

# THE HIGHEST DERBY IN THE WORLD

Bolivar, The Strongest and  
how altitude influences  
La Paz's great rivalry

*BY HARRY ROBINSON*

*A shot of the Libertador Simon  
Bolivar stadium in La Paz*





**The soundtrack to Bolivia's capital, La Paz, which sits 3,600m above sea level, is unique. Vans choke up the city's endless hills and *cholitas* natter and bargain with their latest customer. Once a derogatory term for a castigated and discriminated section of society, *cholita* is now an affectionate name for the Aymara indigenous women. Deliberately undersized bowler hats perch on their heads, a tradition encouraged by British railway workers who ordered hats from Italy and, upon realising they were too brown and too small, convinced these women to buy them. The exact position of the hat now shows whether the woman is married or not. Many of them sit street-side, surrounded by bulging sacks of potatoes and fruit. Others spend their Thursdays and Sundays wrestling atop one of La Paz's vast hillsides.**

But the soundtrack to La Paz is one heavily accented by the heavy breathing of the foreign tourist. There is less oxygen in the air and even those who feel no altitude sickness must occasionally pause on the side of the road and pant. While they do so, a *cholita* strides by with a 20kg sack of potatoes over each of her shawled shoulders.

Overhead, a cable-car system carries thousands to El Alto, a sprawling red-bricked hilltop city. And in these two overlapping cities where the air is so thin exists a passionate football culture.

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"The *clásico paceño* is different to all others," insisted a fan of Club Bolívar. Every derby has its own intricacies but in the context of Latin American football,

he has every right to make such a claim about that of La Paz.

It's Bolivian football's biggest game, contested between two clubs with long and successful histories. With 29 national titles, Club Bolívar are the dominant force. Named after Simon Bolívar, they are the only Bolivian club to have reached the semi-finals of the Copa Libertadores.

Their rivals are The Strongest, whose English name is a nod to the pasty travellers who brought the game to the Andes. *El Tigre* have fewer trophies than their rivals but a proud history. They are Bolivia's oldest club. It was they who inaugurated the Estadio Hernando Siles where both teams now play. It is neither side's home stadium but its 42,000-person capacity indulges ticketing demands.

*La Vieja Escuela*, the *barra brava* of Bolívar, sit in the stadium's Curva Norte. Decked out fully in light blue on match days, they've been the main ultra group since 2012. It's been a relatively smooth transition from three rival *barras* to one and their philosophy is now to support the team rather than scrap with the opposition.

That's an ideal taken up by both sets of *barras*. "Yes, it's more of a party," explained Rodrigo Parra Salinas, a Bolívar fan who has collected more than 300 of his team's shirts. "It is different. La Paz is a city known for being Bolivia's economic and political centre. There are people from all areas of the country. We live in peace. There's a lot of tolerance because everyone knows that the fan base of both clubs isn't necessarily born in La Paz."

But when either team faces Chilean opposition, for example, “then it becomes dangerous,” Rodrigo said.

10,000 Bolivar fans went to la Bombonera in Buenos Aires for the 2004 Copa Sudamericana final. It’s an eight-hour journey by air but the 38-hour coach journey was an equally popular choice for fans. Boca Juniors, though, were too good.

Rodrigo sits in the Curva Norte of the stadium. At the end of the 1980s, Bolivar’s *barras* invaded the Curva Sur, fighting with The Strongest’s fans and trying to establish themselves in their rivals’ section. The state had to get involved, insisting the two *barras* separate. Between them, the leaders decided that whoever’s team won the next *clásico* would earn the right to stay. The Strongest won 3-0 and have remained in the Curva Sur since 1993.

The Strongest have a colourful support. They’ve played in yellow and black since the early 20th century and their *barra*, *La Gloriosa Ultra Sur 34*, predates their Bolivar equivalent by more than two decades.

LGUS34 meet on the corner of Diaz Romero, just below the stadium’s Curva Sur, making their way to the sound of drum beats, trumpets, cymbals and a ‘Tigre’ war chant.

In 1930, The Strongest won the league championship without conceding a single goal and inaugurated the Estadio Hernando Siles. A couple of years later, the players who achieved that great feat took on a very different battle.

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Bolivia has many neighbours, but not many friends. They have been landlocked since defeat to Chile in the 1884 War of the Pacific. The recently deposed President Evo Morales made the issue a priority during his 13-year presidency but the International Court of Justice ruled against Bolivia, a country which still has a navy despite a distinct lack of water on which to sail.

In 1932, Bolivia fought Paraguay in the bloodiest Latin American military conflict of the century, contesting the oil-rich Gran Chaco region. Bolivia won just a single battle, named *La Batalla de Cañada Strongest* – thought to be the only battle in history named after a football team. It was The Strongest who steered their country to victory in a division filled by players, coaches, directors and fans. Renato Sainz, who played in the 1930 World Cup, fought while the club captain Victor Hugo Estrada Cárdenas was taken prisoner by the Paraguayans. Another player, José Rosendo Bullaín, was killed as he and teammates searched for cannons. 600 fans had signed up alongside them.

They recovered to win titles again in 1935 and 1938, but 25 years after the battle all 20 members of their team were killed. Invited to an exhibition game in Santa Cruz in September 1969, their plane disappeared on the return journey. It had crashed near the rural town of Viloco. All 69 passengers and five crew members died in a tragedy attributed to pilot error.

The Strongest managed to fight on through the direction of their great President, Don Rafael Mendoza, who built the Achumani Sports Complex and organised games against Pelé’s Santos

and Boca Juniors. Bolivian football was still finding its feet. Some would say that remains the case today.

The first league started in 1914 but it was only in the mid-1950s that teams outside of La Paz joined. The country's meek showing in 1978 World Cup qualification forced change. Top clubs broke away and formed a new league which survived until 2017 when the Bolivian Football Federation wrestled back control and in doing so organised three league seasons within a year. The Strongest won one and Bolivar two. It was the country's fifth restructuring of the leagues in 50 years, the strangest of which involved some teams being relegated mid-season in 2005.

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Kettle drums, firecrackers and confetti make for an incredible atmosphere at the Hernando Siles. The Siles is tucked in between a scattering of high-rise flats. The night before I'd stood at a viewpoint about a kilometre away. The pitch looked good but the terraces perfect, against an extraordinary background of a million twinkling *paceño* lights and snow-capped mountains, a reminder that although the sun shines during the day you are in fact two and a half times higher than the peak of Ben Nevis.

*Cholita* stalls were spread out along the pavement. Meat sizzled on a hot plate, to the left of which was a child's stool for the next customer: me. I chatted and ate *sandwich de Chola* – a roll stuffed with pulled pork, pickled veg and salsa – and drank *refresco de mocochinchi*, a refreshing sugary drink made from a dehydrated peeled peach.

I made my way into the Curva Sur and from the steps watched two hundred bouncing members of LGUS34 hop towards the entrance. Many of them bought thin polystyrene sheets on their way in to provide some additional comfort on concrete seats.

I stood above LGUS34 for a half. An old man decked out in a clean white coat and hat wandered along the front of the stand with a tray and what seemed to be a petrol canister. He made his way towards me, creaking knees struggling on the concrete steps, and after using his canister to propel himself upwards he poured a sweet hot chocolate out of its lid. I joined LGUS34 in the lower tier to celebrate four second-half goals and a 5-2 win.

Very occasionally, the *clásico* is played away from the Hernando Siles. For *paceños*, these are the most memorable games. Bolivar were crowned champions in 1997 after a two-legged tie which involved games at both clubs' real home grounds. Repairs to the Hernando Siles in 2011 forced the *clásico* to go to Achumani, the home of The Strongest whose fans insisted that no Bolivar supporters would be welcome.

"We organised ourselves in a caravan with flags, got out about four blocks away and began walking up," Rodrigo remembers. "They were shocked. We went into the stadium and practically filled it. We still sing about it now. These games are special because fewer people are allowed in."

Payback came in 2016 when The Strongest won the league on Christmas Eve with a derby victory at the Siles.

Up the hill and accessible by cable car is El Alto. A sprawling flea market, one of the world's largest, threatens to tumble off the hill's edge. Everything is for sale: designer clothes, barber's chairs, front doors, old chicken-shop fryers, a table-football table with 'Qatar 2022' stamped on its side. Delve further into the El Alto grids – La Paz moving out of sight – and you'll find a new stadium which perhaps offers a fresh dawn for Bolivian football.

This residential mass is a world away from La Paz, the governmental hub, and it has long sought its own identity. The arrival of Club Always Ready, based in La Paz until 2018, may provide some civic pride. Their name derives from the Scouts' motto, 'Be Prepared'. Translated into the Spanish '*Siempre Listo*', it seems to have been re-translated into a more literal 'Always Ready'.

In 2018, they moved into Estadio de Villa Ingenio, a government-funded 25,000-seater ground. It supposedly meets the standards for international tournaments but sits at a breath-taking 4,150m above sea level. That football is played in these conditions is quite incredible. Few can manage it. Argentina

have a long history of defeats in La Paz. Messi threw up in 2013 and four years later la Albiceleste's players took a pre-match cocktail of viagra and caffeine to arrest the effects of the altitude. They still lost 2-0.

Perhaps Bolivia will soon play in El Alto. Their home advantage will grow to even greater levels. Hopefully their football will too. Always Ready, who wear kits similar to those of River Plate, have ambitious owners, a father and son who have outlined their intentions of winning the Copa Libertadores. No Bolivian team has ever bettered Bolivar's semi-final appearances. Always Ready were promoted in 2018 and now compete in the Sudamericana, the continent's second-tier club competition. Perhaps a future in the Libertadores awaits them. Perhaps they will be a part of a great *clásico*.

But the *clásico paceño* will always be Bolivar and Tigre where, in the wrong areas of town, "they can hit and kick you", according to Rodrigo, but the real "trophy of war" is a flag from the opposing *barra brava*, stolen and turned upside down to show victory. It may be tame compared to other *clásicos* in the continent but when a short walk leaves you panting, maybe that's not a surprise. 🤔

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Dave Bowler** is the biographer of Alf Ramsey, Bill Shankly and Danny Blanchflower among others and the founder of the England Women's Football Archive. He is currently writing a series of limited-edition books on the FA Cup. @MagicOfFACup

**Luke Connelly** is a freelance writer, who writes predominantly for *Libero*, @MagLibero, the publication he founded earlier this year. He writes on topics ranging from football in the former Soviet Union to the Copa Libertadores, and his work has recently been found in the UK-based German football fanzine *Halb Vier*. @LukeDConnelly

**Ewan Flynn** is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in the *Independent*, *When Saturday Comes*, *FourFourTwo* and on BBC Radio 4. His first book, *We Are Sunday League*, is a bittersweet real-life story from football's grassroots. @flynn\_ewan

**Joseph Fox** is a photographer

**Themis Karapanagiotis** is a freelance football writer from Greece. He has written for the *thefalsenine* and contributed various blogs. @ThemisKarap

**Alasdair Mackenzie** is a freelance journalist based in Rome, where he covers Italian football for Reuters, the *Times* and the *i* among others. @aksmackenzie

**Jessy Parker Humphreys** is a freelance writer who mainly writes on women's football for *The Offside Rule*. @jessyjph

**Finn Ranson** is a podcaster and writer focusing mainly on football and tennis, who has worked for the *Guardian*, *Varsity*, *The Offside Rule* and *Tennis TV*. He has been a Holocaust Educational Trust Regional Ambassador for the East Midlands since 2016. @finnbranson

**Harry Robinson** is a freelance writer and host of the football history podcast *United Through Time*. His work has appeared in the *Independent*, *FourFourTwo*, *Mundial*, *United We Stand* and *Tifo Football*. @HarryRobinson64

**Gregory Wakeman** has written for the *New York Times*, *Metro US*, *Yahoo*, the *National*, and *Vice*. @WakemanGregory

**Jonathan Wilson** writes for the *Guardian* and *Sports Illustrated*. He is the author of 11 books. @jonawils

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Luke Connelly, Diplomatic Manoeuvres

Ewan Flynn, The Boycott

Gregory Wakeman, Going to Ground

Themis Karapanagiotis, Rizoupoli

Joseph Fox, Returned to the Elves

Finn Ranson, Strangers in a Strange Land

Alasdair Mackenzie, Why is it so hard to build a ground in Italy?

Jessy Parker Humphreys, Freeholding Tight

Harry Robinson, The Highest Derby in the World

Jonathan Wilson, Terroir

