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Football and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Argentina: La Nuestra, by Mark Orton, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, xiii + 305pp, £109.99 (hardcover), ISBN: 978- 3-031-20588-0, £87.50 (ebook), ISBN 978-3-031-20589-7.

‘Football and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Argentina: La Nuestra’ by Mark Orton is the 12th book in Palgrave Macmillan’s Studies in Sport and Politics series, the second with a Latin American focus, and, perhaps surprisingly, the first on football. Adopting a chronological approach across seven content chapters bookended by an introduction and conclusion, Orton analyses the twentieth-century history of Argentinian football and its interrelation with key moments of political and intellectual discourse about the construction of Argentinian national identity. Beginning with its introduction and practice by British migrants as part of the informal empire in the late nineteenth century and ending with the 2001-02 Argentinian financial crisis, Orton explains how and why football became so particularly embedded within Argentine society. Using a range of sources including national press, archival material from football clubs, governing bodies and government records, he explores why football mattered to a nation wrestling with the problem of assimilating rural populations and migrant communities, why it became widely understood as a national symbol, and how it was manipulated by politicians or social movements for often competing socio-political messages.

This book is a welcome addition to studies on Latin American history and sport’s often underappreciated and under-studied influence importance as part of it. Given the book’s century-long scope, it serves as a good introduction to football’s significance in Argentina for students interested in the topic. There are, for example, chapters on the British-influenced top-down and horizontal diffusion of football through schools, railways and neighbourhood teams, the role of the press in inventing and narrating a myth of an Argentinian style, the use of football in the Perón years, the conflict between pragmatic and idealised styles of football,

and the 1978 World Cup hosted in Argentina during the military junta. These topics have, of course, already received attention from Argentinian and other historians and sociologists; not only does Orton challenge some of the assumptions and arguments around these key periods, he also provides details of less-researched case studies at these times, such as the significance of the Sporting Barracas tour of Europe in 1929, issues around the dual identity of Italo-Argentines and difficulties around their assimilation into an Argentinian national identity, and discussions of how teams from the internal provinces were able to challenge perceptions of rural Argentina that originated from the capital. More established scholars in the field will, therefore, also find much of interest in this book, although the ambitious time scope unfortunately does not always allow Orton to give more examples and develop his arguments further in the detail some may desire.

The main example of this lack of topic development are the intervals when Orton discusses Argentina's 'voiceless others' (p.3), particularly women, indigenous and Afro-Argentines, those from rural areas, or non-metropolitan provinces. Rather than being continuous threads that are woven into each chapter that could chart a sense of progression over time, they tend to emerge at specific junctures. In the case of women, this occurs in chapters 3 and 6, with a discussion of when football was first played by women in the country and coverage of the 1971 unofficial Women's World Cup. The intervening and following years are not detailed. The Afro-Argentine question similarly just appears in chapter 3, albeit with a fascinating analysis of media reporting on players José Laguna and Alejandro de los Santos, as well as a comparison of how articles on the footballing visits of Brazil were laced with racist overtones in the first three decades of the twentieth century. One could, however, see these and periodic discussions of footballing representations of Argentina's interior, as case studies of a thread running through the book critiquing the narrative dominance of the Buenos Aires metropolitan centre. Narratives from the metropolis tended to reject or elide 'unmodern'

aspects of its society when constructing a masculine-centred sense of identity around football that aimed to project a white, modern and civilised aspect to itself and to those abroad. Orton demonstrates, often convincingly, that influential groups in Argentina's footballing success have been marginalised in national identity discourse, focusing particularly on Anglo and Italo-Argentines. Orton argues that, in previous work, Anglo-Argentines have largely been set up in opposition to this football-based national identity project as a stylistic 'other' and incorrectly considered as an elite homogeneous group with their influence erased. Similarly, Italo-Argentines had their Italianness either elided through assimilation or were labelled as unpatriotic when they sought to further their careers abroad. It would have been useful to give more examples of how such Italo-Argentines had their identity discussed in the newspapers, when making the case for more recognition of a hybrid notion of 'Argentiness' (p.3). Further sections that challenge previous readings of significant junctures of football history include Orton's contention that the golden period of Argentinian football of the 1940s in fact set out the stall for footballing decline and hubris taking root when Argentina was dislocated from the footballing world due to various aspects of Perón's foreign diplomacy. In a later chapter, Orton also posits that the successful, if notorious, Estudiantes team of the late 1960s could also be seen as a 'metaphor for student-led resistance' (p.192) against the Onganía dictatorship, a team of 'urban guerrillas' (p.195), rather than solely being considered as an '*antifútbol*' representation of the 'win at all costs' mentality of that regime. Some may contest these interpretations, but any challenge to orthodox and regularly-held perceptions will stimulate debate.

This book, then, has much to recommend it as a worthy addition to the field of studies on the history of sport. Eminently readable, well-structured and well-sourced throughout, Orton shows how football and debates around Argentinian national identity regularly dovetailed, with anxieties about footballing identity and success often mirroring political and economic

decline and fragility. Given the time scope, readers will use this book as an important starting point before consulting other publications that focus in greater detail on specific time periods or issues. Hopefully this work will encourage more scholars to focus on those groups less researched to date, particularly histories of football in other provinces, Afro-Argentine footballers or women footballers, and suggest ways of researching sports history in other nations.

1020 words

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