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‘Playing sport is building nation’: Issues of Colombian Football and Nation in the magazines *Estadio* and *Semana* during the El Dorado professional league (1948-1954).

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Introduction

Football in Colombia as a mass, popular, national phenomenon was a relatively late development compared with much of the continent. Though football was introduced to different parts of the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a Colombian national team did not participate in the South American Championship until 1945, a full 29 years after the first tournament in 1916. It was not until 1948 when the first national professional league was founded shortly after the assassination of Liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. This murder led to an explosion of national political violence between Liberals and Conservatives, a period known as *La Violencia* (1948-1958); the football league was rushed into operation as a pacifying device against this backdrop of violence. The first six years of this league (1948-1954), organized by the Bogotá-based Dimayor organisation in competition with the FIFA-affiliated Adefútbol located in Barranquilla, has become known as the El Dorado period, notorious for the influx of foreign football stars who arrived attracted by the high wages paid by Colombian clubs. Many Argentinians and Uruguayan players signed had been on strike due to contract and wage demands, and Colombian clubs took advantage of the situation to offer them lucrative contracts to the anger of their original clubs and football federations. As a consequence the Dimayor league was portrayed as a ‘pirate league’ and was disaffiliated by FIFA. Colombian clubs and the national team were unable to

compete in official international competitions. Despite this, the arrival of stars such as Adolfo Pedernera, Néstor Rossi, Alfredo DiStéfano, Heleno De Freitas, and Neil Franklin stimulated huge interest with crowds flocking to the stadiums. This spectator excitement was accompanied by a parallel rise in newspaper and radio attention reporting on matches and discussing issues related to sport and nation, meaning that football in Colombia became an authentic mass phenomenon (Jaramillo Racines 2011: 122). Consequently, football also became a matter of state attention and potential national value, ripe for exploitation by press and politicians attempting to promote modernizing national narratives (Jaramillo Racines 2011: 124). The El Dorado league, however, was a short-lived boom; due to international pressure, in the Pact of Lima in November 1951, agreements were made for footballers to return to their original clubs by 1954 and Colombia being readmitted into FIFA. Soon after, stars began to leave Colombia, crowds dwindled and many clubs were bankrupted.

The juncture of *La Violencia* and El Dorado is a foundational national moment, marking a ‘before and after’, not just for football, but for the nation (Jaramillo Racines 2011: 127; Quitián Roldán and Urrea Beltrán 2016a: 166). This chapter analyses how sport and national questions converged and were discussed during this important period in two Bogotá-based weekly magazines with a national audience: the current affairs publication *Semana* and the sport-focused *Estadio*. *Semana* was founded in 1946 by future Liberal president Alberto Lleras Camargo in 1946, folded in 1961, but was eventually re-launched in 1983. Before the start of the El Dorado league, sports news was limited to one column of news in the magazine. The first fixtures of the league in August 1948, for example, merit only two short paragraphs. By the end of the year though, there were more columns dedicated to sports news, and a first footballer, Santa Fe’s goalkeeper Julio ‘Chonto’ Gaviria was on the front cover (*Semana* 4 December 1948) marking the impact of the league. Footballers on the cover would become more common, with the likes of Efraín ‘el Caimán’ Sánchez, Adolfo

Pedernera, Neil Franklin, George Mountford and managers Carlos Aldabe and Adelfo Magallanes featuring. *Estadio* was launched in 1947 under the directorship of Hernando Ferro Gómez, later to be replaced by Santiago Pardo Uribe in 1950. It had a hiatus in 1948, but then was re-established in 1949 given the popularity of professional football, but would only last until mid-1951, effectively reporting on the boom years of El Dorado. *Estadio* wrote on a variety of sports, predominately male but also female¹, with football tending to dominate content. Here, I argue that in these two publications sport became a focal point for wider debates about the state and improvement of the Colombian race and nation, debates foregrounded in the 1910s and 1920s. By that time, sport had moved from being an elite pursuit to becoming envisaged an instrument for educating and ‘civilizing’ different classes. Discussions in intellectual and political circles outlined sport’s potential role for modernity and civilisation, issues relating to improving health and values for Colombians while reducing violence and vice, and promoting Colombia’s name abroad. In the El Dorado period, given the backdrop of *la Violencia*, similar debates were held in the press. In addition to these discussions, I shall focus on how other issues related to sport’s role for national development were discussed in *Estadio* and *Semana*, including the problem of *criollos* vs *extranjeros* (native players vs foreigners), developing a truly national football, and criticisms over government actions and the lack of support for sport. I hope, therefore, that this chapter will serve as a necessary contribution from a Colombian perspective to analyses of press, sport and nation in Latin America at key historical moments when national identity was being debated.

Sport, press and nation in Colombia pre-El Dorado

In her analysis of football in Medellín in the 1950s and 1960s, Bolívar-Ramírez wrote that ‘footballers’ and sportswriters’ cultural initiatives deserve our attention precisely because neither the state nor collective actors promoted professional football at this time’ (2018: 585). Although there was some state involvement in the El Dorado period and it has received some academic attention given its foundational nature, there has been scant analysis of the role of the press and how the league was reported and interrogated. The tendency has been to discuss El Dorado’s impact on society as a mass spectacle. Academics agree that football served as a sort of ‘circus’ (Dávila 1991: 18) that was exploited by the Ospina Pérez government (1946-1950) to ensure that the public was focussing on football and not on national social reality (Ramos Valencia 1998: 53-54; Jaramillo Racines 2011: 120). It is seen as a classic case of football as a pacifying device, mobilized to calm national political tensions and impact of *La Violencia* (Uribe 1976: 9; Zuluaga 2005: Galvis Ramírez, 2008: 42; 157; Jaramillo Racines 2011: 122; Quitián Roldán 2013a: 30, 2013b: 61; Campomar 2014: 207; Ruiz Patiño 2017a: 41; Watson 2022: 43). The circus was not even a Colombian one; the sheer number of foreign players imported by most teams meant that the principal characteristic of the spectacle was its international component (Jaramillo 2011: 126; Quitián Roldán and Urrea Beltrán 2016b: 61); Colombia was ‘merely the location for a predominantly Latin American cast of football stars to entertain the Colombian public’ (Watson 2022: 44). This mass influx of imports meant that Colombian footballers were underappreciated and often relegated to the substitutes bench (Zuluaga 2005: 157). Their development, and that of Colombian football was stymied and stunted (Galvis Ramírez 2008: 48). No sense of a Colombian footballing style or identity was developed during this period (Uribe 1976: 9; Watson 2022: 44-45), a feature considered essential for football’s deployment for sporting nationalism and national identity construction (Archetti 1999: 59; Alabarces 2002: 43). The sense of differentiation with an ‘other’ (in this case, predominantly Argentinian football given the presence of so many Argentinians in the

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league) needed to articulate a Colombian style of play was unfortunately more based on a perceived difference in technical ability and art of play, embedding a sense of Colombian inferiority in the continental footballing hierarchy that would endure until the 1980s (Watson 2022: 48-49). Despite these problems, the football spectacle was arguably the most glorious period of Colombian club football (Arteaga 1991: 67; Galvis Ramírez 2008: 51). Despite the absence of native players, success could be potentially translated into national benefit, given the exploits of the famed Millonarios team nicknamed the 'Blue Ballet', who won the league in 1949, 1951, 1952 and 1953 and defeated Real Madrid 4-2 in Spain in 1952. This team, according to Colombian ambassador, Guillermo León Valencia, 'achieved more in 90 minutes in Spain than I have in two years' (Dávila 1991: 17), and, in fact, took on the '*los embajadores*' (ambassadors) nickname being a rare referent of Colombian success (Quitán Roldán 2013a: 34; Jaramillo 2011: 126). El Dorado is understood as the period when football in Colombia finally moved from being seen from a perspective of social distinction, as a civilizing instrument and leisure pastime, to being principally a pure spectacle with a commercial imperative (Ruiz Patiño 2017a: 40; Arias Trujillo 2020: 85). As this chapter demonstrates, this role for sport for national benefit remained a topic of discussion in the written press. El Dorado did put Colombia on the world footballing map for the first time, although mostly in negative terms. It was criticized as a 'pirate' league, and due to the violence of the political backdrop 'ingrained ideas about Colombian people as "barbarian" and "savage" reached new audiences' (Braun 2015: 378-382, cited in Bolívar 2018: 585).

The mass media has undoubtedly 'played a key role in the history of modern sports as components of national culture' (Mauro 2020: 933), being a vital public channel where ideas about the nation and national identity can be invented, promoted, contested and reinvented. Sport development was also linked to national questions as modernist thought associated the practice of sport with notions of civilization and progress, the health of the nation, 'race' and

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moral values (Real 1998: 17; Boyle 2009: 20). As the practice and popularity of sport increased, so did reports in the written press, with journalists arguing in favour of the modernist values sport promoted. The media also has a 'key mythologizing role' (Rowe et al. 1998: 121; Mauro 2020: 934-935) which can 'advocate, shape and generate new habits amongst the citizenry, encouraging active participation at both a physical and ideological level' (Rowe et al. 1998: 121). This habit was certainly present in the Latin America media as the practice of sport and football grew and press reporting followed suit. Sibaja, focusing on crisis narratives in the 1950s in Argentina, argues that Argentinian sports journalists 'regarded themselves as "respectable" citizens whose responsibility was to shine a spotlight on a series of crises affecting *fútbol* and society as a whole (2020: 358). This was certainly the case in Colombia in El Dorado. Colombian men of letters regarded writing in the press as a means of educating and civilizing the country, attempting to reduce the evils of vice and political partisanship (Castro-Gómez 2009: 67).

In the Colombian context, Ruiz Patiño argues that there is a parallel process of the development and consolidation of sport and press coverage (2009: 104). Initial, sporadic reporting illustrated sport in urban centres as an elite leisure activity, signifying class distinction and differentiation (Hernández Acosta 2013: 45; Quitián 2013a: 26-27; Ruiz Patiño 2009: 42; 2017a: 32;). Gradually sport and physical activity developed as a vehicle for education and betterment of other classes, as debates about the state of the nation and degeneration of the Colombian 'race' became prevalent in politics and press in the second decade of the twentieth century. Discussions in the 1st Pedagogical Congress in 1917, for example, were reported on in detail by *El Tiempo* newspaper (Quitián Roldán 2013a: 29), with sport envisaged as a fundamental tool for Colombia to modernize and for the improvement of Colombians in general (Hernández Acosta 2013: 45 and 57; Quitián Roldán 2013a: 30; Ruiz Patiño 2009; 2017b: 63-64). Sport into the 1920s was still only sporadically

reported in newspapers (Arias 2020: 73), but in 1924 a specialized section called *Página Deportiva* appeared in the Sunday edition of *El Tiempo* with the express aim of raising interest in sport, benefitting Colombian youth and reducing the temptation of vice (*El Tiempo* 17 August 1924, p.3 cited in Ruiz Patiño 2009: 103-105; Hernández 2013: 45), responding to an awareness of greater national practice of sport (Ruiz Patiño 2009: 101). In the same year, *Patria: Revista de ideas* was founded which also highlighted the importance of the practice of sport for hygiene, health and the general benefit of Colombians (Arias 2020: 73). As we shall see, *Estadio* in particular would continue to promote such ideas positioning sport as a counterpoint to partisan political violence and perceived national deficiencies.

Following the first significant state intervention into regulating sport with Law 80 of 1925 (Ruiz Patiño 2009; Hernández 2013: 48; Quitián Roldán 2013a: 20) sport became a space for national encounters with the holding of the first National Olympic Games in Cali in 1927 (Hernández 2013: 49). As sporting practice increased and became more heterogeneous across the country in the 1930s, so did reporting, catering for new and wider audiences at a national and regional level (Arias 2020: 74). Although most reporting focused on men's sporting endeavours, Ruiz Patiño does note that women's sport was reported on in the third National Olympic Games in Barranquilla in 1935 (2017b: 66). The lack of national leagues and regular competitions, however, meant that into the 1940s, football reporting was still limited and did not enjoy specific sections in newspapers or regular coverage (Ramos Valencia 1998: 53).

The press would be a focal point for supporting Colombia's entrance into international sporting competition (Hernández 2013: 51). Colombia became affiliated to FIFA in 1935, founded the Colombian Olympic Committee in the following year, and hosted the first Bolivarian Games in 1938. This international participation was based on a need to 'appear' on an international stage and be seen to be competing in modern, civilized events (Hernández 2013: 59; Quitián Roldán and Urrea Beltrán 2016b: 54) but it was not until 1945 when the

national football team first competed in the South American Championships. The first national teams, however, were not fully representative, being mostly comprised of players from the Atlántico region where Adefútbol was based. There is an early association of national football team and nation, though, made in *Estadio* after the 1947 South American championships, when the team came bottom of the table. The footballing performance and off-field behaviour was strongly criticised in national terms: 'It matters, and matters a lot, that the sporting name of Colombia is not undone by the poor conduct of several footballers and a few directors, who, in a lamentable moment, forgot about the traditional culture that our country has displayed in international events' (*Estadio* 4 January 1948: 1)². *Semana* also reported on the 'national scandal' of the 'unusual spectacle given by a drunk Colombian footballer in Guayaquil', reporting that the sporting authorities and Minister of Education would be conducting an inquest (*Semana*, 3 January 1948: 18). Colombia's lowly place in the continental hierarchy is already embedded with their footballing backwardness apparent in *Estadio*'s tournament report: 'And now, onto the "boys"'.³ Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia have learned little. Their game is completely rudimentary' (*Estadio*, 4 January 1948: 3). Colombia's game is described as being backward, lacking intelligence and movement, which are the 'key of *modern* football and it seems like the boys have not been able or willing to learn this lesson' (*ibid*: 3, italics my own). This footballing inferiority is also evident in reports of pre-El Dorado visits from Vélez Sarsfield (Argentina) and River Plate (Uruguay) to play exhibition matches. These were 'two powerful teams, the likes of which we have not seen in many years' (*Semana* 31 January 1948: 19) who showed Colombia how good football should be played as 'the players from Bogotá are no masters in the art of playing football' (*Semana* 14 February 1948: 29). There were, in fact, several foreigners playing for Colombian club sides in regional leagues at the time, 'showing the inexperienced native'⁴ footballers something about technique and footballing ability' (Dávila 1991: 13). The

Colombian press were painfully aware of native players' limited footballing qualities and knowledge compared to other South American nations, and looked enviously at the international renown gained by Uruguay (who had won the Olympics in 1924 and 1928 and hosted and won the first World Cup in 1930) and Argentina (Olympic and World Cup runners up in 1928 and 1930).

El Dorado: Popularity, modernity and benefits for the nation

The press were quick to see the benefits of the launch of the professional league organized by Dimayor. The embarrassing performances of the national team in the South American Championships, evident regionalism and questionable organisation of football by Adefútbol, coupled with entrepreneurial awareness of businessmen such as Alfonso Senior, strengthened press and public support for Dimayor establishing a professional national league. Although only ten teams figured and six cities (Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali, Manizales, Medellín and Pereira⁵) were represented in 1948, the league was a success, even before the major stars arrived in the second season. At the end of the first season, *Semana* commented 'professional football has produced a real and prolonged sporting fever in the country. The names of the teams and best players are more popular in Colombia than those of any contemporary politician or poet' (*Semana* 4 December 1948: 24). This success grew substantially in 1949 after the signing of Adolfo Pedernera that dominated national headlines. The excitement stimulated by the press was such that Colombia seemed to be suffering from a national case of 'Pedernitis' (Gómez, 12 March 2015). *Semana*, for example, reported that the owner of shop called 'Marisol', Mario de Castro, had put a sign up reading 'Talking about Pedernera during work hours is prohibited' (*Semana* 9 July 1949: 22). *Estadio* attributed profound national importance to the league and arrival of Pedernera and other stars. They claimed that

‘we are obviously experiencing one of the most brilliant sporting eras in our country’ (*Estadio* 20 August 1949: 2), and that ‘the first two championships marked the start of a new era in Colombian life’ (*Estadio*, 10 December 1949: 2). A year later, they proclaimed that ‘the creation of Dimayor is one of the most important events in Colombian history in the last 50 years’ (*Estadio* 18 February 1950: 29). These are hyperbolic claims, but indicative of the fervour created by the league and acknowledging its impact upon cultural practice, predominantly in urban areas. Both newspapers noted economic benefits due to mass spectatorship across the country (though both would also criticize the drive for rapid profit over long-term sustainability), but, more importantly, it was seen to have awakened a new interest in the practice of sport. Sport had ‘become one of the principal activities of the country. With the rise of football, there has been a surge of sport in general everywhere’ (*Estadio*, 13 August 1949: 12). Football had ‘changed urban customs and even the mentality of a large mass of our people. It has been the entrance door to sports venues in general’ (*Estadio*, 10 December 1949: 2). The league and media reporting were helping to stimulate a national (though urban) culture of sport, evident in both spectating and practice.

With this new mentality seemingly inspiring a mass of Colombians, sportswriters returned to the potential benefits of sport for the nation, realizing this was an important juncture for promoting modernizing values attributed to sport. Editorials in *Estadio* extolled the impact that sport could have on health, education, and improvement of the race, in short, in civilizing the nation. Sport had, according to these proponents of sport-based modernity, ‘revolutionized many aspects of the country, giving it a marked civilized profile’ (*Estadio*, 17 September 1949: 2). Influential journalist Gonzalo Rueda Caro⁶ wrote an important editorial on 27 August 1949, in a letter from Switzerland where he was Colombian vice consul. He drew comparisons between the civilized Switzerland, where ‘sport has not only strengthened them physically it has also, more importantly, made them forget political grudges, daily

disagreements and tedium', and Colombia, where, given the absence of sporting practice 'the sad, discoloured masses, crowded together in canteens or town squares, listen to speeches that they don't fully understand but which always sow subconscious seeds of hate' (*Estadio* 27 August 27: 2). For Rueda Caro, sport could be 'an educating force, vital as an element to replace politics and alcohol', a regular custom to replace the 'only regular festival of election days that just lead to blood and revenge' (ibid: 2). Describing the league as 'the greatest Colombian achievement in recent years', he demanded that the country's leaders make the most of this sporting opportunity to 'promote the practice of sport in every corner of Colombia, and in this way, transform our country into a true democracy where every citizen [...] has the right to be healthy, to find a path for life, to find pleasant distraction and the happy and noble education that sport provides when its true meaning is taught' (ibid: 2). Editorials such as these are highly aspirational, utopic, and attributing far greater power to sport than it could reasonably be expected to wield. They are, however, also indicative of a continuation of discussions of sport for the benefit of the nation prevalent in the late 1910s and 1920s, where organized sport practice was still in its relative infancy compared to Southern Cone countries in particular. The football league was seen by sportswriters as a launch pad to attempt to solve the painfully visible national deficiencies being expressed at the time in political rancour and bloody conflict.

Sport was regularly positioned as an antidote to the national affliction of partisan politics expressed in antagonism, violence and divisive rivalries that undermined any semblance of national unity, particularly given the background of *La Violencia*. The following comments exemplify this mooted role for sport as a tool to pacify political tensions:

Today, when the country finds itself convulsed to its very roots as never before, sport increasingly rises up above the violent dispute that has contaminated all citizen activities. [...] The embers of the heated political atmosphere even reach the stadium

gates, but they do not pass through them. Despite the immense crowds of all social classes and political representations who occupy the stands, the stadiums remain as the only places in the country that represent the most authentic and affirmative example of civilisation. [...] We are convinced that sport, and hundreds of thousands of Colombians agree with us, can be called upon to resolve many of the grave problems that are putting our country at the risk of dissolution. "Playing sport is building country"⁷, now becomes a phrase ready to assume most authentic realism (*Estadio* 29 October 1949: 2).

New regional sporting rivalries and violent crowd behaviour did become an occasional phenomenon, for example in a match between Deportivo Cali and Santa Fe in 1949. On that occasion 'a numerous, rude and indolent crowd' and 'uncivilized and aggressive fanatics' engaged in fighting and throwing stones. These were described as 'outbursts of savagery from a people, although even when they have claim not to have drunk *chicha*⁸ seem to be still victims of its effects' (*Estadio* 1 October 1949: 32). The choice of wording makes a clear distinction between the culture and civilisation of the sporting venue, harking back to the gentlemanly behaviour expected as part of the sporting pursuit, and the savage, barbaric violence which is unbecoming of the arena. Despite these isolated problems, 'sporting fanaticism, which channels passions healthily, is preferable to political fanaticism which degenerates into dangerous hatreds' (*Estadio* 20 May 1950). Football stadiums were seen as 'true temples of culture. Our fields of play are demonstrating, in a way that should make us proud, that not everything is lost in Colombia' (*Estadio* 27 October 1949: 2). Writers in *Semana* agreed, stating that 'sport has invigorated the population; it has distanced it, where possible, from political passions as the only collective centre of interest; it has educated it, and though partially at this time, it has distanced it from vice' (*Semana* 16 April 1949: 21). Following Pedernera's arrival, *Semana* wrote of the impact of the surge in football interest:

This interest gives hope for the country, because it distracts Colombians, especially the popular classes, from their monomania, political passions. When it was said that buying foreign players should be banned due to the amount of money leaving the country, the Finance Minister, Jaramillo Ocampo answered “Very little money is leaving. Moreover, there will always be funds for this. Sport is saving the country” (*Semana* 9 July 1949: 24).

This statement also attests to the political manipulation of football as a means to distract the nation, the awareness of football being a new opium for the masses that could help to pacify working classes and political tensions, helped by the players being neutral to the political conflict given their status as foreign ‘other’ (Quitíán Roldán and Urrea Beltrán 2016a: 167; 2016b: 64).

The preoccupation for sportswriters was that the sporting renaissance stimulated by football should impact where it was most needed. El Dorado was seen as the opportunity to establish a national sporting culture as well as a sense of a national football identified as being truly Colombian in nature. *Estadio*’s editors wrote that in July 1949 that ‘a sense of national sport is being developed, and not in any old way, but in the best way possible. Creating in people the physical and spiritual need to go to stadiums. Creating a real sporting awareness’ (*Estadio*, 9 July 1949: 2). It was vital to develop a culture of practice, rather than solely a culture of spectatorship, which could strengthen youth and the race in general, particularly in those ‘tropical’ areas of the country where civilisation had not reached. By 1950, *Estadio* was urging the government to do more to support sporting practice:

We have fans watching sport, but not playing it. Amongst the immense amounts of people who fill our stadiums, very few are active players. [...] The most important thing is to develop a love of sport as an activity [...] The greatest problem in the

country and its principal aim should be to improve the conditions of human beings, and sport should be one of the preferred activities in the budget. Due to the human values that a true athlete learns, training these athletes should be one of our most dedicated goals (*Estadio* 12 August 1950: 2).

Sport needed to be present throughout the country, but the government was failing in this duty. In 1949, the editor wrote ‘the government must urgently attend to the needs of our rural and urban children. The vast majority of children in our schools have been waiting forlornly for sport to arrive in their establishments’ (*Estadio*, 1 October 1949: 2). The problem of state failure was further discussed two months later:

We observe with great worry the immense masses of Colombians who remain on the margins of this gigantic movement. Of the fifteen departments that make up the republic, sport is only played in an organized manner in four or five. [...] It is absurd that in Colombia there are still entire regions where sport is the privilege of the very few, while the children of our workers, who are those who most need sport’s benefits, are on the margins of its influence (*Estadio*, 16 December 1949: 2).

Estadio would continue to be critical of the government’s failure to invest in sport and sporting infrastructure throughout 1950, arguing that ‘they have not thought of the future, and therefore the next generation will be developed in the same way as the previous, in other words, in complete improvisation, abandoning the chance to develop an authentic national sport’ (*Estadio*, 27 May 1950: 2). Given the dominance of foreign players in the league and few Colombians playing in the teams by this time, there were increasing worries about the football league and government squandering the sporting boom that El Dorado had occasioned. By March 1951, *Estadio*’s writers argued that:

If we do not know how to profit from the millions of *pesos* invested in creating a fan base, a spectacle and a global renown for Colombian football, in order to create a genuine national sport, then we can ask ourselves with bitterness something that for several years enemies of professional sport have been waiting to ask: “And professionalism, what was it all for?” (*Estadio*, 31 March 1951).

From this, we can argue that the extent of political involvement in football was perceived to be as a pacification device and supporting its moneymaking potential. In the eyes of sportswriters, there was a failure to take measures to create infrastructure and education programmes for Colombian youth, meaning the impact El Dorado risked being wasted as a starting point for addressing recognized national divisions and underdevelopment. In 1954, in the final season of El Dorado as the best footballers went elsewhere, *Semana* concluded that:

In the eyes of the public, professional football has just been a “booming business”. It has lost its sporting character. For many, this is an incorrect focus of the problem. Because the object of sport is to create stronger, more robust citizens removed from vice, and more spiritually well prepared. However, the professional directors seemingly have no interest in this aspect of sport (*Semana* 19 April 1954: 38).

This would be one of the major criticisms of El Dorado. It was a period when football was exploited politically and economically for the benefit of the few, rather than its potential, if utopian, values being promoted and established for the benefit of the many.

The national vs foreign player quandary

Sportswriter preoccupations over establishing a beneficial national sporting culture were problematized by the *criollo* vs foreign player conundrum, which was a major press debate from the signing of Pedernera onwards and regular topic of *Estadio* editorials. As has been

mentioned, a sense of footballing inferiority was already embedded in Colombia. Foreign players, coaches and referees from recognized footballing nations⁹ were seen as teachers bringing football technique, knowledge and artistry to an uneducated nation (Arias 2020: 81)¹⁰. *Estadio* supported this importation of talent and knowhow at the outset, commenting ‘Colombians have to learn to play football better, and this is why foreigners are indispensable’ (*Estadio* 9 July 1949: 12) and ‘the importing of players, coaches and referees in different sports is a vital necessity for national sport’ (*Estadio* 16 July 1949: 2).

There was a clear lack of confidence in Colombian players, and a sense they could not compete with imports as evidenced by this report on a match between Millonarios vs Atlético Municipal (the only team in 1949 to have a *criollo* only policy): ‘It is impossible to compete with only native players against the star figures who defend the colours of the big teams. For those of us who defend, and will continue to defend, national players, it is a painful truth’ (*Estadio* 24 September 1949: 11). In the same edition, however, Universidad were urged to sign native players, as they would show more courage and fight on the pitch, qualities which were the main skills of Colombians in the absence of technical ability (*Estadio* 24 September 1949: 7). A sense of ‘us’ vs ‘them’ opposition is already apparent with Colombians seen as ‘being more courageous and fighting better for his colours than the imported players’ (*Estadio* 16 July 1949: 2) with some foreigners portrayed as greedy mercenaries. Players like Peruvian Valeriano López were criticized for flaunting his money when Atlético Municipal’s Colombian players were working as bricklayers or carpenters or studying, as their wages were vastly inferior (*Semana* 17 December 1949: 27-28). It is also important to note that any sense of regionalism disappears with the use of ‘*criollo*’ to describe Colombian footballers. Regional rivalries have long been present in Colombia, but in this way a united national front is created, all native players representing Colombia (Watson 2022: 46). This national pride was highlighted by *Estadio* whenever native players outperformed foreign counterparts, as in

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the following example: 'The eleventh week of the championship was a near-total triumph for national football, as in the majority of matches that took place in the different stadiums around the country, the *criollo* players were better than the imports' (*Estadio* 23 July 1949: 8). Such a sense of pride in success gained when Colombian effort (despite a tendency towards rough play) overcame foreign skills and experience evidences an incipient sense of national footballing pride despite the inferiority complex.

However, as more foreigners were imported from 1949 onwards, the value of imports was questioned, particularly when teams began playing 11 foreign players and the total absence of 'Colombianness' of the spectacle became a concern. Both *Estadio* and *Semana* would criticize teams without Colombian players when it occurred (see, for example, *Estadio* 8 July 1950: 3 and 12; *Semana* 25 March 1950: 2). In the interest of attracting crowds, clubs prioritized short-term economic gains with 'exciting' new foreign players taking the place of Colombian players. Colombians, therefore, were not given the opportunity to learn and develop on the pitch, a situation summarized by a cartoon by 'Rajul' playing on the 'banca' (bench) / 'banco' (bank) wordplay, depicting Colombian players sitting despondently on the substitute bench while happy foreigners headed to the bank with their wages (*Estadio* 17 March 1951: 13). This situation led to press debates similar to those conducted previously in Mexico given the influx of foreign players at the start of their professional league in 1943. Carrillo Reveles argues that when the visibility of the foreign or naturalized 'other' is greater in the public eye than native players, this creates a dangerous situation of the 'other' being superior to the 'national', thus becoming an identifying reference point. It can also lead to a sense of 'defensive xenophobia' aimed at protecting the nation from foreign interference (2016: 53). In the Mexican case, Carrillo Reveles demonstrates how *La Prensa* campaigned to safeguard the essence of national football, to protect national players and to ensure that sport could fulfil its mission of being an example to Mexican youth of the benefits of sport

(2016: 56). *Estadio*, in particular, would play a similar role despite initially being in favour of foreign imports.

This importing of foreigners was a national debate at the time conducted in the press as *Semana* shows, with a sense of national defensiveness against foreigners already evident:

The debate has interested the whole country, even in those circles uninterested in sport, and it has awakened a streak of nationalism, more sentimental than anything else [...] The truth is that everyone agrees that foreigners should come, but only if they really have something to teach. Some of those who have been brought do not seem to offer this minimum guarantee (*Semana* 2 July 1949: 27).

Estadio was also raising concerns about the lasting benefits of foreign players and the potential damage it could do to national sport if the situation was not managed properly. In several editorials they questioned what impact on Colombian players the imports were actually having, as young players were left out of the team, were not being trained, and were prevented from developing. Money was not being invested in local talent. These concerns are shown in the following examples:

They are showing us how to play football, but we have the clear feeling that very little is being done so that these magnificent displays translate into practical benefits for native sport. Behind the brilliant curtain of professionalism, we are unjustly abandoning our own men (*Estadio* 20 August 1949: 2).

All this has had serious consequences. The first of these has been the gradual dislodging of native players from teams, who in the judgement of blinded owners, do not produce the same ticket office success as the foreigners. This would not be as serious if these clubs worried at all about training native players, who, in the future, would defend their colours without the need to resort to costly imports (*Estadio* 10 September 1949: 2)

The series of editorials effectively became a campaign in the final months of 1949 and in 1950, with *Estadio* criticizing the league, club directors and the government for failing to protect national players. Writers proposed introducing rules that would ensure Colombian player development such as limits on foreign players, quality control over imports, and the obligation to create youth and reserve teams. The constant aim was to defend national football and sport as part of their on-going interest in promoting the benefits of sport for the nation, as mentioned previously. In just one such example, in April 1950, the editorial wrote:

We have received hundreds of letters from all regions in the country, confirming the Colombian sporting public's support for our campaign in favour of the native player [...] We believe we have said this many a sufficient amount of times, but we do not want to conduct a nationalistic campaign. But we are certain that our future in this area is based on developing native footballers, and we are alarmed that the most powerful entities behind professionalism are refusing to give them the chance to rise (*Estadio* 15 April 1950: 2).

The magazine repeatedly emphasized that national sporting development was at stake, as the only way to gain proper renown through sporting channels would be based on the achievements of Colombian footballers. They noted a growing disappointment in the footballing spectacle given the lack of native talents:

We are starting to note a bit of disappointment. Disappointment because they [the fans] see the country absent from this movement; because the Colombian sportsmen, who were so recently their idols, are being forgotten little by little; because every day they are told that Colombia is unable to produce new stars, while fans see that this is a lie. Colombia has produced them, but they are sat on the substitutes bench (*Estadio* 25 March 1950: 2)

The one club exempt from criticism for the foreigners-first policy was Medellín club Atlético Municipal, who changed their name permanently in 1950 to Atlético Nacional, a clear example of a club with an awareness of appealing to a national, as much as a local, identity. Although never in contention for winning the league in the peak years of the foreigner boom¹¹, the club were the only one to take a long-term perspective and aim to build for the future. They were frequently reported on favourably in *Estadio* in terms of effort and courage, if not ability, and *Semana* dedicated an article praising the club's approach during the 1950 season, including the financial involvement of the local Fabricato textile company. The aim of the club was to make it into 'a breeding ground for purely Colombian footballers [...] with the healthy desire to encourage those sportsmen, who, following the example of the foreign masters, will one day ensure that the name of Colombia is valued abroad' (*Semana* 9 September 1950: 34). In an interview with Raúl H. Sánchez, a lawyer and director of the club he further outlined the national building-for-the-future perspective:

The criterion that we have is solely to develop a school that serves as a stimulus to raise the level of the native player. We have already managed to achieve much of this programme. We want to awaken in native players the interest and responsibility involved in making the very best of his talents. We do not aim to obtain economic benefits, but to improve sport centres. And we are grateful for the support and encouragement of the press and the public throughout the country (*Semana* 9 September 1950: 35).

Atlético Municipal / Nacional were the exception rather than the rule, however, and by 1951 it was clear that hopes for creating a sense of 'our football' for Colombians had not been realized. The reputation of the league for 'footballing piracy' had also done enough damage to Colombia's international reputation as the Pact of Lima was agreed to end the illegal signing of footballers. According to *Semana*, 'the Government was no longer prepared to tolerate that the good name and ethics of the country were being judged abroad due to the

piracy of players and international footballing isolation' (*Semana* 22 September 1951: 39). In the final years of the league before the Pact of Lima took effect, more Colombians did play as foreign players went elsewhere. *Semana* believed that 'every day there are greater links between public and players due to the emergence of new and valuable Colombian sporting talents' (*Semana* 10 May 1952: 32), but spectator interest in the league was dwindling, many clubs were in financial dire straits and the renown and high standard of the Colombian league was in the past. By April 1954, the atmosphere was funereal: 'The fans commented, we are attending the funerals of professional football' (*Semana* 19 April 1954: 38). The general feeling was that a chance to really establish a national sporting culture had perhaps not been fully exploited; at least memories and myths had been created that could be the basis for constructing ideas about a Colombian sporting identity.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the success of Colombia's first professional league provided the opportunity for sport to return to being a central aspect of press discussion relating to questions about the development and improvement of the nation. Sportswriters, being very aware of national problems, saw in football the chance to develop a national sporting culture that could distance Colombians from political partisanship, violence and vice. Football was posited as an antidote to enduring political passions and hatreds, and a chance for Colombia to civilize itself according to modernizing essentialist values attributed to the practice of sport. This was based on the realisation that given the popularity of the league, based around the presence of imported football stars, football had become a mass popular phenomenon capable of being exploited for messages about the nation. Unfortunately, given the presence of so many imports and the relegation of native players to relative invisibility as part of the

footballing spectacle, the El Dorado period only served to further embed a sense of sporting inferiority, as Dimayor, club owners and the government focused more on accruing short-term economic benefits and diverting attention from national problems. The best efforts of sportswriters in *Estadio* and *Semana* in their editorials and articles to stimulate the expansion of sports practice and physical education across the nation and develop a sense of a national sporting culture and identity were largely frustrated.

Notes

¹ Several women featured on *Estadio*'s cover, the first being tennis player Rosita Rivas Umaña in edition 15 on 6 August 1949, followed by golfer Beatriz Magner in edition 24, on 9 October 1949. Male footballers dominate front covers.

² All translations from the original Spanish are by the author.

³ 'Chicos' is the original. in Spanish. This has a dual potential meaning of 'boys' or 'little ones'.

⁴ 'Criollo' is perhaps best translated as 'native' or 'Colombian' footballers in the context in which it is used in the press articles cited in this chapter. It has other historical meanings depending on its context.

⁵ Universidad were actually from Bogotá but played their home games in Pereira.

⁶ In addition to his renown as a journalist, Rueda Caro was one of the founding members and first president of Santa Fe football club, who won the first championship in 1948.

⁷ The original phrase in Spanish is '*hacer deporte es hacer patria*'. This was a regularly appearing mantra for the benefits of sport, and would be the motto of another sporting magazine *Afición*, published in the early 1960s.

⁸ An alcoholic drink made from maize.

⁹ Referees were brought in from the likes of Italy and Great Britain to help improve the standard of officiating and teach Colombians the rules.

¹⁰ The press also contributed to this footballing education; *Estadio* frequently included rules explanations to help fans understand the game.

¹¹ Atlético Municipal / Nacional came 6th of 10 in 1948, 7th of 14 in 1949, 15th of 16 in 1950, 15th of 18 in 1951, 13th of 15 in 1952 and 7th of 12 in 1953. However, the planning paid off when the stars left, as the team won the league in 1954 and were runners up the following year.

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