

## Libertadores Cup final 2009

### Estudiantes take 50<sup>th</sup> Libertadores while cross Cruzeiro watch on



It's a freezing winter's night as my friend Angel and I are stuck in traffic on our way out of town. We are surrounded by huge trucks and long distance buses near Buenos Aires' port and start to wonder if we will make it to La Plata before kickoff.

Kickoff tonight is at 10.00 and the game is the first leg of the South American Libertadores Cup final with Argentina's Estudiantes de La Plata up against Brazil's Cruzeiro (Cruzeiro, interestingly for Kiwis and Aussies means Southern Cross in Portuguese). We think about turning back and watching the game in a bar but a scent for history keeps our faith as we inch closer to the motorway onramp.

I have been following Estudiantes' progress closely this season and have felt a real sense of history in the making. It was 39 years ago that Juan Ramon Veron led Estudiantes to Libertadores glory and now his son Argentine international Juan Sebastian has returned to his roots after big money stints in Europe with the heart felt goal of emulating his father.

We finally make it to the motorway after an hour or so and luckily traffic flows freely as we cruise the 70km to La Plata. We turn off and drive to the stadium where we park on a side street and pay the customary \$10 "minders fee". We bargain with a number of scalpers but tickets are scarce tonight and end up paying \$70 each for the \$20 face value tickets. We then enjoy a hot chorizo sandwich before waiting in line behind the mounted police with hundreds of local supporters.

Once in we had to try and find a good place to stand but its absolutely packed and not much looks on. Luckily Angel is an expert at this game and after squeezing through a non existent gap we find a spot with a pretty good view behind the goal. The crowd is amazing, a real mixture of young and old with many family groups which isn't so common at the stadiums in Buenos Aires. We stand next to a family consisting of Grandmother, Mum, and two young daughters.

As the teams run onto the field there is an explosion of fireworks, paper streamers, and red tinted smoke and the noise is deafening. The playing field is obliterated from view and the smoke catches in the back of our throats as the roar of 50,000 Estudiantes fans greets Juan Sebastian Veron and his teammates.

The Libertadores final is played over two matches, home and away, and this first leg is a tense onfield battle. Estudiantes have few chances but are denied by some spectacular saves from the Cruzeiro keeper. As the game wears on it becomes more and more physical with both sides committing fouls for rough play and Veron receiving treatment for a nasty cut below his eye.

With a few minutes left Cruzeiro are gifted a chance but their normally infallible striker misses the open goal and the game finishes 0-0. The local fans are quiet but hopeful as they head home and contemplate Estudiantes chances in the return match in Brazil

where they had never won before. We have smiles on our faces after this awesome football experience as we drive the foggy highway back to the city.

With the nil all result Estudiantes continue their excellent defensive record in this season's Libertadores as they have not conceded a single goal in eight home matches including the final.

Cruzeiro are in arrogant mood on returning from Argentina and their captain publically states that he is looking past the Estudiantes game and is getting excited about playing the mighty Barcelona in December's World Club Championship. Estudiantes arrive in town and say nothing, they aren't going to let the Brazilians arrogance rattle them. In training they are relaxed, happy, and exude a deep underlying confidence.

There is a massive crowd of 70,000 screaming Cruzeiro fans at the Mineirão stadium for the return match but also around 3,000 Estudiantes fans who have somehow managed to make the long trek in an amazing show of faith and devotion. I watch the game in a local bar near home with friends and a bunch of local football fans.

The first half is as tough and gritty as last week but the expanded dimensions of the Mineirão stadium seem to give an advantage to the fleet footed Brazilians. They cut and thrust but just can't beat the resilient Estudiantes defense and at halftime there is no score.

Early in the second half Cruzeiro get ahead when a hard hit shot deflects off a defender and Estudiantes goalie Mariano Andujar has no chance. Cruzeiro celebrate as if they have won but Estudiantes know the game is far from over and that it is only bad luck that has them behind.

Amazingly after the goal it is Estudiantes that lift and press forward driven on by their deep-set belief. Veron is leading from the front and putting in perfectly weighted balls to release attacking runners. It is from one such ball that the equaliser comes when Gaston Fernandez gets on the end of a difficult cross and fires home from close range. GGOOOAAALLLL 1-1

At 1-1 Estudiantes are alive and the wind seems to have been knocked out of Cruzeiro. Estudiantes press and press and with 20 minutes to go they win a corner. Veron steps up and curls in a wicked ball that reaches Mauro Boselli who deflects a precise header into the back of the net. GOOAAALLLL!!! The goal sparks wild celebrations for Estudiantes players and fans as well as those in the bar with me! It is an incredible goal and a stunned silence has fallen over the Mineirão, except of course for the brave 3,000!

I wonder if maybe the goal has come a little early with still 20 minutes to go but there is to be no stopping Estudiantes tonight and after 25 more heart stopping minutes the final whistle goes and Estudiantes are champions of America for the 4th time. Veron sinks to his knees overcome with emotion as he achieves his dream and emulates his father. When he stands again his eyes are blurred by tears and he can't speak as he embraces his team mates and jumps for joy.

Veron then lifts the Libertadores cup skyward into the Brazilian night where high above Cruzeiro's emblemic Southern Cross is watching the scene. Tonight Cruzeiro can't match their star dazed predictions or pay tribute to their celestial guide as they go down to an Estudiantes team whose feet and ambition are firmly rooted to the ground.

Estudiantes campeon de America!!

Back home in La Plata 50,000 fans have gathered to shout, jump, dance, let off fireworks and celebrate in any way they can outside the city cathedral. Many will still be there 24 hours later when Veron and his team arrive home with the cup.

## **Estudiantes road to the 2009 Libertadores Cup**

### **Preliminary Round**

Beat Sporting Cristal (Peru) 1-2 away, 1-0 home

### **Group Stage**

Lost to Cruzeiro 0-3 away

Beat Universidad de Sucre (Perú) 1-0 home

Lost to Deportivo Quito (Bolivia) 0-1 away

Beat Deportivo Quito 4-0 home

Beat Cruzeiro 4-0 home

Drew with Universidad de Sucre 0-0 away

Finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in Group behind Cruzeiro

### **Last 16**

Beat Libertad (Paraguay) 3-0 home, 0-0 away

### **Quarter Final**

Beat Defensor (Uruguay) 1-0 away, 1-0 home

### **Semi Final**

Beat Nacional (Uruguay) 1-0 home, 2-1 away

### **Final**

Beat Cruzeiro (Brazil) 0-0 home, 2-1 away

## **You Tube**

The atmosphere at La Plata for game 1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePZXeC42TWU>

On field action from game 2 and Veron lifting the cup

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZIFrnw7VEI&feature=related>

