Culture



Argentine soccer fans watch a match. (RNS)

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The chain that hung from Santiago García's neck carried no crosses or saint medals, yet it felt sacred nonetheless.

When García's grandmother fell sick years ago and he visited her in intensive care, the Argentine soccer fan took off his beloved Boca Juniors necklace and placed it around her neck.

"Boca will save you," García murmured to his grandmother. "And it did. So now it's hers."

García's faith in his club mirrors that of millions across Latin America as the region prepares for the 2026 World Cup. From Argentina to Mexico, devotion to the game often spills into everyday life, inspiring rituals and beliefs tied to the sport.

"There has been an emotional connection between the public and their soccer teams for a long time," said Mexican analyst Erick Fernández. "It fosters identity and bonds that make us feel part of a sporting process that represents us."

In Argentina, the home country of Lionel Messi, sports passion is often inherited within families and loyalty to clubs strengthens over time. Pope Francis himself — born in Argentina and lifelong supporter of club San Lorenzo — said he agreed with those describing soccer as the world's most beautiful game.

García’s love for Boca Juniors came from his father. He said his mother used to support another team, but after the couple met, she became a Boca fan too.

"You usually support your mother’s or father’s club," García said. "Soccer is the backbone of it all, but you develop a sense of belonging to a team and carry it with you everywhere."

He may have let go of his Boca necklace and the energy he believed it carried, but the club’s imprint was already etched into his skin.

At age 17, García tattooed a phrase from the club’s anthem on his torso. Fourteen years later, those words remain as meaningful as they were when the ink was fresh.

"It belongs to a song that is like a chant of war for us," he said. "It’s like saying: 'No matter the storm, no matter what happens, we will always be there for you.' "

The power of belonging

Pope Francis once told a crowd that soccer is a team sport whose beauty comes from its collective spirit.

Among fans, too, passion is nurtured through a sense of community. The singing of anthems, tears shed after victories or defeats and the embrace of strangers inside a stadium are experiences that can mirror forms of collective devotion.

"Each person can support a team, but the sense of togetherness that generates 'communitas' — a word associated with religion — is only possible when people gather," said Argentine anthropologist Eloísa Martín.

Both negative and positive reactions can emerge from that sense of collective identity. A fan who feels a member of his sporting community has been attacked by a rival may react violently in ways he otherwise never would. But the same dynamic can strengthen solidarity, leading fans to help strangers because they support the same club.

"Soccer creates a community even for those who lack one," Martín said.

On a recent night, among a sea of fans heading towards Maracanã stadium in Rio de Janeiro was Adilvania Santos. Dressed in the maroon and green colors of

Fluminense, the 27-year-old said that supporting the club had helped her through a difficult time in her life.

"I get emotional talking about Fluminense," said Santos, who described the passion for her club as the most important aspect of her life, apart from her family. "Some people come together to go to church. For us, accompanying Fluminense is also sacred."

Santos tries to attend every game despite living nearly 100 kilometers (about 60 miles) from Rio. When she follows matches from home, she stays alone in her bedroom to avoid interruptions from family members who may not support her team.

"Soccer deeply moves Brazilians because it creates a sense of belonging, identity and hope," said Jeferson Mengali, a Catholic priest in the Bragança Paulista diocese and a lifelong fan of Corinthians. "People suffer, work hard and face difficulties, and soccer becomes a space for collective joy."

Rituals for victory

Mengali supported Corinthians as a chaplain for years. He celebrated Masses with the team and was present during training sessions and matches.

"I have always liked praying before important games," he said. "Asking more for serenity than victory."

While not all soccer fans pray, many cling to rituals they believe can influence the outcome of a game. In Argentina these practices are known as "cábalas." According to Martín, they became widespread during the 1990s.

Cábalas vary widely. Fans may drink from the same cup, sit in the exact same spot or wear the same underwear during every match. Others insist on watching games with certain people, while some avoid watching altogether after concluding they bring bad luck to their team.

Rituals are repeated if the team wins and abandoned if it loses. For some supporters, avoiding a match can even feel like a sacrifice made in hopes of securing victory.

At García’s home, his father sits in a specific chair whenever Boca is playing well. If the rival team scores, he changes seats. His mother cleans the house instead of watching the game, stopping every so often to ask about the score.

García’s current cábala includes wearing the same jersey throughout the season and carrying a small image of Diego Maradona everywhere he goes.

"After he died, he was rapidly sanctified by the people," García said. "He became a figure bigger than sports."

Argentines rarely call him Maradona. He’s simply "El Diego," as one would refer to a family member or an old friend from the neighborhood.

"Maradona is the player, while 'El Diego' is the one people turn to like a family member when they need help," Martín said. "Sacredness only works when there’s a community behind it."

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