

The Ball Remains the Same

Leoz, Grondona and Teixeira's 91-Year-Reign

By Ezequiel Fernández Moores

The South American playoffs for the Football World Cup in Brazil start tomorrow. South America has won 9 out of the 18 FIFA World Cups. Obdulio Varela, Di Stéfano, Pelé, Garrincha, Kempes, Maradona, Ronaldhino and Ronaldo were born there. Messi, Neymar, Alexis Sánchez and Falcao too. They are the new stars. There are always new champions in South America. What is never renewed, though, is the ruling class. South America, gentlemen, has gone through great changes over the last years. I am talking about social changes. And political changes. There are countries where for the first time there is a woman president, or an aborigine, a worker, a bishop and an ex guerilla. A lot has changed in South America. But definitely not the football ruling leaders. They are the same as ever.

Let's consider, for example, Paraguayan Nicolás Leoz. He is 83 years old. His enemies say he claims to be two or three years younger. Anyway, he has been the Conmebol president since 1986. Last May he was re-elected until 2015. A record of 29 years. Ricardo Teixeira has been president of the Brazilian Confederation since 1989. As for Julio Grondona, I talked a lot in Play the Game 2005. He is already 80 years old. He has been the President of the Argentinian Football Association since 1979. No matter some last judicial interferences, I assured you that Grondona will start this year his ninth consecutive term. The three of them will be in office until 2015. Grondona will reach 36 years on the throne, Leoz 29 and Teixeira 26. The most powerful South American football trio in the world will summed in 2015 240 years, 91 of them sitting in the throne.

Leoz and Teixeira, as we know, deny taking bribes from ISL. But his names have come up in a Swiss court. In the Conmebol or in Paraguay nobody criticized Leoz about this subject. Teixeira, however, comes in for severe criticism in Brazil. The Brazilian president herself, Dilma Roussef, does not trust him. Roussef wants to control the money that the State will invest in the organization of the next World Cup. Teixeira and also the FIFA got on better with former president Lula. Over the last days the arguments about the privilege law that the FIFA demands for each World Cup have become worse. Last Saturday in Brazil the rumour spread that the FIFA threatens with an alternative venue if Brazilian government doesn't give in. Typical from FIFA. I'm sure there will be more clashes from now on.

Teixeira laughs at the media accusations. He says he will only worry the day Globo TV National Journal accuses him. TV Globo is the most powerful TV network in Brazil. It is Teixeira's partner. On last August more than 20 Brazilian team supporters went to the stadiums with banners that read "Fora Teixeira". Globo did not show any. And if Globo interferes, Teixeira reschedules the start of the Brazilian matches so that they begin at the same time as the soaps, which are the rating owners.

Teixeira was released yesterday from the hospital. Grondona two weeks ago. The real bosses in the Conmebol, have been confronted this year with demands of people demonstrating in the streets and stadiums hoping that they will leave. But Teixeira wants to become the FIFA president in 2015. It is Joao Havelange, his former father-in-law, who encourages him most. Havelange was the FIFA president for 25 years. He is now 95 and enjoys excellent health. Havelange is the founder

and the healthiest of the southamerican centenary club. He invited his friend to celebrate his centenary just before the Olympics in Rio, in 2016.

Grondona no longer has the support of the Clarín group, the most powerful one in my country. As I told you in 2005, Clarín and Grondona were partners for more than 20 years. This society was a huge monopoly in football broadcasts. Do you know why Grondona did not dare break up with Clarín? Because he has found another partner who pays him three times as much and protects him more: the Argentine government. Now football is broadcast on public TV. Anybody can watch it without paying a cent. Much public criticism may be directed at Grondona. The organisation Save Football made reference to the most severe criticism against him yesterday in Play the Game because of the violence of our hooligans. In 70 years the AFA had 30 presidents. They lasted an average of a year and a half each. Grondona has been in office for 32 years. During these 32 years my country has had 14 presidents. The AFA only one. The AFA vote system is so Machiavellian that in eight elections there was only one opponent. And he had only one vote.

Let's see what has happened in Chile. Harold Mayne Nicholls was at last a fresh hope of renovation. He took over an unsuccessful Federation and a trouble national team. It classified during a great campaign for the South Africa World Cup. He multiplied its value by four. But the real owners of Chilean football wanted that business for themselves. They could not stand that Mayne Nicholls demanded the TV money was invested in infrastructure and the building of youth clubs. Chilean clubs are private corporations. And their shareholders are the most powerful business groups in the country. They own shares in all the main clubs. The list begins with Colo Colo, the most popular one. It was controlled by Chilean president, Sebastián Piñera, the richest man in the country. Hours before a decisive vote in the Chilean Federation, president Piñera himself offered to build new stadiums for small clubs. They did not care that 80% of Chilean fans were supporting Mayne Nicholls. Their colleagues have an 80% too, but of disapproval. Leoz and Joseph Blatter have been through it themselves with the tremendous hissing from football fans when they stepped into the River Plate pitch to award the prizes to the last American Cup winners. Grondona stayed in his seat. It was wise of him.

Chilean Piñera, economically Liberal and politically Conservative, is an exception. Most of the region turned, in fact, to centre-left or left governments. We know that when Hugo Chávez became president there was a radical turning point in Venezuela. I will not make a political analysis. For better or for worse, the truth is that many things have changed in Venezuela since Hugo Chávez. What in Venezuela has not changed either, though, is the president of the Federation. Rafael Esquivel has been there since 1987 and his term will finish in 2013. 26 years. He is the owner of fishing vessels, clothes shops, gas stations, cinema complexes and he is a whiskey importer. Venezuela is almost one million square metres large. Do you know where they have been building, for a decade, The High Performance Centre with the money of the FIFA Goal Project? On lands belonging to the Esquivel family.

The Venezuelan Federation presided by Esquivel paid Disgamar company one million dollars for the land, which is on Margarita island. "The land- Esquivel explained a few years ago- belongs to the Federation. The FIFA should not care whose it was before".

And in our neighbouring Colombia? Well, there, we know that the clubs belonged, for years, to the narco Cartels. Pablo Escobar, the Medellín Cartel boss, was the owner of the Atlético Nacional.

Brothers Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, Cali Cartel bosses, had the America. Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha had Millonarios. In the 80's they blackmailed or killed referees. They controlled that great National Team which classified for three World Cups running. Valderrama, Asprilla, Higuita, Rincón. The narcos paid none other than the president of the Federation, Juan José Bellini, who went to prison. I recommend the documentary "Los Dos Escobares" by Jeff and Michael Zimbalist brothers. It shows the national team players going to play football in the narco prison Pablo Escobar. "If Vito Corleone calls me –former trainer Orlando Maturana said- , I will go".

We already know that Colombia managed to get rid of those narco bosses. Their executors were the "paras" of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia. The cocaine business is now theirs. And, apparently, so may be the football business. The Autodefensas accountant was killed last year. He was auditor of the Federation. The president of the Federation is now Luis Bedoya. But the real influential man is Alvaro González Alzate. He has been in Colombian football for 40 years. There have been narcos and the "paras" will no longer be. Not González Alzate. He will stay.

And Perú? Manuel Burga is the boss there. Former government wanted to get him out but the FIFA, as usual, threatened with sanctions. Once the same thing happened with with Esquivel in Venezuela. And. let me warn you, it will happen again with Grondona and with Teixeira. Burgos has been in the Federation for two decades, one as president. 92% of Peruvians reject him. "The remaining 8% - he said very seriously- is a big number". He was summoned by judges, prosecutors and they have initiated Parliamentary commissions. He still has three pending judiciary proceedings. When he appeared, he meant hope for change. Now newspaper El Comercio called him Reverend Jones, like the one in Guyana, because he is also on the road to self-destruction. Some Federations in the Andean region did manage, at least, to voice criticism about the Traffic business in the Conmebol. Traffic is a Brazilian production company, friend of Teixeira's. It made a lot of money out of TV rights. And Traffic gave the Conmebol only peanuts. For this reason Mr Paco Casal is now going to be part of the business. And there wasn't a public bidding. Paco is the most powerful man in Uruguayan football. He has a TV channel, players, contacts in Europe, runs clubs and controls journalists. Before he was also the owner of the National Team. He only allowed journalists who did not criticize him to get on the plane.

The new president of the Uruguayan Association, Sebastián Bauza, also represents an attempt of change. He seemed determined to limit Paco Casal's power. He will not find this easy, though. This year Paco has been seen in pictures with Uruguayan president, Pepe Mujica, an ex guerrilla who was in prison and was tortured during the time of the dictatorship. Paco introduced Florentino Pérez to Mujica. The president of the Real Madrid promised investments. Two days ago, Casal won, once again, the National Team TV rights. Bauza and Mayne Nicholls represented hope for change within the Conmebol. But my sources tell me that when Leoz leaves, he will be replaced by vice-president Eugenio Figueredo, 79 years old, an Under-80 of the old guard. In 2005, Figueredo had to leave the Uruguayan Fraud Association, as many fans called the Uruguayan Football Association. In 2005, journalist Ricardo Gabito published a devastating article in "La República". Legal charges, falsification of records, legal violations, favouring businessmen like Casal. The agents are rich. The clubs always are poor.

Uruguay was semifinalist, the best South American team in South Africa. Do you know how much money a small club has received monthly this year for TV rights? 10,000 dollars. Yes!, that is what Cristiano Ronaldo earns for signing an autograph. Minister Héctor Lescano has publicly asked for

washing the AUF with lots of water, soap and a wire brush. Figueredo had to leave. 85% of the people were against him.

If we go out of South America, Mexico is the other powerful team in Latin América. In México, the FIFA allows a single owner to have several teams. The television network Televisa owns three first division teams: América, Necaxa and San Luis. Azteca TV has other two: Morelia and Jaguares. Sometimes I think that when the old South American football ruling leaders leave, all the clubs will belong to the television like in Mexico or will be private corporations controlled by the economic power like in Chile. And maybe for that reason, politicians, even if they are innovators, will prefer to negotiate with the old leadership. The permanence is not an exclusive issue of the Conmebol. The NBA, which boast being one of the most innovating sport organizations, now in problems because of the lock out, has had the same commissioner for 27 years: David Stern. But, in South American football, it's been decades of corruption accusations, lack of transparency and incompetence. We have fantastic players. The jewells of the crown. But our clubes are always poor. You should have seen Figueredo, Teixeira, Grondona, Blatter, on May1st last, on the occasion of Leoz' last reelection happily strolling around the brand new five-star Bourbon Conmebol Convention Hotel. The hotel cost more than 20 million dollars. It has 168 rooms, a swimming pool, a spa, a gym and a museum. The Conmebol leaders will have their own suites. In 15 years the Conmebol will be the hotel owner. That will happen in the year 2026. When we go in, Leoz, Grondona and Teixeira may still be there opening the door for us. And in the saloon we may found Joao Havelange. Celebrating its 116 years old.