



The World Cup

The World Cup soccer tournament is a landmark event that comes around every four years. Dozens of nations send teams to compete, all longing to bring home the coveted trophy. I'm not a sports fan, but I am addicted to the World Cup, and always watch a few of the games. I can't help it. I was bitten by the soccer bug as a child.

You couldn't get away from soccer 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 game 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. Heber Pinto was one of the broadcasting stars at the time, a fast-talking commentator known as “the narrator who televises with his words.” The bar up the street from our house in Pocitos had a radio and whenever a goal was scored, we could hear Heber yelling “¡Goool!” at the top of his voice half a block away. I used to call that bar when I needed to get a message to my parents, back before we got a phone at home. One of the owners would answer and, on game days, would yell at someone to turn down the radio: “*Che, ¡baja el volumen que no se oye nada!*” Then I'd be on hold, listening to the game for a few minutes while someone went to get my dad.

Uruguayan fans are passionate about *fútbol* and flock to the stadium on game days. The Estadio Centenario 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.

Heber Pinto once proposed a toast: “To the English, who gave us soccer, which we then made ours!” He was spot-on. The British started coming to Uruguay in the mid-nineteenth

century, mainly to farm and raise cattle, but also as entrepreneurs and adventurers. In need of recreation and a chance to socialize with their fellow *ingleses*, they started the Montevideo Cricket Club (MVCC) in 1861 and imported soccer, among other sports, from “home.” The club played a team fielded by a visiting British ship in 1878, the first organized game of association football on Uruguayan soil. The MVCC is the oldest sports club in Uruguay; it was at La Blanqueada for years before moving to Sayago in 1945, then to Carrasco in 1956, where it remains to this day.

Sayago was one of those pretty towns close to Montevideo where English families settled in the 1870s to work for the railways. The British, flush with capital and expertise, funded and ran the Uruguayan railways for about seventy years until they were nationalized in 1949. Laid off English employees, by then mostly born in Uruguay, found other work and stayed on in communities that blended into the larger population but never forgot their roots. There are still families with English names in those towns who pause in the afternoon for a cup of tea.

In the early 1890s the railway company bought some land in Villa Peñarol for their maintenance workshops, with space for recreation and sporting activities. Following the example set by the MVCC, railway workers formed their own club in 1891 “for the purpose of stimulating the practice of cricket, football and other male sports.” That club—nicknamed the *Carboneros* in a nod to the stokers who shovelled coal to keep the trains running—survives to this day as *Peñarol*, one of Uruguay's two main soccer teams, which often plays at the Estadio Centenario against its arch-rival *Nacional*. Uruguay won the World Cup again in Brazil in 1950, beating their hosts at the Maracanã stadium in Rio de Janeiro in the famous game known as the *Maracanazo*. Widely considered one of the greatest soccer playing nations in the history of the “beautiful game,” Uruguay has won Latin America's Copa América fifteen times, and will be ready for another shot at the World Cup in 2026.