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## **No place for a left-winger: the historical relationship between football and the FARC in Colombia**

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Abstract: (150 words)

This article explores the relationship between the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and football in Colombia. It argues that until the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos, the FARC had been excluded from being part of the national ‘us’ when celebrating successes of the national men’s football team. In fact, sporting nationalism projects articulated around World Cup successes in 1962, 1990, 1994 and the Copa América in 2001 projected the national football team as being symbolically representative of a nation against an ‘other’ that was Colombia itself. This other was the ‘Narcolombia’ of the FARC, drug traffickers, violence, terrorism and criminality that had become notorious internationally, and was the image most associated with the country. This rhetorical positioning shifted under Santos, when football became a bridge to allow the FARC back into the nation given the political backdrop of the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC.

Keywords: Colombia, FARC, Football, Sporting Nationalism, Sport for Development and Peace, President Juan Manuel Santos, FIFA World Cups

**No place for a left-winger: the historical relationship between football and the FARC in Colombia**

## **Introduction: 2014 – a new narrative**

In 2014, the Colombian national men's football team returned to the World Cup finals for the first time since 1998. Colombia's previous appearances in 1994 in the USA and 1998 in France had been clouded in controversy and tragedy, the country heavily associated with the drug cartel industry and violence between state forces, guerrilla organisations, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and paramilitaries such as the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). In 1994, the team that several pundits including Pelé had tipped as potential tournament winners were knocked out ignominiously in the first round. Shortly afterwards, Andrés Escobar, who had scored an own goal in the crucial defeat against the hosts, was murdered in Medellín by men with cartel links. Stories emerged of death threats made to the manager, Francisco Maturana, during the competition. This continued a series of problems that revealed the extent to which drug cartels had infiltrated Colombian professional football (see Araújo Vélez 1995, Taylor 1998, Quitián 2007). This stain of cartel influence was still present in 1998. After scoring the crucial goal against Ecuador that assured qualification for the finals, Antony De Ávila dedicated it to the jailed leaders of the Cali cartel, Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, who had financed the América de Cali club where De Ávila had played much of his career. In addition, there were still regular reports of massacres and kidnappings perpetrated by the various actors in the conflict, maintaining Colombia's negative international image.

Sixteen years later, in 2014, Colombia arrived at the finals in Brazil accompanied by a new national narrative, that of a potential end to the conflict with the FARC and the

best prospects of peace in some years. The government of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) had been conducting negotiations with the FARC in Havana since 2012, and there was a renewed sense of national optimism, confirmed when Santos was re-elected immediately after Colombia's opening 3-0 win against Greece in the World Cup in a campaign centred on the peace negotiations. Santos made the national team a key element of his national unity project (Watson 2018), 'footballizing' political discourse with a narrative of every Colombian being a fan of the national team, with an accompanying message of 'One Country, One Group of Supporters'. The shirt of the national team displayed the hashtag #UnidosPorUnPaís (#UnitedForACountry). This narrative of one team, one country and one group of supporters proposed by Santos included FARC for the first time within this national collective (Quitián and Watson 2017). This was a radical rhetorical departure from previous occasions when the national team had served for sporting nationalism, when the nation as represented by the national team symbolized Colombia against an 'other' that was Colombia itself (Watson 2018). This 'other' Colombia, which we may call 'Narcolombia', was the negative identity of the country as it was perceived internationally, the Colombia of violence, drugs, terror and criminality. FARC were located within this Narcolombia 'other', and thus excluded from the national 'us'.

This article explores the historical relationship between the FARC and football from two years before FARC's creation in 1964 until the historic peace agreement in 2016 and the first tentative steps in the post-conflict process. It examines how notable football successes during the Colombian conflict between the state and the FARC impacted on how the nation imagined itself, how football was a counterpoint to the violence of war and criminality, and how presidential narratives located the FARC as

outside the nation symbolized by the national football team. However during the Santos presidency, this position changed when Santos' rhetoric allowed the FARC to be included with the imagined national community, and used football as a bridge for this rapprochement. The national team, the government and the FARC were all playing for peace. Football was also deployed as a time and space for re-encounter, reconciliation and re-identification as an important part of the post conflict process.

### **Football's importance in Colombia for nation building**

The Santos 'one country' narrative countered an enduring view that Colombia 'has not yet been fully constructed as a country' (Pécaut cited in Palacios 2006, p. 261), a state whose sovereignty does not cover the full extent of the national territory and whose citizens fail to recognize each other as members of their imagined national community (Anderson 1991). Colombia has variously been described as 'really two countries, or rather one embedded within another' (Kilcullen 2016, p. 67), a 'country of nations' (LaRosa and Mejía 2012, p.21) and a 'mosaic of isolated regions' (Palacios 2006, p. 226). It has suffered from a weak state, which has led to state absence in many peripheral regions, and thus a situation of 'parcellized sovereignty' (Hylton 2006, p. 12) and power vacuums contested by a variety of state and anti-state actors. This situation has led to a multiplicity of 'violences' in the national memory beginning from *La Violencia* that followed the assassination of liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on 9 April 1948, and continuing with the conflict involving guerrilla movements, paramilitaries, drug cartels, and other criminal groups. This seemingly perpetual and heterogeneous violence has led to violence accruing 'the features of a myth as if it were part of the country's natural landscape or an unavoidable natural

disaster' (Dennis 2006, p. 91), and a common point of understanding and experience for Colombians many of whom were caught in the middle of the conflict between the state, the FARC and various paramilitary organisations. The war against the FARC began in 1964, and was the continent's longest enduring internal conflict until the peace agreement in 2016. A succession of presidents have sought ways to try to convince Colombians and the world that Colombia is not just a nation characterized by violence and criminality, and find new unifying myths and positivity. The FARC, of course, were located outside the nation as guerrilla insurgents fighting against the state. US Ambassador to Colombia Lewis Tambs coined the phrase 'narco-guerrilla' in 1984 to describe the FARC (Kirk 2003, p. 227), and official state rhetoric of the FARC until Santos continued this othering of the FARC as terrorists, criminals, and subversives.

Football has been one option deployed by presidents in order to try to unify the nation. It is one of very few activities and symbols capable of transcending enduring national divisions, whether regional, political, racial or economic. Dávila and Londoño describe football as becoming the sole unifying factor in constructive terms in the nation given the absence of other unifying symbols (2003, p. 134). Football is described as a place of national encounter in a fundamentally unequal society with few opportunities for Colombians to meet each other (Jiménez Duzán, quoted in Larraín, 2015, p. 194), and as a palliative, 'escape valve' (Jiménez Garcés 2014, p. 86) or 'alternative reality' (Dávila and Londoño 2003, p.126) from daily pressures, traumas and violences that have become banal (Pécaut 1999). Its importance was measured in the 'Poder del Fútbol' (Power of Football) survey carried out by the Colombian Interior Ministry as part of the Ten-Year Plan for Security, Comfort and

Coexistence in Colombian Football 2014-2024. The survey showed, for instance, that football was either important or very important for 94% of Colombians (Ministerio del Interior 2014a, p. 22) and that the national team was important as a symbol of integration for 96% of Colombians. It was also seen as having significant benefits for education, health, social capital and for distancing young people from violence and vice. This report justified football's deployment by President Santos in his national unity project, not just through rhetoric, but also through Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) projects introduced during his presidency, most importantly following the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC.

### **Colombia vs communism: the World Cup 1962**

Among the four conditions seen as necessary by Archetti (1999) and Alabarces (2002, p. 42-43) for sporting nationalism are success and a sense of footballing style that can be articulated as representative of the nation, and which helps identify the national 'us' from an 'other'. The first time that football success arrived for Colombia through the national men's team occurred in 1962, at the World Cup in Chile. Although Colombia lost against Uruguay and Yugoslavia, they drew 4-4 against the mighty Soviet Union, coming back from 1-3 down.<sup>1</sup> The draw was celebrated as a victory by newspapers, Colombians and politicians (Colombia were very much the 'minnows' of this tournament, and had feared being humiliated) but it was also seen as a political victory. Given the context of the Cold War and fears of communism spreading in Colombia as much as the rest of Latin America, Colombian leaders articulated the

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<sup>1</sup> In this game, Marcos Coll also scored a goal directly from a corner against goalkeeper Lev Yashin, seen as being one of the best goalkeepers in history. This goal is regularly repeated on Colombian television, helping it and the match become a national myth.



‘winning draw’ as a victory over communism. Although the FARC did not form until 1964, a number of rural Marxist enclaves, known as *Repúblicas*, had sprung up following *La Violencia*. To counter this threat and fears of communism spreading, the USA developed a counter insurgency strategy called Plan Lazo, announced in July 1962 following recommendations by General William Yarborough (Kirk 2003, p. 49-51). Fears of communism were therefore a concern of the Colombian presidency.

Following the 4-4 draw, president-elect Guillermo Valencia said ‘it is a triumph of democracy over totalitarianism [...] I hope that next time freedom will triumph over slavery’ (Pino Calad, *Gol Caracol*, 18 March 2013).<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, a cartoon by ‘Henry’ in *El Tiempo* showed outgoing president Alberto Lleras Camargo saying to Nikita Khrushchev ‘I’m sorry Nikita, but not even in football can Russia cope with Colombia’<sup>3</sup>. The sports magazine, *Afición*, described the draw as ‘the most glorious page of Colombian sport in history’ (*Afición*, Num. 93 6-12 June 1962, p. 16), having ‘vital resonance for the future of Colombia’ (p. 1) and the players as ‘the true champions of the international politics of Colombia because they have been true ambassadors (p. 1). Tellingly, whilst describing the ‘14 million Colombians celebrating’ the result across the country, *Afición* highlighted that ‘some communist sectors displayed unusual anger about the national success.’ They quoted a ‘well-known and successful artist’ as saying, ‘Colombia may well have football, but there are no schools, there are no social services, illiteracy and misery reign’ (p. 25).

Communists were portrayed as not patriotically supporting the country. As we can see, the result against the USSR became a political victory for Colombia against not

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Spanish in this article are my own.

<sup>3</sup> This caricature can be seen as one accompanying the online article ‘La caricatura social: moda y transgresiones’, by Beatriz González Aranda, <http://www.banrepcultural.org/la-caricatura-en-colombia/texto19.html>

only international communism, but also communists within their own country. This was the beginning of the narrative placing so-called subversives outside the nation articulated through sport. Although the war with the FARC itself had not yet begun – FARC would be formed after Colombian forces overran the communist *República* of Marquetalia in May 1964 – the war against communism had already begun, with the national football team representing a version of the nation opposed to supporters of this political ideology.

### **Colombia vs Narcolombia: the World Cups in 1990 and 1994**

By the time Colombia next qualified for the World Cup in 1990, the conflict with the FARC had been ongoing since 1964, mostly located in rural, peripheral areas. However, the so-called ‘pesca milagrosa (miracle fishing) kidnapping tactics legitimised by the FARC commanders meant anyone could be taken hostage for lucrative ransoms. Violence related to drug cartels had become an increasingly urban phenomenon, featuring drive-by shootings of police, judges and rival gang members, as well as bomb attacks perpetrated by Pablo Escobar, designed to terrorize the population and force the government to back down from their policy to extradite drug traffickers to the US. Colombia had become synonymous with the drug trade and violence. When a new generation of talented footballers emerged, led by the emblematic Carlos Valderrama and René Higuita, the team was used to portray a positive face of the country in opposition to the terrorism, criminality and violence. Not only did this golden generation bring success with qualification to the World Cups in 1990 and 1994, it was achieved with an attractive and exuberant style of football articulated by the manager Francisco Maturana and the press as being

‘authentically’ Colombian (Dávila 1994). It was made up of constituent parts representing the regional stereotypes of the nation. Maturana said “[Leonel] Álvarez and Gabriel Gómez are midfielders from Antioquia, a region of hardworking, disciplined people – and they’re the ones who have to keep things under control. The fantasy I leave to Asprilla, Rincón, Valderrama – people from Cali and the coast. Those people are always partying; they’re harder to discipline. They take care of the creative part’ (Price, *Sports Illustrated*, 23 May 1994). Football was associated with a tropicalized image of the country through accompanying music on television broadcasts as well as advertising<sup>4</sup>, which created a more positive identity of happiness, celebration, and flair linked to the Colombian Caribbean. Blanco Arboleda argues that Colombia became a country that emphasised happiness, ‘la rumba’ and ‘la fiesta’ in its collective imaginary and this tropical, festive image became a fundamental piece in how national identity was constructed (2009, p. 105). The style played by the national team, and this metonymic version of the nation, was opposed to a Narcolombia ‘other’. The ‘other’ is the worst of Colombia, the Colombia of drug cartel-related violence and resultant fear, suffering and misery. There is an attempted construction of a ‘real’ Colombia that is obscured by perpetual violence and the dominance of negative reporting in the media. The Colombian nation that the national football team symbolizes is that happy and festive Colombia that is trying to emerge. The extent to which the football team was placed in opposition to Narcolombia is shown by reactions to Colombia’s famous 5-0 victory over Argentina on 5 September 1993, to qualify for the 1994 World Cup, arguably one of the greatest national

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<sup>4</sup> Goals scored by Colombia on the Caracol television and radio broadcasts were followed by a salsa style jingle associated with the Caribbean region. Another jingle went ‘Sí, sí, Colombia, sí, sí Caribe (yes, yes, Colombia, yes, yes, Caribbean). Sponsors’ adverts involving the national team, particularly those of the Bavaria beer company, usually featured a similar type of music, replete with images of celebrating, dancing Colombians in the national shirt, drinking beer, and enjoying the football.

triumphs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>. *Semana* magazine put a photo of the team celebrating on their front cover with the headline ‘Thank you guys! In the middle of the darkness of violence, the national team provides a ray of light with qualification to the World Cup’ (*Semana*, Num. 592, 1993). In the special supplement, they wrote:

‘For a population that has been sadly accustomed to bad news – kidnaps, car bombs, political assassinations, corruption – a triumph such as that of Sunday is much more than a sporting success. It is the success of a whole country that refuses to succumb in the face of adversity and, through achievements, like the one gained in River [Plate]’s stadium, recovers its confidence’ (*Semana*, Num.592, 1993, special supplement p. ii).

The win placed the nation as football fans *against* the perpetrators of the violence and criminality, including the FARC. The message was the same from the President César Gaviria who saw the football team as showing what a new country could consist of, as opening a door to the future, giving the country the chance to fly their flag high again and providing national happiness. He added that the country could look proudly ahead, with the pessimists, the violent and the eternal foretellers of disasters behind them (*El Tiempo*, 7 September 1993). Here again we see a sense of us vs them, the

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriel García Márquez described the win as being one of only three important things that had happened in Colombia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Campomar, 2014: 422). Additionally, a film by director Sergio Cabrera *Golpe de Estadio* (1998) did show how this football match could transcend the Colombian conflict. It showed how guerrilla forces and state forces arranged a truce to watch the game together on the only television working in the local town near where they were fighting. Although this was a fictional account, in a radio interview, former FARC combatant Jairo Camargo claimed that such an event actually happened in the department of Cauca, a story which he said *alias* Walter Mendoza, sports spokesman for the FARC following their conversion into a political party, could corroborate. The interview can be heard here: <http://unradio.unal.edu.co/nc/detalle/cat/de-porte-academico/article/deporte-paz-y-reconciliacion-iv.html>.

country vs the violence. Those fighting against state forces are excluded from the nation in this rhetorical imagining.

### **Copa América 2001**

The Copa América in 2001, the first time Colombia had hosted the competition, provided another occasion where national narratives were articulated through football, and where the FARC were placed outside the national in-group. Sporting mega-events are a way that nations can improve their prestige in the international eye (Strenk 1979, Black 2007, Finlay & Xin 2010, Grix 2012) and Roche notes that ‘the staging of international mega-events was and remains important in the “story of a country”, a people, a nation’ (2000, p. 6). It was an important occasion to demonstrate that Colombia was capable of hosting the continent’s major football tournament, particularly after previous failures.<sup>6</sup> A series of bomb attacks in the months preceding the 2001 Copa América, made the tournament a question of state for President Andrés Pastrana.<sup>7</sup> Not only had the peace talks with the FARC that he had staked his political capital on floundered, but also there were serious questions about whether his government could guarantee security for the tournament. Pastrana made regular speeches assuring Colombians that the tournament would not be moved, calling the tournament the ‘Copa de la Paz’ (the Cup of Peace), and saying that any move to take the cup away from Colombia would be ‘the worst of all attacks’ (*El CincoCero*, 24

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<sup>6</sup> FIFA named Colombia as hosts of the 1986 World Cup in 1974 after strong lobbying from President Misael Pastrana. However, FIFA put pressure on Colombia due to security concerns around guerrilla action, as well as slow progress in building the necessary infrastructure for the tournament. Consequently, President Belisario Betancur on 25 October 1982 announced that Colombia would give up the honour of hosting the 1986 World Cup, the only nation to have done so.

<sup>7</sup> These attacks were a car bomb outside the Hotel Torre de Cali on 5 May, another near the El Tesoro Shopping Centre in Medellín on 18 May, two car bombs in Barrancabermeja on 24 May, and another bomb near to the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá on 25 May. Three days after the Medellín attack, the police deactivated a car loaded with explosives in Itagüí, and on 21 May, a land-air missile was discovered in a van in Bogotá. Several of these cities were due to host matches in the tournament.

September 2015). When the FARC kidnapped the Vice President of the Colombian Football Federation, Hernán Mejía on 25 June, shortly before the tournament was due to start, Pastrana and Colombia were again undermined. Despite his eventual release, CONMEBOL<sup>8</sup> decided to cancel the tournament on 1 July before it was reinstated on 6 July after pressure from Pastrana and, more significantly, from the tournament sponsors. Argentina and Canada withdrew from the tournament, Argentina citing security concerns, claiming to have received death threats. The FARC pledged not to conduct attacks during the tournament following the kidnapping of Mejía. Hernán Ramírez, a member of the FARC's International Politics Commission declared that the FARC were not against the Cup taking place, that they were friends of sport and football especially, and were not against the teams, nor against the people being able to enjoy football despite the hunger and misery in the country. He even claimed that the FARC were supporters of the national team, and would be urging them on during each match (*Emol*, 21 July 2001). It seemed that the 'Cup of Peace' was only going ahead given the pressure of sponsors and the say-so of the FARC. This pointed to the weakness of the Colombian state against the FARC, undermining Pastrana's government even further after Pastrana had conceded an area of Colombia the size of Switzerland to the FARC prior to failed peace talks (Watson 2018, p. 600). Football did provide another occasion to promote the narrative of a country wanting peace against a terrorist enemy, further uniting the nation as football supporters against those who had jeopardised the hosting of the tournament through bomb attacks and kidnappings.

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<sup>8</sup> CONMEBOL stands for the Confederación Suramericana de Fútbol, and is the South American Football Federation.

Colombia ending up winning the Cup, and the tournament went unscathed by violence or attacks. The narrative of Pastrana was one of Colombia overcoming violence, with the nation and team once again rhetorically placed in opposition to the FARC 'other'. In one match, the national team wore a white shirt against kidnapping (still a common FARC tactic) before the game started. The discourse excluded the FARC from being supporters of the national team, the peace of football being a peace embraced despite the FARC. The kidnapping of Mejía, and the threat of Colombia losing the tournament was in some ways a public relations own goal by the FARC. With football being a source of national pride, the FARC's actions led to an increased sense of resentment against them, furthering 'othering' them from acceptance within the national 'us' as represented by the national team.

### **Santos and a change of rhetoric**

Football did not provide the opportunity for Pastrana's successor, Álvaro Uribe, to talk about nation via the national team, as Colombia failed to qualify for the World Cups in 2002, 2006 or 2010. After all, a national team failing on a continental or global stage diluted the effectiveness of the team as a potent national symbol engendering pride and positivity. Uribe took a hard line against the FARC, delegitimizing them as political actors and branding them as 'narcoterrorists', further banishing them from being part of a Colombian collective. His 'discourse produced a clear line of demarcation between us – the nation – and them – the nation's enemies' (Lobo 2013, p 355). This rhetoric changed under Santos who made the peace process with the FARC the cornerstone of his government. He announced in August 2012 that his government had held exploratory negotiations with the FARC and would be continuing with the process in Havana. By this time, Santos had begun his

‘footballization’ of political dialogue, with a rhetorical strategy that exploited all sporting, and particularly football, success for imbuing the nation with a sense of positivity, accompanied by references to national unity. The entire country was urged to see in their football ambassadors an example of what could be achieved with unity, teamwork, discipline and effort. The hosting of the U20 World Cup in Colombia in 2011 provided the first opportunity for this discourse to occur, and another mega event where Santos could reshape the nation brand away from its former violent and criminal identity. In the run up to the start of the tournament, the FARC were invited to join the nation enjoying the football spectacle in adverts produced by the Ministry of Defence suggesting the guerrillas should demobilize. The advert showed footballs being signed by the national team, which were then dropped over the jungle, with the message ‘Guerrillas, they [the national team] like every Colombian are united in this mission, they invite you to enjoy the passion of football in your home, your family in Colombia are waiting for you to make up one sole team. Because we are all Colombia. Demobilize, come back and play’ (*Ministerio de Defensa*, 11 July 2011). There is a clear rhetorical shift here, a sense of potential inclusion within the football-supporting nation, the metaphor of ‘one sole team’ accepting guerrillas within the nation. The balls also symbolise a reclaiming of ‘lost’ national territory.

The tone was very similar in a second advertising campaign before the World Cup in 2014, once again promoted by the Ministry of Defence. This time the video showed Colombians from all over the nation patting an empty seat next to them, inviting the guerrillas to demobilize and come and sit next to them in order to enjoy the World Cup matches with them. The message is ‘Guerrilla, don’t miss the World Cup,



demobilize, I'm saving a seat for you' (*Ministerio de Defensa*, 10 June 2014)<sup>9</sup>. The guerrillas are recognized as football supporters, as Colombians keen to support the players, as a welcome addition to the celebration of the national team's success. The symbolic inclusion and legitimization of FARC combatants as fellow Colombian football fans offered football as a space of encounter and recognition, where former differences could be forgotten and reconciliation and a shared identity could be found. The fact that both these football adverts were released by the Ministry of Defence also shows how football was deployed as a military tactic designed to undermine guerrilla resolve, reminding combatants of the pleasure of enjoying football and the World Cup in particular, and tempt them to demobilise and 'rejoin' the nation.

The language in this video was not an isolated example of the rhetorical inclusion of the FARC within the nation as football fans. In a ceremony in the Casa Nariño presidential palace when Santos gave the flag to the team captain Mario Yepes before the 2014 World Cup, Santos emphasized what the national team represented:

This team, led by the Professor Pékerman<sup>10</sup> is for the next 50 days the maximum symbol of national unity [...] This national unity that you represent is very important in these moments for the country. When we are watching you play in matches, all the differences in the country are going to disappear, because behind you are going to be 47 million Colombians. No matter what political party they belong to, no matter what religion they belong to, no matter what the differences. Even those people with whom we are talking to end the

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<sup>9</sup> The video included some famous Colombians, including former footballer Leider Preciado, who scored a goal in the 1998 World Cup for Colombia against Tunisia.

<sup>10</sup> José Nestor Pékerman was the Argentinian coach of the national team. Colombians have the tendency to call their coaches and managers 'profesor', as an honorific term, rather than due to any qualification.

armed conflict, they will also be supporting you. All of Colombia is going to be supporting you (*Presidencia de la República*, 23 May 2014).

Santos stressed that the whole country, including the FARC, would be united as Colombians behind the national team. Football is a meeting ground, where the nation should be able to imagine itself as a unified collective; those formerly excluded as terrorists, criminals and enemies of the state are part of this in-group (Watson 2018, p. 601-2). A year later, before the Copa América 2015, the national team returned to the Casa Nariño, and Santos repeated the message. He said:

Every time that the National team ran out, every time they scored a goal, the country shook with excitement. And that is very important for any country, for any society. It is a reason for unity, a reason for pride. This is always needed. I believe that there have been no greater reasons for unity than in the recent past. Everyone in the country, everyone, from the guerrillas to their greatest enemies, unites around you, around the national team (*Presidencia de la República*, 29 May 2015).

Again, in a ceremony replete with national symbols, the former enemies of the state are included within the national 'us' of supporters of the national team. These are the only two specific mentions of the FARC as welcomed supporters of the national team, but Santos's message of national unity through sport was a constant throughout his presidency. In both speeches and tweets from his own personal account (@JuanManSantos) and the Presidency account (@infopresidencia), there was a constant message of all Colombians being unified by football success, all Colombians

supporting and being proud of the national team, and the national team being an example of one sole country. In 99 sport-specific speeches given during his presidency, there are 130 references to ‘all Colombians’, 150 mentions of sport’s unifying power, and most of these are in close proximity to references to the national team, who were mentioned on 108 occasions<sup>11</sup>. There are 21 instances of where the national team and sport’s unifying power appear in the same sentence in speeches.

Two such examples, follow:

And every time the national team plays, the whole country is united, we leave every difference behind us, and that is very important (*Presidencia de la República*, 19 October 2017).

Our national team is something that for me represents the union of the country. Every time the national team plays, the country unites. And that is something that we Colombians need (*Presidencia de la República*, 3 April 2018).

The statistics are similar on Twitter. From a total of 1048 tweets taken from the two accounts during Santos’ presidency, there were 514 references to the national team, 174 references to all Colombians, and 136 references to unity. It is evident from these statistics that the footballization of political discourse towards unifying the country, and including those previously excluded from previous deployments of sporting nationalism, was a deliberate tactic. Juan Carlos Torres, the director of communications for the Santos government until September 2017, admitted as much:

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<sup>11</sup> All data comes from analysis conducted as part of my ongoing PhD thesis. This particular chapter quantitatively and qualitatively analysed speech and Twitter content. Words and themes were collected at ‘nodes’ to see how often these words and themes were mentioned. The study also allowed me to see how often these words and themes appeared in close proximity to each other.

In speeches, we have tried, due to instructions from the president [...] to use football as an element to unify the country. We have done this consciously and we have used it in many speeches, particularly in the period in preparation for and after the football World Cup. [...] It has been an important element in government communication in order to encourage values that the government wants to see in Colombians, such as unity, such as solidarity, such as valuing talent and personal endeavour, and teamwork (personal interview, 14 December 2017, 14 December 2017).

With the ongoing peace talks between the government and the FARC in Havana, supporting the national football team thus provided a propitious ground for preparation of how former guerrillas could be included within the nation when the peace agreement was eventually signed.

### **FARC and the 2014 World Cup**

The sport-related rhetoric used by Santos that included the FARC within the nation also meant that the FARC could speak in terms of football and nation, having been legitimized by Santos. They too were aware of this potential terrain for inclusion and recognition a chance to begin a process of re-identification that could facilitate their entry into legitimate political debate and the social life of the country. The peace talks in Havana allowed their representatives to speak to the press directly, rather than through communiqués released from the jungle. They, like Santos, seized on moments

of national football success in order to footballize their own messages to the nation, as can be seen from a statement by Ricardo Téllez, released after the 3-3 draw with Chile on 11 October 2013 that confirmed Colombia's place in the 2014 World Cup. He said that 'we are very happy with the draw achieved in Barranquilla against the brave Araucanians from Chile, a country who never yielded. We are sharing the revelry, the happiness that there is in Colombia, with the sport that unites peoples and nations'. He went on to thank the manager and team for 'this great happiness, which is immense for our population', and declared that 'we in the FARC, we will always watch you and cheer you on' (*As*, 12 October 2013). Here we can see various references to FARC including themselves within the national celebrations, using that deixis of little words, particularly first person plural pronouns, which Billig refers to as being subtle reminders of inclusion with the nation (1995, p. 94).

Before the 2014 World Cup, the FARC took the opportunity to show their support for the national team, sending an open letter to the team. In this letter they reiterated their total support and admiration for the team, recognised the team as representative of a united Colombia, and stressed their commitment to be 'playing for peace', just like the footballers. Some key excerpts of this letter follow:

We in the FARC wish to express our recognition, our voice of encouragement, and desire for success and glory for the team on Brazilian soil. In the name of the men and women of the FARC, today in dialogue to obtain peace and social justice for all, we reiterate our admiration for every step taken on the road to qualify for the World Cup, and we express our most fervent desire that new triumphs will make the heart of every compatriot happy. We will be with the

National team in the good time and the bad, accompanying you until the end, and hoping that the squad that represents the Colombia that we wish to see united, expressing the same nation that we all are, that we are always playing for peace. [...] unfortunately, politicians always tie football and nation together and dictators speculate with these identity linkages. However, we have the dream that football, as part of the path towards respect and tolerance, can grant us moments of joy and entertainment, which will help to calm consciences and may contribute to help us find the best way towards reconciliation. [...] Finally as James [Rodríguez] says, there are dreams, and we have to travel with humility and enthusiasm. We are going to try to get as far as possible, and let the best dreams, the greatest desires, and the best intentions be for peace in Colombia. With people like you, there is no doubt that we can get there (*El País*, 11 June 2014).

The occasion of the mega event and FARC's inclusion via Santos and the peace talks, gave FARC the opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to national unity and peace, to confirm their identity as national football fans, and therefore Colombians like any other supporter, as well as to footballize their political message. During the tournament itself, much like Santos, the FARC regularly tweeted their congratulations as Colombia progressed to the quarterfinals before being eliminated. In this way, FARC included themselves within the tide of optimism and positivity that Colombia's best ever performance in the World Cup occasioned. Again, like Santos, who wore the yellow national football shirt on multiple occasions, FARC negotiators also wore the shirt when the national team were playing as an overt display of 'Colombianness'. The football shirt, one of the most potent and recognizable symbols of the nation,

almost an obligatory uniform for the national ritual and celebration that a national team match has become in Colombia, replaced the guerrilla camouflage and FARC emblem so diametrically opposed to national symbols since the FARC's inception. The politicization of the football shirt did make it another symbol of political contestation and polarization. Santos even put the message 'I am playing for peace' on the back of his shirt before a match against Peru in October 2015. Memes soon appeared adapting the message to 'I am playing for the FARC', promoted by those opposed to the peace process and to FARC being allowed to wear a national symbol that for so long had been held up against the Narcolombia 'other' in which the FARC were situated. In the Copa América 2016 held in the USA, the national team wore a controversial all white shirt. Although it was announced that the shirt was white to commemorate the shirt worn in Colombia's first participation in the tournament, many saw the choice of colour as being another attempt to gain support for the peace plebiscite to be held in October later that year. Santos was accused of further politicizing the shirt for his own ends, by changing from the traditional yellow kit that was linked with Colombia's evolution from footballing also-rans to a power to be reckoned with. When asked if Santos had influenced the choice of colour, Juan Carlos Torres believed that he had not, although he was very happy about the choice when he found out! Consequently, both supporters and opponents of the peace process regularly wore the national shirt in the run up to the plebiscite, both groups attempting to link their message with the most unifying and recognized national symbol.

**Football for peace: football in the FARC demobilisation and reintegration camps**

So far, this article has focused on rhetorical inclusion and exclusion of FARC through football-based sporting nationalism. Unlike previous occasions when political discourse went unaccompanied by concrete measures to deploy football as a unifying activity, under Santos there has been a greater commitment to SDP projects. These were mostly coordinated by the Community and Social Sport sector of Coldeportes, the Colombian administrative department for Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity. This commitment responded to awareness of SDP campaigns and research, and the realization that football could be instrumental in targeting some of the social development issues that have plagued Colombia for decades. The subdirector of Coldeportes, Dr Afranio Restrepo, confirmed this:

Sport as a tool for coexistence and peace is significant for the current administration. If one analyses the National Development Plan, the instrument that the government uses for the planning of their actions over their four-year term, one can appreciate the significant relevance that sport has had over the two terms in office of the current government (personal communication, 31 January 2018).

The Coldeportes Strategic Action Plan for 2014-2018 had the aim of ‘by 2019 position Colombia as a world leader in the development of environments of coexistence and peace through the formulation and implementation of policies of sport, recreation and physical activity with particular focus on inclusion’ (*Coldeportes*, Plan Estratégico 2014-2018). There is no doubt that sport was envisaged as having a role in the ongoing peace process. There was awareness of the need to provide the conditions for coexistence and reintegration projects, not just with



the FARC, but also across the national territory in other zones where violence and insecurity continue to hinder national integration. Football, given its proven capacity to integrate, shown by the Power of Football survey (Ministerio del Interior 2014a), would be a key element of this process. Given the citing of the ‘Harnessing the Power of Sport for Development and Peace: Recommendations to Governments’ document, published by the UN’s Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group in 2008 (two years before Santos took office) in various government department strategic plans and public policies like the Ten Year Plan for Security, Comfort and Coexistence in Football 2014-2014, we can presume that the recommendations of this document were taken into account when designing how football would be used in the post conflict situation.

There were some high profile attempts to use football matches as a symbolic meeting place to mark the peace process. Football legend Carlos Valderrama proposed matches for peace between a FARC team and a team he would put together, but although the FARC were keen, the government were less so, and the matches did not occur. After the peace agreement had been signed and the FARC had demobilized to the 26 so-called Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ETCRs)<sup>12</sup>, several famous ex-footballers from Nacional and América de Cali played matches with the FARC in the La Elvira ETCR (*El Espectador*, 20 February 2017). These matches were heavily mediatized and contributed to legitimize the former FARC combatants who played on the same pitch as the national heroes.

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<sup>12</sup> In Spanish, these demobilisation and reincorporation camps across the country were first known as ‘Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización’ (Rural Transition Zones for Normalization), but then were renamed as ‘Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación’ on 1 August 2017.

Of more lasting impact, however, were the SDP programmes carried out by Coldeportes in the 26 ETCRs. Coldeportes created a project to send sport and recreation coaches to each ETCR, to provide sport and recreation opportunities to the demobilized fighters, as well as to the local communities near the camps. Given this historic moment that arguably gave Colombia the best chance in decades to break down barriers that separate Colombians around the idea of the FARC as 'other' to the nation, the characteristics of sport offered the best alternative to facilitate reintegration. Sport would have to work alongside other institutions and projects as part of the wider process. There are, nonetheless, simple benefits that sport itself provides. These include reducing the immediate possibilities of violence, providing a means of entertainment and activity during a time-consuming process and, perhaps most crucially, changing the identities around former combatants, so that they no longer are seen as guerrillas, terrorists or enemies, but as equals in the community (Calderón and Martínez 2015, p. 9-10).

A number of those involved with the project confirmed football as being the most popular, and therefore the most successful, sport to use to help with the reintegration and coexistence projects, as well as to keep the demobilized guerrillas occupied. It was not just playing football that provided opportunities. National team matches, both qualifying for the 2018 World Cup and the tournament itself, allowed former guerrillas, local communities and members of public forces to come together. Juvenal Tangarife coach in the Llanogrande camp, Antioquia, recounted that a match day involved 'preparing the area to watch the match together, shouting for a while, sharing and urging the team on so the national team would qualify. And it was another reason for integration in addition to those when we were actually on the pitch

playing together' (personal interview 23 October 2017). Paulo Martínez from the Monterredondo camp, Cauca, confirmed the same processes there, and described how the national team and shirt functioned as a shared symbol of mutual recognition. When asked whether the experience of watching the game was a shared one between the FARC members and the community, he answered 'Yes of course. With them of course we shared all of that. Furthermore, they were wearing the national shirt and supporting the Colombian national team. And it mattered for them as well, they really cared about it' (personal interview, 23 October 2017). Identities of being guerrillas (perhaps temporarily) took second place to being fans of the national men's football team, thereby aiding the process of finding ground for mutual confidence between former enemies. Bromberger suggests that football matches are a type of social ritual and ceremony and cites Durkheim's argument that ceremonies function to 'secure the continuity of collective consciousness', 'to assert for oneself and for others that we belong to the same group' (1995, p. 306). When fans wear the same kit they are identifying themselves as part of a collective that is representative of a community, the national shirt being one of the strongest convening symbols for a Colombian collective identity. By wearing the national shirt, former FARC soldiers assert their membership in the nation, their own 'Colombianness', a trait that was denied to them during the conflict when they were cast as 'other' in national representations.

In Llanogrande, an event called Golpe de Estadio 2 was held to watch a World Cup match from the 2018 tournament. The name commemorates the Sergio Cabrera film about FARC and army forces watching a national team match together. Yolanda Pérez, a victim of the conflict, said 'the important thing about this Golpe de Estadio, is it allowed us to show that the film was not just a film, but a reality, and be able to

talk from this position about what it is like to live with a guerrilla on one side, and a exparamilitary on the other, and see how they are managing this reincorporation process' (*Reincorporación FARC*, 21 June 2018). From this particular video, the amount of national team shirts catches the eye, being worn by the FARC, local inhabitants and victims. The shirt becomes a common site of recognition, a clear indication of a national togetherness. This event did not just function at the local level; Golpe de Estadio 2 gained substantial media attention.<sup>13</sup> The convergence of the World Cup, the peace process in evident operation, football bringing together former combatants, victims and public forces was a strong story that helped to embed new significations and identities of those involved.

The ETCRs were the object of huge national and international attention following the peace agreement. For decades, the FARC had been a relatively invisible and demonized enemy of the state. As the FARC transitioned into the camps and media access was granted, new representations of the former combatants were created. The media told stories giving personal accounts of these FARC men and women, and a new side began to emerge of who the FARC members were, what they cared about, what they thought and what their aspirations were. It was noticeable how often photos and videos showed football being played, and stories of FARC integrating with the community around them were based around football matches or tournaments played between the FARC, the community and local public forces. It was also obvious that both men and women played football, often together. Camilo Montaña, the coach in La Elvira camp said that one of the key values on show in the sport activities was this gender equity: 'one of the values that we most focus on now is that of gender, because

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<sup>13</sup> see for instance Arias Hidalgo, Walter, 'La cancha donde se dio el segundo golpe de estadio', *El Espectador*, 22 June 2018, and Zuleta Valencia, Juan Felipe, 'Abrazos de reconciliación, al calor del partido, en montañas de Dabeiba', *El Colombiano*, 21 June 2018

when the tournament was held previously, women's football was forgotten about a bit, and now we give the same importance to men's football and women's football' (*Fundación Tierra Posible*, 19 January 2018). Football was shown by the media and the FARC since it was the easiest way to resignify the FARC and provide them with a new 'normal' Colombian identity. By playing football, former guerrillas were shown to be like any other Colombian, and the fact that women were shown playing transmitted a positive message of a lack of gender discrimination. Women who were on an equal footing as soldiers were now on an equal level as footballers. Colombians either seeing or watching the images and reading or listening to the stories saw the human side of these former guerrillas and in so doing could perhaps reconsider their own preconceptions.

Observers and coaches see this new identity of the former FARC combatant as football lover / football player as a crucial part of the process of creating the possibility for peace-building and then nation-building in Colombia. Grotenhuis writes that 'the nation is about identity, who we are in the sense of "self-identification"' (2016, p. 28), but it is not just self-identification, but how others within the nation identify other possible members and judge them as whether they should be included or not. The FARC identity has historically excluded combatants and left-wing sympathizers from the national collective. Coakley argues that a benefit of sport participation is that it provides 'opportunities for other people to see, define, and deal with a person as more than just an athlete' (Coakley 2001, p. 93), but sport also works to enrich the identity of those coming into the sport with a prior identity. A guerrilla can be re-identified as a fellow football lover or as a fan of a particular football team, for instance. This new identity provides an opportunity for socialization

to occur, thus potentially strengthening community ties and mutual confidence. Former FARC members need a new identity in order to be accepted, or selected as fellow members of the nation, as the former identity is incompatible. Grotenhuis states that ‘the construction of national identity is therefore a process of selection, bringing together those elements that fit well together to create an identity people can and wish to identify with and leaving out elements that could disturb a coherent picture’ (2016, p. 28). Football is thus a process that enables former FARC members to become compatible with others through a recognizable activity helping to construct a new acceptable identity.

This mutual recognition and respect gained by playing football together was often the most positive experience for the coaches.<sup>14</sup> Bibiana Graciano, a coach from Llanogrande camp, commented

I do believe it is super important, this question of football and sport in these zones, because we have seen that, through sport, groups who you would never have believed would have shared the same space have integrated [...] the fact that we have a tournament where there is a police team, an army team, a civil community team, a FARC team, that they all share, and the tournament ends with no trouble at all, for us that shows that something really important is being achieved (personal interview 23 October 2017).

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<sup>14</sup> Interviews with the Coldeportes coaches who were working in the ETCRs quoted in this article Bibiana Graciano, Juvenal Tangarife and Paulo Martínez, took place during a 2-day event hosted by Coldeportes on 22-23 October, to which I was invited. In addition to the recorded interviews, I also heard all of them talk about their experiences at the camps and local communities as part of the structured events of the day. The event was designed to provide a way to hear about the experiences, problems, solutions, successes and opinions that the coaches had. Activities took place to discuss improvements and further ideas before they returned to the camps for the next stage of the project. Clara Luz Roldán, the director of Coldeportes (2016-2018), other Coldeportes sector chiefs and representatives from bodies also involved in the transition camps were present on the second day of the event.

She added that there was even a team representing the zone in a regional tournament, comprising the best players of each group, 'all wearing the same uniform'. This wearing of the same uniform is an even stronger symbol of how local and national divisions are being gradually repaired. The creation of a composite team in which the best players of the FARC, public forces, and the local community come together, wearing the same kit and playing together overrides, at least momentarily, the different political 'kits' that differentiate and were historically in opposition. Just as the national shirt is a shirt that can be worn by everyone, at a micro level these kind of football uniforms are a symbolic tool of inclusion.

Paulo Martínez backed up the importance of football tournaments for integration and breaking down previous identity blocks: 'We do a lot of tournaments and matches. People come from outside, there is integration, and this helps to break that paradigm of 'no, it's that they were guerrillas'. Therefore, there has been unity' (personal interview 23 October 2017). Johnny Barón, who worked in the Vista Hermosa ECTR in Meta, perhaps put it best as to the rebuilding of the nation that was occurring:

'I'd never had dealings with people who were ex-guerrillas, and now they aren't that any more. We realized that they were people, human beings with many problems, other people with a clear political philosophy, and through this, we learned that we are all one, that we are all country, that we are a nation (Coldeportes, 31 October 2017).

Football matches where previously opposed sides come together and meet have clearly been one of the most successful ways in which people and places have been resignified and had the chance to be integrated into the local community and the wider nation. Tidwell writes that a lack of ‘human contact, engagement and bonding’ (1998, p. 134) contributes to creating hatreds between opposing factions. Throughout the Colombian conflict, there has been a separation of Colombians due to where either state or FARC have exercised authority. Suspicion, distrust and fear exists because of atrocities committed by either side. There have been few reasons for the opposing sides, state forces and FARC (as well as the community who have often been caught in the middle) to engage in activities, such as football, that permit bonding, understanding and recognition of shared interests. It is no wonder that Santos repeatedly emphasized the idea of ‘all Colombians’, celebrating football victories together, envisioning football as this bonding opportunity for previously divided communities, and why football as part of the reincorporation process in the ETCRs has had a significant role.

## **Conclusion**

Colombia’s return to the World Cup in 2014, converging with the peace talks with the FARC and the Presidential election campaign, provided the perfect opportunity for President Santos to footballize political discourse and gain support for his national unity project given the tide of positivity and optimism engendered by football success. As has been shown, his form of rhetorical sporting nationalism, through speeches and tweets, marked a departure from previous instances when politicians discursively deployed football towards a national project. Whereas on other occasions when the



national team gained notable success, in the World Cups in 1962, 1990 and 1994, and the Copa América in 2001, the national ‘us’ articulated by the leaders of the time represented by the football team did not include Colombia’s ‘left wing’. The national football team, and its style of play from the late 1980s onwards was set in opposition to this Narcolombia ‘other’ which included the FARC as enemies of the nation. The football team represented only one part of the nation and excluded Colombians linked in some way with the ongoing Colombian conflict and drug trade. It was not until Santos’s two-term Presidency when there was a rhetorical shift and the ‘one sole country united behind one team’ narrative emphasised the inclusion of all Colombians, irrespective of their political affiliations, within the national fan group of the national team. FARC have taken the opportunity to legitimize themselves within this imagined groups of football fans and identify themselves with Colombians through football. Despite opposition to this rhetoric and the subsequent politicizing of the football shirt, football has thus provided channels for encounter, socialization and mutual recognition between Colombians previously divided by the conflict. As the political discourse has been accompanied with some concrete projects where sport has served as a part of the demobilization, transition and reincorporation process, it can be argued that football in Colombia has had a role to play in the peace process that is more than symbolic.

(8000 words)

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