted to formulate a unified racial identity that could complement the Hispanistic cultural identity conceived of by Lugones, Rojas, and Gálvez. The sports pages and international soccer tournaments allowed for this discussion to take place and to be internalized by Argentines on a popular level. Various conclusions emerge from this examination of that discussion, particularly as exemplified in coverage of Boca Junior's European tour and the soccer rivalry between Argentina and Uruguay. First, the idea of race most often had a physicality, a positivistic (and indubitably racist) reference to inherited traits and environmental determinants remote from the spiritual, civilizational, Hispanist meanings of *raza*, although these, too, did occasionally figure in the sports pages. Second, and somewhat unexpectedly, positivist understandings of race appear most often in discussions of race mixture, *mestizaje*. Unlike contemporaneous formulations of national *mestizaje* elsewhere, however, Argentina's was to be an exclusively white *mestizaje*. This use of the Pan-American discourse of *mestizaje* has hitherto gone largely unnoticed in Argentine historiography. The sports pages, in singular fashion, translated this intellectual discourse for a broad Argentine public.

A common, present-day Argentine refrain indicates the durability of the white *mestizaje* ideology developed in the 1920s sports pages. "Mexicans descend from Aztecs, Chileans from Mapuches, but Argentines descend from ships," a representative variation of

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

the saying goes. White mestizaje ideology evokes racial mixture only secondarily. By centering the terms of debate on whether or not inhabitants of the Rio de la Plata were a new, superlative mixture of different European races or whether they were more similar to a specific part of a European collective, the sports pages ultimately helped to construct an exclusivist racial identity—one that, to one degree or another, has an enduring legacy in modern Argentina.

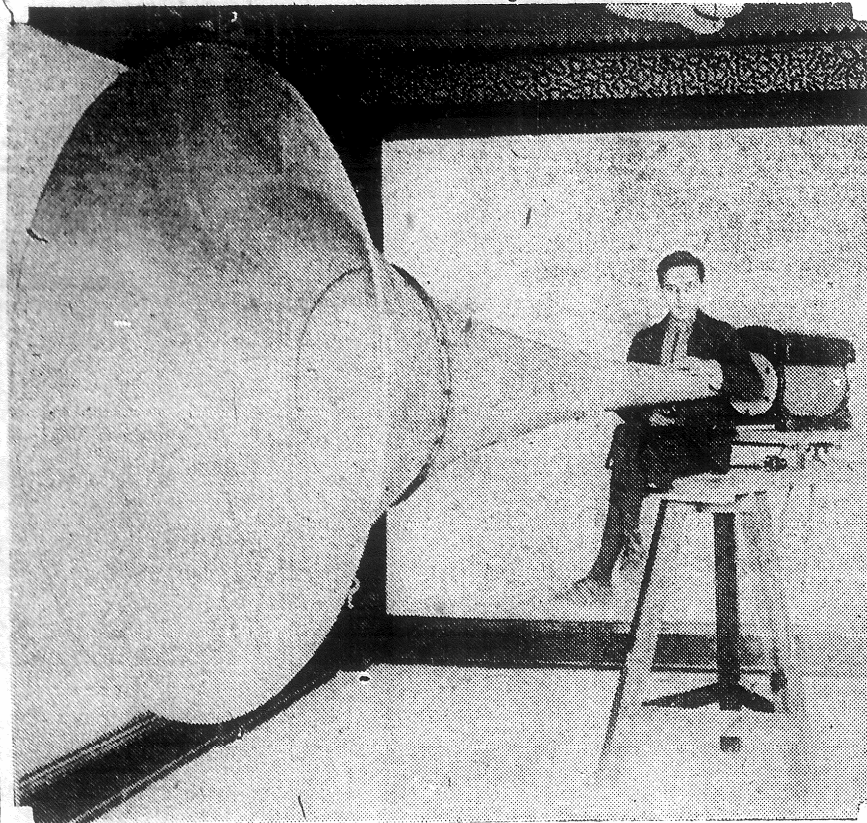


## **APPENDIX A: FIGURES FROM THE SPORTS PAGES**

# CRITICA Transmitió Ayer el Match y el Partido de Football

UN ENORME GENTIO SE CONGREGO EN LA AVENIDA PARA ESCUCHAR NUESTRA INFORMACION

Mañana lo hará en el match, olímpico Chile-Portugal



UNO DE LOS ALTOS parlantes de CRITICA

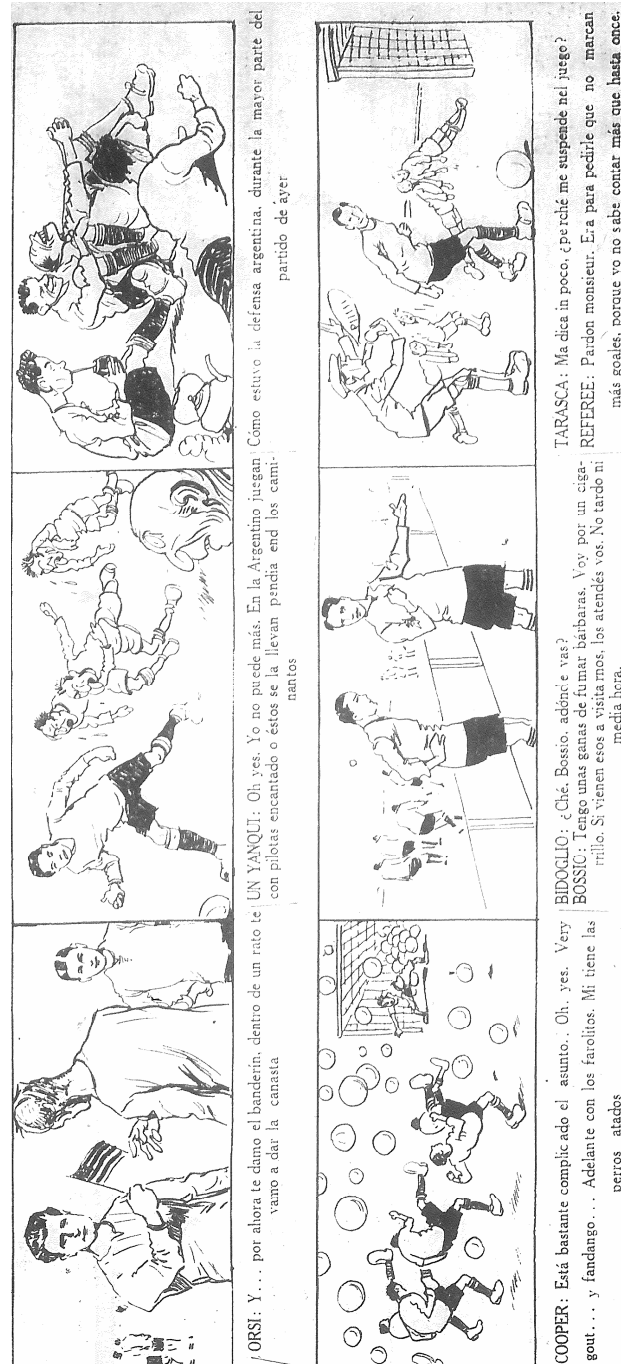
CRITICA inauguró ayer con buen éxito los poderosos altoparlantes colocados en el frente de su edificio y que en adelante informarán eficazmente al público, de los acontecimientos deportivos más importantes.

Por medio de teléfonos directos instalados en la cancha de Independiente y en el ring side de River Plate, nuestros cronistas deportivos transmitían todos los detalles de los dos grandes acontecimientos del día, detalles que eran de inmediato retransmitidos por medio de los altoparlantes, los más potentes construidos hasta ahora y que permitían seguir la información en casi toda la extensión de la Avenida de Mayo, repleta de público.

Frente a nuestro edificio, el público se congregó en gran número desde las 15 horas y fue aumentando su número constantemente a tal extremo que más tarde quedó totalmente interrumpido el tráfico en la Avenida donde más de 2.000 personas seguían con extraordinario interés las incidencias del partido de football, primero, y las de la pelea de Cármpolo y Monte Munn, después.

Mañana transmitiremos desde nuestros balcones el desarrollo del partido de football entre Chile y Portugal, con el que se inicia el torneo olímpico de football.

**Figure 1. “Uno de los altos parlantes de *Crítica*.” *Crítica* 5/26/1928, p.3.** In addition to printing hundreds of thousands of paper copies daily, it was also common for newspaper offices such as *Crítica*’s to transmit live radio commentary of international soccer matches to crowds gathered outside the paper’s headquarters. Loudspeakers such as the one pictured above helped make newspapers an institution of the daily life of many working-class Argentines, converting the physical location of the press into a gathering place of great social significance.



**Figure 2. “Gran Partido de Ayer Reconstruidos por Nuestro Dibujante Rosas.”**  
*Crítica* 5/30/1930, p. 10.



Figure 3. “Aventuras de Don Gil Contento: Todo se explica.” *Crítica* 6/8/1928, p.16.

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