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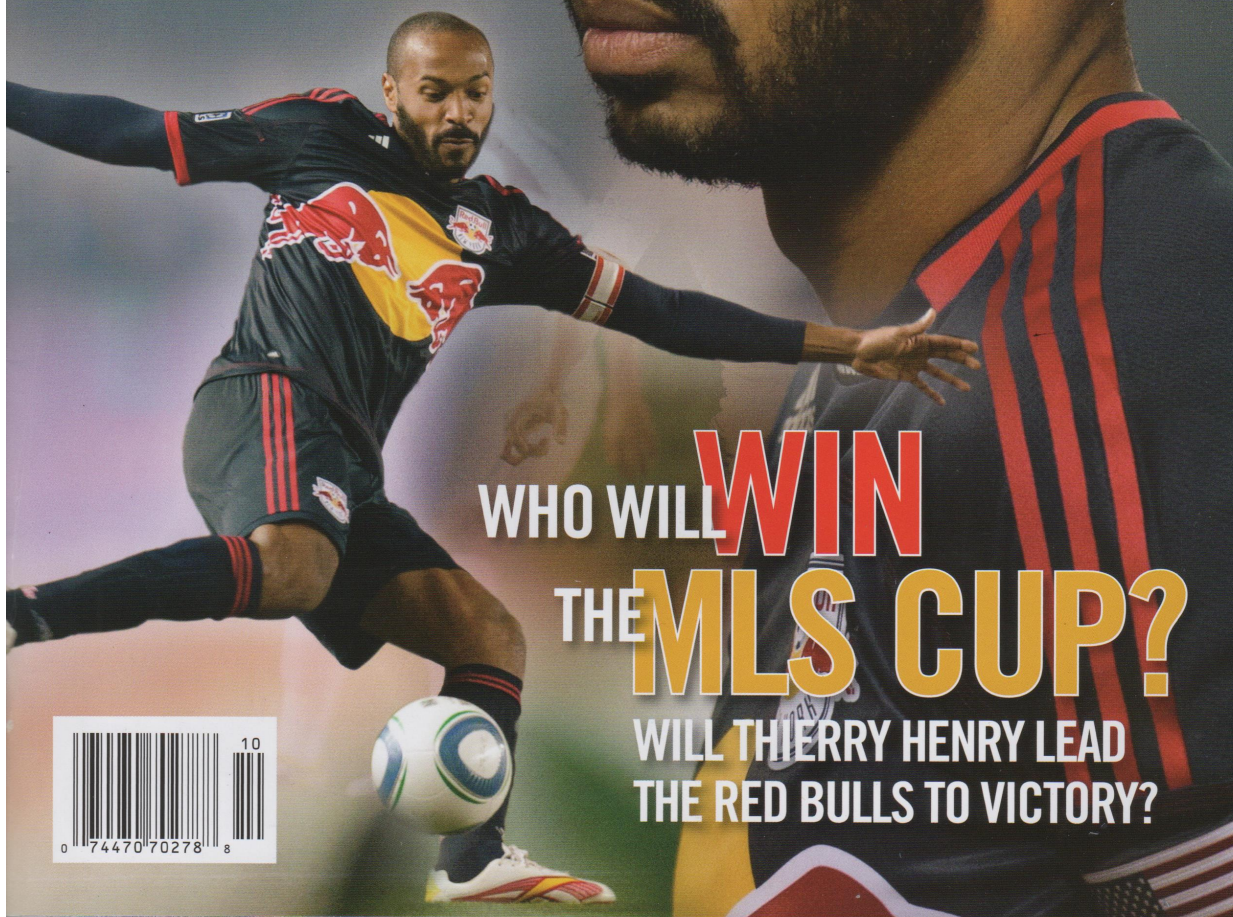
Magazine

IN THIS ISSUE:

THE FAST AND THE FURY

PHIL WOOSNAM:
A SOCCER PIONEER

THE FUTURE OF THE GAME
IN ATLANTIC CANADA



WHO WILL **WIN**
THE **MLS CUP?**

WILL THIERRY HENRY LEAD
THE RED BULLS TO VICTORY?





LA PASIÓN

WHY URUGUAYANS ARE SO SUCCESSFUL IN SOCCER AND WHAT CANADIANS CAN LEARN FROM THEM!

BY RICHARD BUCCIARELLI

On August 27th to September 8th, 2013, I was contracted to run pre-season fitness assessments with Canadian SC Uruguay, a professional soccer team from Montevideo, Uruguay, that won promotion into the "B" Division (second division) of the Uruguayan Primera Liga this past spring. During my stay, I also had the privilege of watching several Uruguayan professional first team and academy teams train and play games.

This experience had a profound impact on me as I was able to see, first-hand, various different aspects of the Uruguayan life and culture, into which the sport of soccer is deeply ingrained in a way that is hard to comprehend for a Canadian like me. The Uruguayans have a word for this love for the game, La Pasión – the passion. It is my opinion that La Pasión is the reason Uruguay has had such continued success in the sport. Below is a summary of the three reasons La Pasión has been so crucial to the success of soccer in Uruguay, and what we as Canadians can take away from it:

1. SOCCER IS NOT JUST THE MOST POPULAR SPORT IN URUGUAY – IT'S THE ONLY SPORT

The first thing that became apparent to me right away about Uruguay was that everybody in the country lives eats and breathes soccer. It's an obsession for the game that is ingrained into every Uruguayan citizen. Everywhere I went, I

saw people playing soccer (on the street, on small patches of grass, on various outdoor and indoor fields, even in the airport terminals)! The only time that nobody in Uruguay is playing soccer is when the national team plays (a time when the entire country can be found either at home or at a restaurant/bar watching the game). The passion that Uruguayans have for the sport is never more evident than when you watch the players train. In my observations of youth academy training sessions, as well as first team practices, the players were literally fighting (shirt-pulling, wrestling, even kicking each other) to win and maintain possession of every ball from the start to the end of training. Based on my observations, it may be possible that the element that makes the Uruguayan training sessions more intense is simply that the players have more of a passion and love for the game than Canadian players do.

2. THE PLAYERS ARE NOT JUST COMPETING FOR A SPOT ON THE TEAM – THEY ARE COMPETING FOR THEIR LIVELIHOOD

On the way to view a professional U16 academy team called River Plate train, my driver stopped to pick up another player from the team. On the ride to his house, we drove into a "barrio" (Spanish word for ghetto). The houses on this street were literally falling apart. There

was garbage everywhere, and there were people huddled under blankets on the sides of the road. The player came running out of the door and into the car. Over the course of the training session, it became apparent that he was one of the best players on the field, and certainly the most aggressive. When I spoke to one of the coaches, he explained his opinion on the subject: This player lives in the barrio. He has four siblings and his parents are barely earning enough money to pay their living expenses. He requires rides from other parents to get to training because he does not have a bicycle and cannot afford the cost of bus fare. He is hungry to succeed in soccer, because soccer represents the best way for him to escape his present living conditions. According to his coach, this player's situation is not unique. He estimated that in a big city like Montevideo, there are probably over 10,000 talented young soccer players who cannot afford transportation to training. It may be possible that this hunger for success can raise the motivation of Uruguayan players, which in turn raises the intensity level of their training sessions. While it is obviously not possible to replicate the economic conditions in Uruguay in a country like Canada, it may be important to consider ways in which motivation and competitiveness may be increased in Canadian youth players.

3. THE TRAINING FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT ARE BAD – AND THAT'S A GOOD THING

One other, very important common thread can be found in Uruguayan soccer – something I noticed in all of the training grounds (both for first teams and academies) that I visited during my trip: the training facilities, especially the fields, are of poor quality. The fields that the professional teams train on in Uruguay are basically made up of very hard/dry grass and dirt, and they are not well maintained. The ground is not always level, and in some fields the penalty areas were so worn out that the entire six-yard box had basically been converted into a sand pit. I was



Richard Bucciarelli with Richard Medina, forward with Canadian SC Uruguay

expecting the hard and uneven ground to make the execution of technical skills more difficult for the players, especially when receiving the ball. Once the players began training, however, I noticed that the field conditions were actually helping the players improve their technique and speed of play. The Canadian SC first team seemed completely unaffected by the random and unpredictable bounces the ball was taking. They were still able to pass and move the ball on the ground

accurately, and their first touches were executed with speed and precision. Furthermore, it appeared that the field conditions had a positive impact on the players' speed of play. Because the ball travels much faster and more unpredictably than it would on a better quality field, players on both sides of the ball (attackers and defenders) must react and make decisions much quicker. Almost all the professional teams in Uruguay (excluding the top teams like Peñarol and

Nacional) train on poor quality fields, but play their games on better-maintained natural grass pitches. If players and the team as a whole can keep possession, attack, and defend with speed on a hard dirt field, the transition to soft grass must make the game feel significantly easier. It seems that this effect has had a very positive impact on Uruguayan players' development of both technical ability, and speed of play. Perhaps this may be another aspect of training that could be useful to further the development of Canadian soccer players.

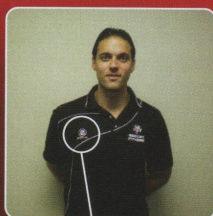


Richard Bucciarelli is the President of Soccer Fitness Inc., a soccer-specific strength and conditioning company located in Toronto. He recently spent two weeks in Uruguay assisting the coaching staff of Canadian SC, a professional team in the Uruguayan Primera 'B' division, during their pre-season.

For more information about Richard and Soccer Fitness, please visit www.soccerfitness.ca.



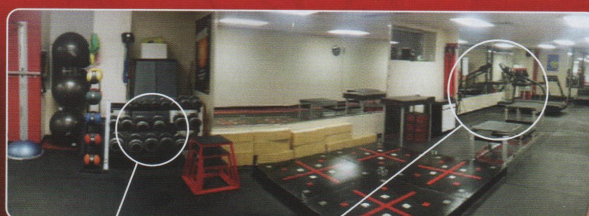
Trio Sportsplex, 2nd Floor
601 Cityview Boulevard, Vaughan
905-417-4110
richard@soccerfitness.ca



RICHARD BUCCIARELLI

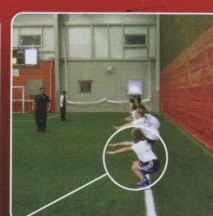
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