



## The Beautiful Game

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Soccer was everywhere in the last few months. Two international tournaments were being played simultaneously, one in Europe and one in the Americas, featuring the best national teams and the finest players in the world. I'm not a sports fan, but when there is that much soccer going on I have to watch a few games. I can't help it; I was bitten by the soccer bug as a child. You couldn't get away from it in Montevideo in those days. Wherever you were on game days—in a café, a restaurant, a taxi, just walking down the street—you could hear the *partido* blaring over the radio (no one had TV yet). The radio was usually played at full volume, especially in public places where fans gathered to follow the game.

Modern soccer began in England in the mid-1800s. As it gained popularity, people started calling it “the beautiful game” because of its innate simplicity and elegance, the teamwork involved, the unpredictability, and the sheer joy it brings to fans and players. The British started coming to Uruguay at about that time, mainly to farm and raise cattle and sheep, but also as entrepreneurs and adventurers. In need of recreation and a place to socialize with their fellow *ingleses*, they started the Montevideo Cricket Club (MVCC) in 1861 and imported soccer, among other sports, from “home.” The game caught on among the local population and soon became the national sport. Uruguayan fans are passionate about *fútbol* and flock to the Estadio Centenario on game days. That stadium in Montevideo was built in 1930 to commemorate the centennial of Uruguay's Constitution. The very first World Cup tournament—anywhere in the world—was played there that year and, when Uruguay won, the whole country erupted in victory celebrations. Some years later the broadcasting star, Heber Pinto, proposed a toast: “To the English, who gave us soccer, which we then made ours!” He was spot-on.

But there was more to the beautiful game than the actual event. It was also an integral part of the British ethic which held that sports should be part of every child's education. I recently watched *Chariots of Fire*, a film about two British

athletes who compete at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. One of them is studying at Cambridge, and there is a scene in which the university's Master of Trinity (splendidly played by Sir John Gielgud) says: “Here in Cambridge, we're always proud of our athletic prowess. We believe, we've always believed, that our games are indispensable in helping to complete the education of an Englishman. They create character, they foster courage, honesty, and leadership. But, most of all, an unassailable spirit of loyalty, comradeship, and mutual responsibility.”

These words rang a bell and sent me back to the Centennial history book published by my alma mater, the British Schools in 2008, in which the introduction to the chapter on Sports has this to say: “In addition to simple enjoyment, sport allows the students to learn its inherent key values such as fair play, teamwork, trust, discipline, resilience, sportsmanship, grace under pressure, as well as an appropriate attitude towards both winning and losing. These character-building codes instil essential life-long values and habits in young men and women which are often acquired more easily on the games fields than in the classroom.”

These are some heady concepts for girls and boys in high school. But they were idealistic seeds planted in successive generations of students who then went out into the world inspired by these noble values to do their best to live by these principles. As I watched game after game in the Copa América and the Euro 2024 I was reminded of these ideas and glimpsed a somewhat wistful vision of what the example of soccer could teach. In our complicated world where conflict and violence are on the rise, the metaphor of the playing field acquires great significance and points to a more peaceful way. How deeply satisfying it is to watch two teams, both firmly committed to winning, play against each other according to a set of rules that are respected by all and honourably accept the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat as fundamental parts of the contest. A beautiful game indeed.