

A

**BRITISH SCHOOL OF COSTA RICA**

**INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE**

**EXTENDED ESSAY**

**HISTORY**

***THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF FOOTBALL***

***IN SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA***

***AS A REFLECTION OF THE ONGOING***

***SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DISPUTES***

**3,986 WORDS**

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England...within ten minutes, the plaza was filled with curious [people].”<sup>2</sup> This reportedly took place in the ‘plaza de San Juan’, in San José.

However, three other sources claim the sport appeared rather earlier, and thank one Captain William Le Lacheur, a native of Guernsey, who by means of his coffee-exporting journeys, “carried out the first exportation of Costa Rican coffee to the London market and indirectly caused the introduction of football into the country”<sup>3</sup>. According to this modern newspaper account, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1876, a group of six youngsters who had recently returned from England, after being taken there by Le Lacheur for education, bringing with them football equipment, “met to play the first game on the north-eastern side of La Sabana”<sup>4</sup>, the main park in San José at the time. Another article in the same newspaper<sup>5</sup>, based on historical testimonies, goes into more detail as to the equipment brought<sup>6</sup>, and the actions of the players on the fateful day in question, but agrees with the previous article on the essentials while an article in a different newspaper agrees that “football has always been the most important sport in Costa Rica, and began to be practised from 1876 at the northern end of La Sabana,”<sup>7</sup> in a place shown in the following photograph:



*The northeastern corner of ‘La Sabana’, where the first game was played.*

<sup>2</sup> “Se le vino la idea...de jugar al fútbol y ofreció cinco uniformes y una bola que traía de Inglaterra...en diez minutos la plaza se llenó de curiosos.” *All translations are my own.*

<sup>3</sup> “80 años del fútbol federado.” *La Nación* 10 Jun 2001: “Realizó la primera exportación de café costarricense al mercado londinense y propició indirectamente la introducción en el país del ‘football’.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: “Se reunieron para jugar la primera mejenga en el costado noreste de La Sabana.”

<sup>5</sup> Calvo, Rodrigo. “Una huella ancestral.” *La Nación* 08 Dec 1996: *Revista Dominical*.

<sup>6</sup> See appendix for a full list of the equipment brought from England.

<sup>7</sup> “Así se inició el fútbol en Costa Rica.” *La Prensa Libre* 08 May 2001. “El fútbol siempre ha sido el deporte más importante de Costa Rica, y...se comenzó a practicar desde el año 1876 a un costado norte de La Sabana.”

<sup>8</sup> *La Nación* 12 Nov 2006: *Proa*. p. 12.

### The Government and Football:

At the end of the nineteenth century, the government was Liberal, secular, and seemingly obsessed with the idea of bringing Costa Rica up to a level of civilisation comparable with leading European countries of the time; and this Europeanising and secularising of urban culture—thanks largely to the expansion of coffee exportation—was nowhere more apparent than in San José.<sup>12</sup> Its modern architecture led to the capital city being labelled a “metropolis in miniature” by a visitor from the United States,<sup>13</sup> and another visitor from the same country, John Lloyd Stephens, was of the impression that “San José is the only city in Central America that has grown or even progressed since the Independence [from Spain].”<sup>14</sup> The government wished to maintain this reputation, and “reject popular culture, whose irreverent and plebeian profile greatly worried ecclesiastics, the establishment, and intellectuals.”<sup>15</sup> However, at the same time as they improved education, taking it away from the Church; and encouraged Costa Rica’s reputation as democratic and civilised, there was still a very clear social divide.

This is emphasised by observing the newspapers of the time.<sup>16</sup> Around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, large numbers of newspapers were set up with a basis on the government’s policies, as they finally began to take notice of the 1824 decree that “[invited] citizens to establish in any of the country’s towns a public periodic paper...”<sup>17</sup>. Due to this, as an observation of a range of contemporary newspapers revealed, they concentrated mostly on editorialising about the government, generally ignoring or discounting the Church and its policies—with the exception of *El Eco Católico* (‘The Catholic Echo’). One such newspaper is *La Prensa Libre* (‘The Free Press’), which according to personal historian Pedro Rafael Gutiérrez was “open to pluralism [and] intransigent in its principles of defending the Constitution”<sup>18</sup>, which can be evaluated as meaning that it shared the government’s policies, or at least its principles. This was

<sup>12</sup> Molina Jiménez, Iván. *Costarricense por dicha*. San José: Editorial de la UCR, 2003. p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Molina Jiménez, Ivan, and Steven Palmer. *Historia de Costa Rica*. San José: Editorial de la UCR, 2004. p. 68

<sup>14</sup> Molina: *Costarricense por dicha*, p. 15: “San José es la única ciudad de Centro América que ha crecido o siquiera progresado desde la Independencia [de España].”

<sup>15</sup> Molina and Palmer: *Historia de Costa Rica*, p. 67: “rechazo de la cultura popular, cuyo perfil irreverente y plebeyo preocupaba en extremo a eclesiásticos, burgueses e intelectuales.”

<sup>16</sup> Acknowledgement is due to the Biblioteca Nacional Miguel Obregón Lizano (National Library of San José) for providing access to their newspaper archives.

<sup>17</sup> Blen, Adolfo. *Historia del periodismo*. San Jose: Editorial Costa Rica, 1983. p. 9: “[invitó] a los ciudadanos a que establezcan en cualquiera pueblo del Estado un papel periódico público...”

<sup>18</sup> Gutiérrez, Pedro Rafael. *Cien años de historia a través de La Prensa Libre*. San Jose: Impresora Costarricense, 1989. p. 10: “abierto al pluralismo [e] intransigente en sus principios de defensa de la Constitución”.

social problems in San José, such as drug abuse (to a certain extent); prostitution, including “under 15s, who frequently escaped from their homes, and some women who prostituted themselves for necessity, in search of glamour, or with the hope of a better income”;<sup>23</sup> and finally gambling. This last, including games of chance and cock-fighting, was very strongly disapproved of by the state, who banned it from all legal sports clubs, making both “all those games in which losses and gains depend on luck or chance and not skill” and cock-fighting finally completely illegal with the Law on Forbidden Games of 1917<sup>24</sup>. What the government was looking for among its citizens was a healthy, fit, and morally strong population, which could be distracted from revolutionary ideas, and so introduced sports education into its schools. The worry the government had about improving its people’s physical conditions “originates...around the civilising ideal of radical positivism, social Darwinism...assuming thus principles such as racial purity [and] honesty.”<sup>25</sup> This is included in the country’s desire to be seen as “a happy Switzerland of the Tropics”<sup>26</sup>. At first it was sport that the government encouraged, with the creation of Sporting Clubs, but slowly football took over as the premier sport, owing to it being a team game that promoted values of sportsmanship, teamwork, and a “feeling of communal identity between Costa Ricans.”<sup>27</sup>

A third reason behind the support of football by the government was the simple concept of popularity. With the sport’s increasing attractiveness, it would seem logical for politicians to associate themselves with it, and this hypothesis seems supported by the evidence, beginning in 1904 when the Municipality of San José donated 200 colones (the Costa Rican currency) to football clubs to organise games.<sup>28</sup> This was followed by encouraging the use of ‘La Sabana’ for playing games, and also politicians such as Cleto González Víquez (President from 1906-10) and Ricardo Jiménez Oreamuno (President from 1910-14) attended football matches and gave prizes (including medals) to the participating teams<sup>29</sup>, in what may have been a merely philanthropic gesture, but

<sup>23</sup> Marín Hernández, Juan José. “Prostitución y pecado en la bella y próspera ciudad de San José (1850-1930).” *El paso del cometa*. Comp. Iván Molina Jiménez and Steven Palmer. San José: Editorial Porvenir, 1994. p. 58: “menores de 15 años, que a menudo escapaban de su casa, y algunas mujeres que se prostituían por necesidad, en busca de *glamour* o con la esperanza de un mejor ingreso”.

<sup>24</sup> Urbina: *Costa Rica y el deporte*, p. 177: “todos los juegos en que la pérdida o la ganancia depende de la suerte o del acaso y no de la habilidad”.

<sup>25</sup> Urbina: “Orígenes de la Política Deportiva...”: “radica...alrededor del ideal civilizador del positivismo radical, el darwinismo social...asumiendo por ende principios tales como la pureza racial, [y] la honestidad.”

<sup>26</sup> Molina: *Costarricense por dicha*, p. 8: “una feliz Suiza de los trópicos”.

<sup>27</sup> Urbina: “Orígenes de la Política Deportiva...”: “sentido de identidad comunal del costarricense.”

<sup>28</sup> *El Noticiero* 19 Nov 1904: p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Urbina: *Costa Rica y el deporte*, pp. 152-162.

sociability of these groups towards diversions considered by the liberal ideology as being more cultured and modern.”<sup>35</sup> Ironically, however, the idea of improving their popularity appears to have backfired, with people gaining interest more in the players than in the politicians behind them, as “the image and popularity that [the players] began to acquire...could hide that of some politicians.”<sup>36</sup> This is still visible in the country today, where football players have an immensely high profile among the public.

### The Catholic Church and football:

Since Costa Rica's colonisation by Spain, the Catholic Church had been the strongest body in Costa Rica, more powerful than, or at times on a par with, the government. However, around 1870 the Liberal Government began to take off, and as of this moment the Church began to lose authority, as the “dominant class...saw itself compelled to define the socio-political spaces within the Costa Rican universe between two powers, which were the State and the Church”<sup>37</sup>—in other words, there was a separation of powers. The Church finally lost large parts of its social influences with the anti-clerical “Liberal Laws” of 1884, when a series of decrees took away a large part of its privileges, from administration of cemeteries and burials, to religious processions in the streets<sup>38</sup>. The clear aim of the government was to take from the Church the ability to influence people or show itself outside of its own churches, or in other words, for the “State to assume ‘absolute’ control of politics”<sup>39</sup>, as it “sought to reduce the influence of the Church in society.”<sup>40</sup> The government wanted control of both the political and the social sides of the country, and by the end

<sup>35</sup> Urbina: “Política deportiva”: “proyecto político-cultural gubernamental por morigerar las costumbres de los sectores populares, con el fin de encauzar la sociabilidad de estos grupos hacia diversiones consideradas por el ideario liberal como más cultas y modernas.”

<sup>36</sup> Urbina: *Costa Rica y el deporte*, p. 171: “la imagen y popularidad que [los jugadores] comenzaron a adquirir...podría opacar la de algunos políticos.”

<sup>37</sup> Calderón Hernández, Manuel. “Proceso y estructura del liberalismo en Costa Rica (1821-1940).” *Las instituciones costarricenses*. Comp. Jaime Murillo. San José: Editorial de la UCR, 1991. p. 305: “la clase dominante...se vio obligada a definir los espacios políticos sociales dentro del universo costarricense entre dos poderes como lo son el Estado y la Iglesia”.

<sup>38</sup> Vargas Arias, Claudio. “La consolidación del Estado costarricense y la Iglesia Católica”. *Las instituciones costarricenses*. p. 477.

<sup>39</sup> Calderón: “Proceso y estructura del liberalismo...”, p. 310: “Estado asumía el control ‘absoluto’ de la política.”

<sup>40</sup> Vargas: “La consolidación del Estado costarricense...”, p. 476: “buscaba reducir la influencia de la Iglesia en la sociedad.”

European policies. It would certainly seem that the Church was more concerned with persuading the lower classes that their souls depended on regularly attending church, rather than improving their lot on the earth, having “a limited mission...with respect to the social question [of improving people’s working and living conditions]”<sup>48</sup>.

In summary, the Church needed to combat its own weakening position by finding a means of keeping the masses attending religious ceremonies—similarly to the government, it wanted to improve its popularity and, casting around, it came across the same sport that the government had found, reacting positively to football for practically the same reasons as the State had done so. The following photograph of a football team from 1920 is just one example illustrating how involved the Church had become in the sport:



*The 'San Joaquín de Flores' football team, 1920*

Note the priest at far left of the top row. Observing the archives of old newspapers reveals many more photographs like this one. Additionally, one important early club from San José, founded in 1904, was the Club Sport Josefino, which included among its honorary members Spanish priest Andrés Vilá y Albó.<sup>50</sup> Examples such as these—there are many more that could be included—serve to show the involvement of the Church in the development of football: by and large, they

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 19: “limitado quehacer...en cuanto a la cuestión social...”.

<sup>49</sup> *La Nación* 12 Nov 2006: *Proa*.

<sup>50</sup> Urbina: *Costa Rica y el deporte*, p. 117.

could, after all, ‘liberate’ those aforementioned ‘passions’ by being free to make as much noise and move around as much as they wanted—something that couldn’t be done in church.

In the end, it seems like football backfired against the Church more than it even did with the State, as football, “being a part of a process of mass consumption, escaped from [the Church’s] control.”<sup>56</sup> Nowadays, the majority of First Division football games are played at 11.00 on Sunday mornings, and many more people attend them than Sunday morning mass. It is, however, clear that the Church’s attitude towards the early development of football in the capital—the way in which it was seen as a means of regaining importance and popularity without antagonising the government, encouraging it until it became an opponent—did indeed reflect, by and large, the socio-political context of the beginning of the twentieth century.

### Conclusion:

The aim of this essay was to examine the way in which the attitudes of the Costa Rican government and the Catholic Church to the early development of football in San José served as a reflection of the socio-political context. Having observed exactly how and why football originally came to prominence in the country, as well as what the context was, it now merely remains to draw a final conclusion.

As has been revealed, both groups had a positive attitude to the development of this sport, seeing in it positive repercussions for whoever supported it, as they would appear to be supporting the people themselves. The State’s benevolent view of the game, with politicians trying to become associated with it, does indeed reflect the way in which the State was attempting to forge a healthy, ‘civilised’ people among the citizenry in general. In the same way, the Church’s attempts to integrate football into the religious lifestyle expected of its followers, are a microcosm of the Church’s concern with losing followers and subsequent compromise on some of the facets of life that they were not previously willing to give way on.

On the other hand, while both Church and State saw the importance of football, they did not seem to realise that its popularity would grow to occasionally overwhelm them both—otherwise,

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<sup>56</sup> Urbina: *Costa Rica y el deporte*, p. 128: “por ser parte de un proceso de consumo masivo escapó del control de [la Iglesia].”



The early development of football in San José, Costa Rica as a reflection of the ongoing social and political disputes

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