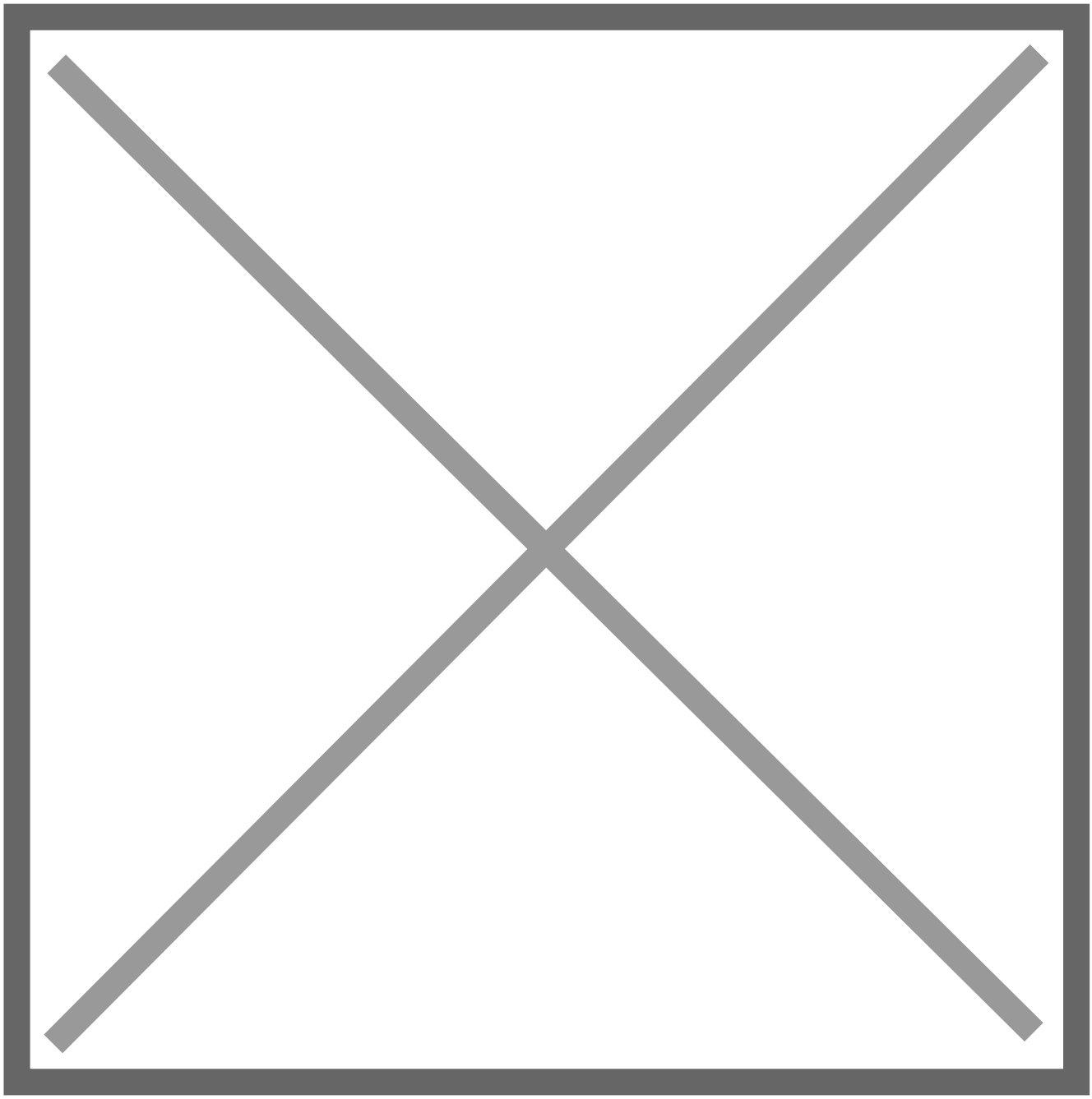
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A drone view shows the Pedro Bidegain stadium, home of San Lorenzo de Almagro, Pope Francis' hometown soccer team, in Buenos Aires April 21, 2025, following the death of the 88-year-old pontiff. (OSV News/Reuters/Matias Baglietto)

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Before he was Pope Francis, the first pope from the Americas, he was Jorge Mario Bergoglio — a kid from Buenos Aires cheering for San Lorenzo, going to live games with his dad on Sundays.

In a country where soccer is practically a second religion, little Jorge found his first taste of joy, teamwork and heartbreak not in the sacristy — but on the pitch.

His devotion to San Lorenzo de Almagro isn't just a nostalgic footnote — it's a window into the soul of a pope who knew what it meant to love fiercely, hope deeply and stay loyal — win or lose.

Upon Francis' passing, San Lorenzo issued a poignant statement reflecting on his lifelong bond with the club: "His passion for San Lorenzo always moved us deeply, and unites us in constant prayer for his soul."

Affectionately known as "El Ciclón," this team holds a special place in Argentine soccer history, as one of the "big five" teams. Founded in 1908 by Father Lorenzo Massa, the club's origins are deeply intertwined with the Catholic Church. The fans of the club are known as "the crows," for the black cassock Massa wore.

Young Bergoglio's passion for San Lorenzo was inherited from his father, Mario José, who played basketball for the club. Even as archbishop of Buenos Aires, the future pope maintained close ties with the club, officiating Mass at the Ciudad Deportiva

chapel, confirming young players like Ángel Correa, and even spending $100 to buy a piece of wood from what used to be the bleachers of the original stadium.

In 2024, despite having shunned all but a handful of awards and public recognitions, according to the club's statement, he accepted the honor of having San Lorenzo's future stadium named Papa Francisco.

"Emotional, the Holy Father accepted without doubting it," San Lorenzo said on April 21, hours after the death of the Argentine pontiff.

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Francis wrote in his autobiography "Hope" that he had been nicknamed "hard foot," and often drew parallels between soccer and life's broader lessons. In a 2019 address to Italian youth and athletes, he remarked: "Soccer is a team sport. You can't have fun alone. And if it's lived like that, it can do good for your mind and your heart in a society that is exasperated by subjectivism."

Despite taking a vow in 1990 to abstain from watching television, Francis stayed updated on matches through the radio and, later, the Vatican's Swiss Guards. They would inform him of San Lorenzo's and Argentina's results, ensuring he remained connected to his homeland's passion.

For decades, Argentines have joked that when it comes to soccer, they've been divinely favored: They had "the Hand of God" in Diego Maradona and found their long-awaited "Messiah" in Lionel Messi.

Now, with Francis watching from above, fans of San Lorenzo might just be wondering if their beloved Ciclón has an intercessor in heaven. After all, if soccer is a religion in Argentina, it only makes sense that one of its most faithful fans ended up a saintly supporter in the skies.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.