Overcoming Escobar: Creating a Sustainable Future for Colombian Soccer Initiatives

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Introduction

When the World Cup began in June of 1994, the Colombian national soccer team seemed destined for international success. The team’s impressive World Cup campaign put Colombia front and center on the world stage, gaining approval of international soccer critics and even the coveted blessing of the sport’s greatest legend, Pelé. Led by defenseman and captain Andrés Escobar, the team was expected to rehabilitate the image of a country torn by drug lords and rampant violence through their inspiring play and imminent success. Unfortunately, Colombia’s World Cup field of dreams would prove more of a nightmare for the nation’s international image.

The team was upset in its first match against Romania 3–1, further adding pressure to the Colombian squad to defeat the United States and advance out of group play. Although the United States had not won a World Cup match since 1950, the pregame tensions for both teams were enormous. Colombian coach Francisco Maturana and his players began to receive death threats from their war-torn home. Forward Faustino Asprilla lamented, “This is what was on our minds as we went on to the pitch—that, if we didn’t win, there would be trouble and we would be killed” (Ginn). Burdened with fear, Colombia entered the match against the United States lacking the confidence that to date had helped them to rise to the top of the international pool.

Despite several promising attacks by the Colombian team at the beginning of the match, the fate of the national team was changed forever when U.S. midfielder John Harkes sent a shot that ricocheted off of the foot of Andrés Escobar and into the Colombian net. The U.S. team went on to clinch a 2–1 victory, deeming the game “the biggest win in the history of United States soccer,” thereby thrusting U.S. soccer onto the world stage (Howard). This stunning victory over the pretournament favorites sent Colombians into a violent frenzy.
that would make a lasting impression on the sport.

At 3:30 A.M. on July 2, as Andrés Escobar was leaving a nightclub on the outskirts of Medellín, he was verbally attacked about the own goal. After the verbal altercation, the assailant then shot Escobar six times and immediately fled from the scene. Although accounts differ, many claim to have heard the attacker cry out, “GOAL!” with every shot, mimicking the sports commentator from the U.S. match. Escobar was taken to the hospital and pronounced dead on arrival (McCallum).

Soccer is a powerful sport that has direct effects on culture, national identity, and economics. It is a connecting point for people across political, geographic, and socioeconomic boundaries and a unifying force for both national and global communities. An integral part of life in Colombia, soccer is tied to the country’s rich history, social evolution, and political resolution and has recently been utilized as a tool for future development. Colombian soccer has never reached a sustainable level of excellence, however, due to events like the murder of Andrés Escobar in 1994.

The path to becoming a successful soccer nation requires planning, from grassroots initiatives and education to the compilation of a national squad that has the perfect mixture of background, training, and talent. This article explores whether Colombia has been investing in soccer in a way that is beneficial to the advancement of national identity, cross-cultural relations, and youth development. I first provide a base understanding of the sport’s structure and the bloody history haunting the Colombian soccer programs before exploring the efficiency of the grassroots initiatives and professional soccer leagues. Through an investigation of the youth and professional programs, I evaluate the effectiveness of the current systems and how they might be improved to ensure a sustainable future for the success of Colombian soccer, both nationally and internationally. It is important to understand that successful sports programs are not simply evaluated on a win-loss basis. Financial stability, community-based outputs, regulation, and athletic talent will also be appraised to develop a clear picture of the successes or failures of each program.

Colombian Sports Structure

Colombian soccer can be viewed on three distinct levels: grassroots or local programs, the professional league, and the national teams. Each level has characteristics unique to Colombia and the Latin American sports franchising system. Comprehension of the sport’s structure is crucial to understanding the development of soccer over time as well as how the public violence and financial failures of major soccer programs have had a direct impact on Colombian culture and economics.

Grassroots and youth development programs are growing increasingly popular in both remote areas of Colombia and urban slums, where children have limited access to education and opportunity. International aid agencies, government initiatives, and in-country organizations have sent coaches and community organizers to areas of extreme poverty or duress to provide a creative outlet for struggling youth. These programs are meant to promote sportsmanship, gender equality, health, and education as well as provide athletic training, all at a low cost. Youth development programs not only focus on children but also have concentrations in community development, involving families and local leaders to create a more suitable environment for community growth and advancement.

Colombia’s premier professional football league is Categoría Primera A. This league includes 18 teams and is regulated by the football governing body, División Mayer del Fútbol Profesional Colombiano (DIMAYOR), and by Coldeportes, the judicial board for all Colombian sports. Play culminates in a championship game, called Copa Colombia, at the end of the season. Teams are distributed evenly throughout the country, with larger cities hosting two teams each.

Unlike American sports franchises, teams are structured as clubs. Apart from holding season tickets, fans can purchase membership to a club and have access to amenities, meeting

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Coldeportes is the Departamento Administrativo del Deporte la Recreación, la Actividad Física y el Aprovechamiento del Tiempo Libre (Administrative Department of Sport, Recreation, Physical Activity and the Use of Free Time), initially created in 1968.
spaces, and social networks. Clubs have a president and board of trustees who are responsible for managing finances, hiring coaches, and recruiting players. Leadership is crucial because teams are not guaranteed a spot in the Primera A league. Teams placing last in the Primera A league can be interchanged with the champion of the Primera B league. This sports structure is common across Latin America, although it promotes team association with an economic class, political party, or ethnic identity. This phenomenon tends to pit city, ethnic, and class identities against each other and has been instrumental in the violent history in the Colombian professional league. Violent tendencies continue onto the pitch, as Colombian soccer stars, such as the retired Iván Ramiro Córdoba, were infamous for collecting up to 25 yellow cards, or personal fouls, per season (Miguel et al.). The more successful European clubs rarely draft Colombian professional players due to a lack of international visibility and the tendency for violent play. It is possible, however, for players to advance by first moving to the more prominent Argentinean or Brazilian teams to train with some of Latin America’s most talented players, before moving on to a more competitive level of play.

The Colombian men’s and women’s national teams are managed and regulated by the Federación Colombiana de Fútbol (FCF) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Similar to the United States, players are selected from national pools to compete at the international level at a variety of age ranges. The national team must qualify through a series of continental regulation games to attend the FIFA World Cup, the world’s most watched sporting event. Colombia has not qualified for the event since 1998 but is currently working toward rehabilitating the image of the program and hopes to qualify for the 2014 tournament in Rio de Janeiro. It is the national teams that receive the most international press and serve as the face for Colombian soccer on the world stage.

The Evolution of Colombian Narco-Soccer

Soccer has been woven into the fabric of Colombian history, serving as the national pastime since 1903. British workers on the railroads of Barranquilla first introduced the game, and the sport quickly spread with the first organized football club founded, Barranquilla FBC, in 1909 (“Football”). It was not until 1924 that the first Colombian Football Federation, Liga de Fútbol, was formed and in 1936 that FIFA affiliation was first granted. A national soccer league would not emerge until 1948. Between 1948 and 1954 the Colombian soccer scene was promising, as Argentinean players populated the new league due to player strikes in Argentina, which led to nicknaming the era, El Dorado. Because of the successful early years of football, Colombia became internationally recognized for its playing style and young talent (Museo . . .). In 1962, Colombia qualified for its first FIFA World Cup but was eliminated in the first round of group play. Despite the 1962 World Cup defeat, Colombia’s Categoría Primera A league began to flourish, dominated by the Bogotá Millonarios team. Not until the 1970s did challengers, such as Atlético Nacional, Deportivo Cali, Independiente Santa Fe, and Atlético Junior, join Millonarios in its success and become recognized on the world stage.

In 1979, América de Cali established a new regime in Colombian soccer, ushering in a period dominated by violence and politics, known as the era of narco-soccer. América de Cali dominated the next decade of Categoría Primera A play, backed by infamous Cali drug cartel leaders, the Orejuela brothers (Museo . . .). With cocaine exportation on the rise, drug cartels began to rule throughout the nation, profiting as much as U.S. $50 million a day from sales in the U.S. market. These large profits were often legitimized through money laundering, making soccer club ownership a popular

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2 FCF is the organizing body for football in Colombia that helps develop the sports culture through FIFA-approved programs, supports the Primera A and B leagues, selects national team members, and helps improve the quality of life in Colombia (Federación Colombiana de Fútbol).

3 FIFA is the governing body for international football charged with protecting standards, encouraging competition, and promoting solidarity in the world game. Every four years FIFA organizes the World Cup, a tournament that brings together qualifying international squads to compete in the world’s most watched sporting event (Fédération Internationale de Football Association).
cleansing mechanism for the most profitable of drug lords. With a large influx of money, the country’s most popular professional teams began to excel. Clubs could afford to hire international coaches and players, bringing a new style to the game and fresh talent to the Colombian soccer scene (Zimbalist). In order to make the team more competitive, Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, leader of the Bogotá drug cartels, purchased the Millonarios club in 1982. Investigations after Gacha’s murder in 1990 led to the discovery of paperwork detailing illegal player payments and money-laundering operations. His was not the only murder associated with soccer throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Attempts to purge the cartels from club ownership also led to the murder of Colombian Justice Minister Rodrigo Bonilla in 1984. The murder of eight soccer officials in 1986 over unfavorable, game-changing calls sent a message of hostility to the international soccer community. Violence continued into 1988 when the secretary of the Metropolitan Soccer League lost his life over statements about the drug cartels. It was not by chance that the rise of Colombian soccer coincided with the popularity of cocaine. The most successful years for the most popular professional teams, Millonarios, Atlético Nacional, and América de Cali, can be correlated with the presence of the country’s most powerful drug kingpins in each of the major cities. Under control of the wealthy drug lords, these teams dominated Primera A league play, clinching the championship titles and asserting their power as a soccer dynasty (Zimbalist).

During this time, Colombia’s most notorious drug kingpin, Pablo Escobar (no relation to Colombian defenseman Andrés Escobar), involved himself in the direction of Atlético Nacional, his favorite team from Medellín. It was said that Escobar would kill to win a soccer match and was suspected in the notorious murder of referee Michael Ortega after an unfavorable call in November 1989. He was personally invested in the development of the team and its players. He used drug profits to benefit the community, building soccer fields and providing equipment for the impoverished children in Medellín. These fields later proved an excellent recruitment resource, producing some of the country’s most talented players (Ginn). Due to Escobar’s commitment and sheer financial resources, Atlético Nacional went on to be the first Colombian winners of the Copa Libertadores, the South American soccer championship, in 1989. His charity work did not, however, save him from the threats of extradition to the United States. Escobar continued to support the development of national soccer in Colombia, until his murder in 1993. He was buried with the flag of his team, Atlético Nacional, and his death was mourned by millions of impoverished soccer fans nationwide (Zimbalist).

It was the close involvement of the Colombian drug cartels that helped write the history of Colombian soccer, both with its international successes and failures leading to bloody consequences. The Colombian national soccer team qualified for the World Cup in 1990, at the peak of drug exportation and violence. It was not until 1994, however, that the Colombian national team earned international attention for its startling rise through the FIFA ranks. Colombia finally had acquired an exceptionally strong collection of players and had the financial means to keep them engaged. In the midst of extreme guerrilla warfare, the Colombian national team was the face of the country, responsible for promoting a national image of peace and prosperity. The team needed to stand proud in a time of national violence, playing harder to bring positive press coverage to Colombia. Connections remained, however, with Pablo Escobar and other drug kingpins who had helped the players step out of poverty onto the world soccer stage. During the 1994 World Cup, these relationships proved dangerous as head coach Francisco Maturana and midfielder Gabriel Gómez received many death threats from drug kingpins and national team owners via fax and telephone. “There will be bombs in your house and in Gomez’s house, if you put him on the field” (Brooke). More threats had been extended to players prior to the U.S. match, creating an aura of panic and fear, throwing off the game of the Colombian team from the norm. Seeded first, the team lost in the first round of group play and returned to Colombia defeated and targets for numerous death threats. Escobar’s tragic death brought a frenzy of media attention to the broader violence and anarchy in Colombia, forever tying soccer to drug trafficking. After 1994, the government purged the national
soccer organizations of drug cartels, bringing in new management and heavily regulating sources of team funding. As a consequence, 14 of 18 Categoría Primera A teams were at risk of becoming bankrupt and were not competitive on the international level in 2010. The Colombian national team’s world ranking fell from 4th to 34th, as many players moved abroad or resigned. Colombia has not qualified for a World Cup since (Zimbalist).

**Youth Initiatives: Opportunity and Reward**

It was with great irony that, despite the immense violence and tragedy connected to the actions of drug king Pablo Escobar, his work as a community activist provided a starting point for grassroots initiatives in the world of children’s athletics and education. Building hospitals, churches, schools, and soccer fields in the slums of Medellín, Escobar became a Robin Hood figure for the poor and uneducated population. Although he took interest in the impoverished so that he could later use them as pawns in his drug trafficking practices, he set an unlikely standard for community development initiatives. His programs produced soccer players like Andrés Escobar, who went on to define an era in Colombian soccer on an international scale. He believed that soccer fields provided children without access to an education the opportunity to develop a unique athletic skill set, to experience community relationships, and to at least momentarily break free from the world of drugs and violence surrounding them (Zimbalist). Although Escobar’s motives were not purely altruistic, he believed in the powerful benefits of soccer for both children and the community. Growing up in poverty, Escobar understood the need for organized sport and education and used his abundant resources to create a standard for future work in community development.

Youth grassroots soccer initiatives today seek to provide benefits similar to those started by Pablo Escobar and his fellow drug kingpins. Programs currently present and working in Colombia stand as models for social change through organized sports and education in the most impoverished areas of the country. Children living in slums in major cities or remote rural areas do not often have full access to educational resources or authoritative figures and role models. These communities are most susceptible to the rule of the few remaining drug cartels, as families and children have limited means and are always looking for opportunities to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Unlike Escobar’s work, current youth development initiatives seek to use soccer as a tool to keep young children in rural areas from being drawn to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), considered a terrorist organization by the government, or to local drug cartels. With almost 400,000 children lacking access to a proper primary education nationwide, soccer can serve as a constructive educational tool for those in need (World Bank). Although some programs are well organized, others are informal, as teachers or government officials bring the game to remote villages with limited access to the more developed parts of the country. These individuals often leave the first impression of authority on the community and its youth who have had little or no contact or experience with government agencies. Soccer in these ungoverned spaces provides a creative outlet for children and complements what little formal education they receive. Sports encourage them to learn values, such as fairness, health, hard work, and friendship (Cano).

Formal nongovernmental organizations promoting soccer for health, education, and peace have become increasingly popular in the more developed areas of Colombia. Under the Soccer and Peace Network, 25,000 Colombian children participate in a social development initiative in which organized sport and activity can be used to improve life skills. The open network of 17 not-for-profit organizations is supported by the World Bank through the Japan Social Development Fund (JSDF), the German Agency for International Cooperation, and the United Nations Development Programme. Since 2010, the organizations involved in the network have been using soccer to promote coexistence, reconciliation, and peace among children and community members (“Playing Soccer for Peace . . .”). One of the most notable organizations is Fútbol con Corazón, a group based in eight urban locations nationwide that focuses on respect, honesty, tolerance, and solidarity through organized play. The program not only
includes professional trainers but also allows for permanent monitoring and evaluation for all participants, ages 5 to 16, living in extreme poverty. Fútbol con Corazón uses a three-step model for social intervention: (1) sports training that promotes healthy living, the development of on-field skills, and abiding by the established conventional rules of the game; (2) social welfare programming, including workshops for the development of life skills, school for parents, and partnerships with certified educational institutions; and (3) nutritional benefits, such as lunches and afternoon snacks and dietary monitoring by the staff. This model is used by the organization in hopes of promoting positive social change in the lives of youth and their communities (Fútbol con Corazón). The JSDF Colombia: Soccer Together campaign through the World Bank was handled by Fútbol con Corazón for the improvement of gender equality and inclusion in the local educational institutions and received $2.76 million of funding in 2011 (World Bank).

The model used by Fútbol con Corazón and its counterpart organizations is the Football for Peace methodology and is the principal reason for the overwhelming success of these organizations. This methodology, established in 2003, uses principles of coexistence and physical exercise to promote values, such as teamwork, gender equality, victory with humility, defeat with dignity, tolerance, peace, fair play, and respect for the body and mind. Soccer is a tool to counteract the negative influences children are exposed to in the poverty-stricken urban areas where they live. Physical exercise and athletic training are used as a base for lessons in fair play, respect, and gender equality. Organizations, such as Tiempo de Juego (translated, Playtime), also include other creative and technologic opportunities for participants. These opportunities are part of the Generación de Oportunidades Laborales (GOL) (Generational Careers) program offered through Tiempo de Juego. GOL, in conjunction with a variety of government-sponsored programs, seeks to improve the socioeconomic situation of the youth participants by providing training programs and employment opportunities in journalism, athletic training, dance, and systems engineering (Tiempo de Juego). The Football for Peace system was recently adopted on an international scale through the Colombiao soccer tournament. Originating in Medellín in 1996, this tournament brings together about 200 children from around the country to take part in a “Game of Peace.” Game advisors help children collaborate and embrace themes of civic participation, gender equality, and conflict resolution. Rules echo these themes as no formal referees are used, and the first goal of the game must be scored by a girl in order to be counted (“Golombiao”). In 2005, the tournament became an international event, and the Football for Peace methodology has been exported to countries around the world.

These programs, in Colombia and internationally, focus on building whole individuals rather than just athletes and stress civic engagement as well as personal health and fitness. Although they may develop young athletes in a way that could be beneficial to the growth and success of the professional and national programs, the real success lies in the opportunities provided for the children and the community at large. As Soccer Without Borders co-chair Mary McVeigh states:

> What we seek as “outcomes” are growth, inclusion, and personal success. Growth means that the youth is moving positively toward adulthood, which requires the development of character, respect, identity and personal responsibility. Inclusion means that youth who are often excluded from opportunities gain the social capital they need to integrate. Personal success means that youth can set tangible goals that are relevant to them and their dreams, and have the tools, skills, and support to reach them (McVeigh).

What do growth, inclusion, and personal success mean for Colombia? A more positive outlook for the future of at-risk youth, social inclusion, and community growth may be just a few of the benefits found by using soccer as a development tool. The Football for Peace program encourages children and coaches alike to develop a strong sense of sportsmanship, leadership, and personal identity through unique rules and lessons on fair play. As the popularity of these grassroots soccer initiatives continues to grow, more children living in underdeveloped areas will gain access to a broader
range of educational opportunities. Whether these programs could be as successful on a national level is yet to be seen, because they require a strong personal and individual relationship with the community.

Rehabilitation of the Professional Soccer Scene

In response to the series of professional soccer-related issues (discussed previously), the Colombian legislature passed Law 181 in 1995 (Willis). Commonly referred to as the Sports Law, it was the first attempt at regulatory legislation aimed at making the operation of all professional sports teams more transparent. The law created the National Sport System, which was to promote sports and recreation in Colombia, along with Coldeportes. In addition it called for the corporate restructuring of professional sports clubs, along with minimum financial standards and player labor requirements.

Although the rules for professional teams were strict under Law 181, no sanctions were put in place for clubs that did not comply with the newly promulgated regulations (Uribe et al.). Despite the efforts of the Colombian government, professional soccer continued to be riddled with drug cartel control, labor law violations, debt, license suspension, and default on federal loans. DIMAYOR general secretary Rafael Arias attributes these financial struggles to the ending of the narco-soccer era. Previously money was laundered through the soccer programs, and they were free to spend frivolously and begin large projects, such as stadium construction. When such funding dried up, teams had to take on debt to maintain roster salaries and continue operation. América de Cali, which has floundered financially since being placed on the Clinton List in 1995, owed players more than ten months of back pay in May 2011 and has had its license revoked by Coldeportes for violating players’ labor rights. Government statements show that the Deportivo Cali team has defaulted on debt due to construction expenditures for a new stadium that was to generate urban growth and revitalization. The Independiente Santa Fe team was accused in 2010 of having ties to the Norte de Valle mob, one of Colombia’s largest remaining cartels, and laundering about U.S. $1.5 billion of illegal cash (“Colombian Football”).

Because of these and other incidents, the Colombian legislature subsequently passed Law 1445, or the Football Law, in May 2011, with President and Independiente Santa Fe fan Manuel Santos’ approval. Primarily the law seeks to stop professional teams from being funded by criminal activity. Under the Football Law, no one “may hold control over more than one club within the same sport, directly or indirectly through a third person,” and the owners must prove where funding comes from (Barahona). Professional football teams must follow one of two corporate structures and thus be regulated by one of two government agencies. A team can be structured as a nonprofit organization, regulated by the Civil Code, or it can be a corporation/stock company, regulated by the Commerce Code. The Football Law provides new standards for company profit, voting power, minimum number of stockholders, and labor regulations for players. Teams are now held financially responsible for player pay by Coldeportes and can be subject to suspension or withdrawal of recognition as a professional sports organization for defaulting on this liability. In addition to corporate restructuring, labor regulation, and financial stipulations, the Football Law makes professional soccer clubs responsible for fan violence and substance abuse within the stadiums (Uribe et al.). Barras bravas, better known as football hooligans with a tendency for violence and stadium vandalism, can now be jailed up to ten years for the use of explosives within the stadium. Law officials are hoping that ticket sales, which have fallen by almost half since 1991 due to extreme hooligan violence and a decline in player quality and team competitiveness, will increase with enhanced security measures for fan safety (“Colombian Football . . .”).

The price of a stable, competitive soccer league is high, with the Colombian legislature authorizing a government investment of more than U.S. $53 million in sports infrastructure. With the passing of Law 1445 also came the

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4The Clinton List, formally known as the list of Specifically Designated Nationals, is a compilation of individuals or companies acting on behalf of targeted countries, terrorists, or narco-trafficking groups. Groups on this list generally have their assets frozen and are cut off from all U.S. business interaction.
pledge to invest 20 percent of state publicity funds to promote sports and culture within Colombia. In addition, the implementation of the Superate (Get Ahead) program will add another U.S. $40 million to the growing government investment, through the creation of a more secure sports infrastructure and the offering of more than 300 sports scholarships to talented youth nationwide (Barahona). The Superate program provides incentives for at-risk youth ages 7 to 18 and municipal educational institutions to participate in an exchange of learning and athletics. Program objectives include linking the National Sport System to educational institutions in order to develop well-rounded athletes and the creation of spaces that allow for the discovery of athletic talent that can be promoted to professional leagues. Participants in the program receive bonds exchangeable for educational technology or sporting equipment and outstanding athletes receive scholarships and opportunities to perform on a national level. It is the hope of program directors that more than 1,600,000 children and educators in 88 urban areas will be participants in 2014 (Superate).

With the influx of government funding, the development of upcoming athletes, and the newest regulations in place, will the Colombian Primera A league change for the better? Many believe that the Football Law is another step in the right direction for cleaning up the sport. Hopefully, the professional league will no longer be a place associated with drug trafficking, where the cartel with the most business can decide the winner. Players will be paid regularly, with the expectation that the financial stability will improve their home lives and, therefore, their attention to the game. Labor regulations for players should help the league to avoid the unionization of athletes, which could cause a massive overhaul of the corporate structure held by most teams. Most notable, however, is the sense of accountability that is now shared by Coldeportes and the team owners, presidents, and stockholders. Millonarios, one of Bogotá’s two soccer clubs, is even considering relinquishing the two league titles won while the team was controlled by drug lord Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha in 1987 and 1988 (Willis). Since the establishment of the Football Law, Millonarios is the only team to have made such an offer, setting off a debate among owners and managers about the moral obligation of sports teams and the legality of the act. The debate raises the question, “What will it take to clear the scoreboard of Colombian professional soccer?” Colombian government officials seem to think that returning the coveted titles is a positive start, while rival owners call the gesture absurd and refuse to follow suit. Although it is noble of Millonarios to propose wiping away titles won during the narco-trafficking era, the talented players of that day should not be discounted. The club still clinched the championship title, defeating the highly skilled and talented opponents it faced in 1987 and 1988. Those who played in the years of drug cartel control were the most talented players in South America, helping to foster the most competitive play since the years of El Dorado. Relinquishing the title would imply that Millonarios intends to discount the talent of the players whose only fault lies in accepting a much-needed paycheck from the country’s most notorious drug cartels.

What the Football Law is not structured to accommodate is the interesting, even positive, effect of the narco-soccer era on the Colombian professional league. “Remember that in the 1980s and 1990s, most people wavered between desire and ethics. They wanted the team managers to create winning teams by hiring famous footballers, at the same time they ignored or hid the disappointment they may have felt about the participation of narco-trafficking money,” states Colombian sociologist Fernando Morales (Martinez). With Colombian soccer organizations receiving more than U.S. $40 million between 1985 and 1989 alone, teams were able to purchase the most talented foreign players, raising the standard of the domestic league (Barahona). Even teams like Atlético Nacional, based in Medellín, which only signed domestic players, had the capability of paying for the best. Drug money made Colombia competitive and entertaining on a national level and helped the country to develop its hybrid style of play. New financial restrictions and more league regulation may stifle the growth of professional clubs and limit their creativity in rebuilding the once mighty empire that was Colombian professional soccer. This regulation is necessary to ensure the safety and well being of players,
club owners, and fans. Although this may be a step in the right direction for the rehabilitation of Colombian soccer, the very need for the Football Law nonetheless indicates the sport’s continued captivity to its bloody past. Transitioning from a long history of violence and corruption will be difficult, but it can be managed through team accountability and an ownership of the past by players, coaches, club owners, and fans.

**Overcoming Escobar: The Future Development of Colombian Soccer**

Soccer is the pastime of a nation plagued by poverty, violence, and instability. It is an integral part of Colombian culture, becoming “an arena in which social actors symbolize and reproduce by means of their social practices the values dominant in a given period” (Archetti and Romero, p. 39). As narco-trafficking and violence diminish and Colombians strive to create a more civil environment within which the nation can thrive, the social practices and values of soccer will further evolve as well. Soccer becomes a model for social inclusion, as any person regardless of gender, race, age, or socio-economic status can play and follow the local, professional, or national team. It becomes a societal bonding agent, uniting the people in a common cause. Fostering this sense of community, soccer breaks down temporal boundaries left behind by years of government neglect, racial violence, and the iron rule of the FARC and leaves in their place a rediscovered hope for success and achievement. Whether a child in the urban slums of Bogotá, one day hoping for a chance to play soccer on the world stage, or a resident of Cali cheering for América de Cali in a Copa Colombia qualifying match, soccer renews hope. It removes focus from the negative, if only for 90 minutes, and unites an unlikely group of individuals.

Success also brings favorable press to Colombia, which has struggled to present itself in a positive light. Although the Colombian national soccer team has failed to qualify for a FIFA World Cup since 1998, the team is currently making great strides toward a bid for the 2014 games. Qualification for an event of this nature would not only bring together a nation but also give Colombia the opportunity to show the international soccer community that it is capable of overcoming the tragic events of 1994. Colombian soccer would be seen as no longer defined by the two Escobars. A great source of pride can be found in the ever-growing number of youth initiatives, new legislation changing the way the professional league is run, and the newfound success of the national program. Soccer emulates the changes being made on a national scale. As the country continues to grow and mature, so will the game.

On the surface, soccer is nothing more than a flat patch of grass, 22 players, two goals, and one ball. It is nothing more than a hobby. A soccer team, whether at the youth, national, or international level, is not the same as a city and most certainly is not the same as a country; yet the purpose that soccer serves in Colombia transcends the game itself. Soccer lies deep within the spirit of the citizenry and acts as a strong uniting force in the lives of all Colombians. In order to create a sustainable future for the sport, the nation must recognize its past, look toward its future, and continue to foster a special sense of community that can be found through soccer.
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