

OHAFC TOUR TO SOUTH AMERICA

APRIL-MAY 2003

There is an ancient Chinese curse which roughly translated means “may you live in interesting times”. The 24 hours leading up to the departure of the OHAFC tour to South America were certainly interesting. Mike and Claire Keenan sadly pulled out, Claire’s back not being up to a long-haul flight; an internal airline on which we were due to fly in Argentina went into liquidation and disappeared off the map; and our prized midweek fixture, an 11-a-side encounter under floodlights in Rio de Janeiro, was revealed to be nothing more than a kickabout on Copacabana beach.

Undeterred, the party gathered at Heathrow in such impressive style that Harry “lastminute.com” Hoffen tried to buy a ticket there and then. He failed to persuade the airline ticket desk or the touring party that he should be permitted to travel. David Lederman meanwhile selflessly decided that he needed to look after his father in business class, but there was no escape for the rest of us as we huddled up for a journey first to Madrid and then on to Buenos Aires. Messrs Hoffen (R.), Dalton, Molloy and Tweddle showed the gallantry that was to win the attention of no women at all in South America by stretching out on empty seats overnight, while whole families nearby were forced into the overhead luggage racks.

A warm welcome from our guide in Buenos Aires, and a spectacularly luxurious hotel, eased the discomforts of long-haul flight as we set about the business of touring in earnest. The first day saw golf at the Hurlingham Club for some, a light training session for others, and the start of a boom in the local polo shirt industry. The evening brought the confusing revelation that to obtain a glass of beer one had to order a “chop”, and the welcome discovery that exactly 16 adults could sit around the circular hotel bar ordering chops without leaving room for anyone else to be served at all. At this point, the Keenans’ absence became tolerable.



A tour of Buenos Aires followed on Saturday, highlights of which included the stunning Recoleta Cemetery (burial place of Eva Peron) and the suburb of Boca, where the Boca Juniors football stadium squeezes 53,000 into its intimidating terraces to watch much better teams than the one visiting that day. The guided tour gave John Wyn-Evans the opportunity to show on the changing room blackboard the tactical acumen which has caused the Welsh to become such a force in world football (it is hoped that the home team have since found an eraser), and the press conference table hosted a display of talent that would really only strike fear into the staff at the Southern Cross.

On Sunday, the day of our first tour match, Buenos Aires saw a hard-fought encounter in which the competing teams would stop at nothing to achieve victory. But so much for the Argentine general election; the match itself was a much gentler affair, played out in superb surroundings and glorious weather against Oddsocks FC, a team made up of the staff and old boys of St Georges College. A sound Harrow performance, no doubt inspired by the tactical discussions which had gone on into the early hours of the previous morning, saw us take a 2-0 half-time lead. The first OH scorer on South American soil was Paul Molloy, and further goals from Rupert Hoffen (2), Quentin Baker, and an Oddsock defender opened up a 5-0 lead. A somewhat complacent conclusion led to a final score of 6-4, but the result was quickly forgotten; a



post-match barbecue with seemingly endless food and drink will live long in the memory (as will the useful Spanish word *pajero*). The Club is hugely indebted to Rob Prata and the Oddsocks and may one day (it is hoped) be able to return their hospitality.

The hotel management having been given a few tips on interior décor by the Club captain, we moved on the following day to Iguacu Falls, on a new flight financed by a disgruntled travel agent. The falls, a mile-long stretch of spectacular cascades situated on the border of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, left many members of the party blissfully, but sadly temporarily speechless. An afternoon on the Argentine side was followed by a kickaround on a floodlit astroturf 4-a-side court in the jungle, where the only bite was provided by a couple of million insects. The following day, on the Brazil side, the party took an unforgettable boat trip under the falls; it was hard to know whether the bigger shower was the one in the boat or the one coming down on top of it. The afternoon saw us fly on to Rio, where we arrived on Tuesday evening, in time for the party's soi-disant "hard core" to be surprised by the attention of a couple of prostitutes. There again, the prostitutes had every man in Rio to choose from, so perhaps there was some reason to be surprised.



Wednesday consisted of two tours – a somewhat joyless bus trip around Rio (Calum Butler had become vocal at learning that he had the second lowest mental age in the party after Paul Molloy) took the majority of the party via several enormous traffic jams to the financial and cultural district, the monastery of Sao Bento, and the magnificent Maracana, while Bert Worthy spent an altogether happier afternoon in search of Brazil's finest golf course (he found it, and will happily talk to friends about La Gavea for many years, possibly continuously). Then that evening came what we had naively expected would be the casual kick-around – a 6-a-side fixture against local opposition (Escuela de Flamencos) under lights on Copacabana beach.

In football terms, no experience on tour came close to this. A 40-metre soft-sand pitch, and 6 Brazillians blessed with a level of pace and skill not seen in the Arthurian League since our revered President hung up his boots (or so he assures me). Rolling substitutions ensured the all-too-frequent involvement of the entire 13-strong playing tour party, but still we chased shadows for much of the time. We would undoubtedly remember for ever the opening goal (a 25 yard piledriver, not previously thought possible out of sand) if only we had seen it. We did see Escuela's first kick off, but could do nothing about the perfect trajectory of the instantaneous shot which brushed post and crossbar as it disappeared into the top left-hand corner of the net. In the end, our superior numbers (even Brazillians get tired), and cunning if ugly deployment of Bert's long throw, ensured that humiliation was avoided as we suffered a narrow loss which revisionist historians think was probably about 19-16.



In the return match the following night (organised, in a triumph of foresight, in case too few of us had been exerted the first time around) floodlight failure brought the game to a premature end with 30 seconds to go and our hosts in a near impregnable 17-6 lead. The game was declared a draw (by us) with the replay to take place on Blackpool sands at a time and date of our choosing.

Otherwise, time spent in Rio was divided between Ipanema beach, the hotel's spectacular roof terrace and pool, and trips to Sugarloaf and the Christ statue. Oh, and Help!, a nightclub which failed to live up to its name for this party, whose members repeatedly returned frustrated in the small hours, having either failed to realise that female attention had to be paid for, or, if they did realise, having been too mean to pay.

Our final game took place on Saturday morning at the somewhat optimistically named Jaca Stadium, a slender patch of grass squeezed in between a mountain and a shanty town, with modernist alfresco



changing facilities and uncomplicated plumbing. The lack of any moaning on arrival lent support to the view that large numbers of the team were still inebriated, a suspicion confirmed when we took every scoring chance presented to us in the first half and raced into a 4-0 lead. We continued in similar vein in the second half, going 6-0 and then 7-1 up, when hangovers kicked in, the referee's watch stopped, and after an extraordinary and extended last half hour eventually ran out 10-8 winners. As the comedy

scoreline suggests, some decent attacking football was played by both sides, Rupert Hoffen's hat-trick and the presence of a pygmy in the home team's goal probably being the decisive factors in our victory. Again, friends were made in the post-match celebration, and our hosts at RioSoccer looked after us well.

There remained time for this tireless party to take in a trip to the Maracana on the Sunday, to watch a dour 0-0 draw between Vasco de Gama and Fluminense, before a celebratory end-of-tour meal in which Jimmy Verdin was deservedly voted Player of the Tour and Nick Warner edged out a number of strong contenders for the Twit of the Tour award. It was with considerable reluctance that we bid our farewell to Rio the following afternoon, and although we almost contrived to miss our flight home, we have now returned with our knowledge of the beautiful game enhanced, and a cunning plan to have the pitch at Cobham shortened and covered in sand before the next Arthurian League campaign.

