



Football and underprivileged neighborhoods: the case of Villas Unidas

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Sport has a fundamental role in the development of people. In Argentina, football is particularly significant due to its popular nature. In November 2018, a different club was born, designed for the social integration of the most disadvantaged in the country: we tell you the story of Villas Unidas.

Argentina and football

Argentina breathes football. The wave of five million people that flooded the streets of Buenos Aires to welcome the Senior National Team after its consecration in the last World Cup, of 2022, is proof of that. It is not just a game, it is a cultural phenomenon—a passion that does not distinguish between regions, social classes or genders. There, professional footballers are heroes and stars. When they wear the



light blue and white shirt, with the colors of Argentina, they carry the weight of a nation that dreams of resolving geopolitical conflicts, such as the one regarding the Malvinas, on the field. They are also the architects of the deepest collective joys in a country that often seems on the verge of collapse.



Children playing football in “Los Gauchitos”, Villa Fiorito (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The National Team is the tip of the iceberg, the top of a mountain that millions of young people dream of reaching every day. The big clubs in the First Division of Argentine football are usually the first step to the World Cup and national team dreams. However, when you examine the beginnings and training stages of [each player](#), you notice a constant theme: role of **community clubs**; generally accompanied by another constant: the players from **disadvantaged backgrounds** (the poorest segments of the working class).

The genesis

"It once occurred to me to wonder what the popular neighborhoods where the best players in the history of Argentine soccer were trained, received... How much of the enormous amounts of money they produced had returned to their neighborhoods?" Fernando Signorini's question was that of a person who witnessed the dizzying rise



that humble kids experience on their journey towards world stardom, often devoid of tools and support, exploited by the multibillion-dollar business of elite soccer. In his professional career, he worked with players like Messi, Riquelme, Tevez, Mascherano and for more than ten years he was the personal physical trainer of Diego Maradona, “I am tall, blonde and with light blue eyes, but I owe everything to a black slum dweller¹” stated Signorini.

The realities that Signorini witnessed throughout his career and his social vocation were the necessary germ to create a **different club**. For this he had accomplices of the stature of the remembered Cesar Luis Menotti (technical director of the Argentine National Team that won the 1978 World Cup) with their Professional School of Coaches. With technical experience thus guaranteed, they understood that to realize their idea, they had to engage with those who were in contact every day with the reality they intended to change. Thus, more than four years later, Signorini's idea, and supported at the time by Menotti (who died on May 5, 2024), encountered the daily work of **social organizations and neighborhood clubs**.

The objective was clear: to give back to the popular neighborhoods a little of what they had given to football. How? Forming a club designed for children and young people from popular sectors where sport is a means to transform reality, and where future benefits return to the neighborhoods.

The Club and its context

“Villas Unidas” is presented as a club that generates spaces for the comprehensive development of children and young people from **popular neighborhoods** (slums) supported by sports.

The popular neighborhoods, colloquially referred to as “slums”, are the result of a historical process of domestic migration. The less well-off classes in search of work and a better quality of life settled on the outskirts of large cities under precarious conditions, often without access to basic services and facing irregularities in land ownership. In this context, it was and often continues to be social organizations that cover the absence of the State.

In Argentina, there are more than 4,700 popular neighborhoods, of which 4,300 have a soccer field. Any open space is a good opportunity to create a “scramble” with the ball. Although the conditions are far from ideal, the simplicity of this sport is perhaps

¹ “Black slum dweller” hace referencia, generalmente de forma despectiva, a una persona de bajos recursos económicos asentada en un barrio precarizado.



what makes it so popular: a ball and a couple of markers that act as goals are enough for the game to start and for people to begin to enjoy it.

Thinking about a football club that, in turn, brings together different smaller clubs while benefiting popular neighborhoods is a complex idea that results in an even more complex structure. Villas Unidas began with a headquarters in a popular neighborhood in the town of [Aldo Bonzi](#) (La Matanza, Buenos Aires) and then incorporated new and pre-existing clubs in different provinces of Argentina, forming a network of more than 20 locations. Each club is managed locally, but the social imprint, objectives, and values are the same.

The social factor

Villas Unidas is a sports project based on social inclusion that seeks to break with the commercial paradigm of football to generate a different one that prioritizes people. Social organizations that work in popular neighborhoods face daily challenges such as malnutrition and difficulties in accessing quality education and healthcare. For this reason, the Club works not only with its athletes but also with their respective families in areas such as comprehensive health, educational training, substance abuse issues, and gender equality from a community perspective.



Athletes from Villas Unidas attend a workshop on Sports Nutrition



At Villas Unidas, there is a clear premise: to train players equipped with multiple tools to reach professionalism without being exploited, while also giving equal importance to personal development and supporting athletes who do not become professional soccer players. This ensures they do not fall victim to exclusion and can achieve decent living conditions through work. Trade workshops and courses for completing compulsory studies are clear examples of this and are commonplace in the club's facilities.

Another clear distinction of the club's social imprint is a definition that is new in the world of Argentine football and is reflected in its statutes: the money from the sales of players trained in Villas Unidas, as well as the funds corresponding to the training rights stipulated by FIFA regulations for each transfer, will not go to the club but will be used for initiatives that benefit the player's community of origin. This creates a virtuous circle where the grassroots finally win.

Women in First Division

The feminist movement in Argentina is one of the most significant on the American continent, however, the inequality and violence that women still face in many areas are stark football is no exception. Although significant progress has been made in recent years, achieving recognition as professionals is still a struggle for many players.

Today, Villas Unidas has a consolidated female team that competes in the First Division C of the Argentine Football Association (AFA) tournament, but the journey was not easy. Many of the players traveled long hours to attend training sessions, which, due to the lack of dedicated facilities, took place in public squares or municipal sports centers that lacked good lighting and infrastructure. In addition, most players must coordinate their work, studies, and, in some cases, even raising children, with their passion for football. But their efforts have borne fruit—through an agreement facilitated by the club, they have secured two illuminated fields available for daily training.

The Villas Unidas board of directors was clear that when female talent is not the limitation, opportunities and management become crucial. Thus, just one year after its establishment, they successfully persuaded the AFA to invite the club to participate in the First Division C of the national championship. A year later, they also incorporated lower divisions. The significance of this achievement represents a notable distinction not only for the club but also for all its players.



Today, the first women's team competes in the tournament regularly, playing against all the teams in its division, and competing on equal terms with clubs that have a much more established and prominent structure. However, in 2023, they began to play their fourth consecutive season in the “First C” of AFA football, having achieved their goal of maintaining their status in the previous three seasons. This reflects a process of sustained consolidation and gradual progress.



Women's team of Villas Unidas

Captain example

During her adolescence, Adriana Arteaga Vilca migrated to Argentina from Peru. Like her, nearly 80% of the migrants who arrive in the country come from neighboring countries, particularly Peru, and settle in popular neighborhoods in the province of Buenos Aires. Villas Unidas takes pride in being enriched by this diversity, and Adriana is one of its greatest assets. Her first club in Argentina was one of the so-called “big clubs”: [Independiente](#) de Avellaneda; this was followed by [Excursionistas](#), where she



met Gustavo Levine, the former coach of Villas Unidas, and she did not hesitate to continue her journey to that club.

Thanks to her performance and determination, Adriana earned the captain's armband of the women's team and, a few years ago she received the call to be part of the Peruvian U20 National Team.

The current dynamics of women's football pose significant challenges, as these teams generally do not cover players' mobility or travel expenses. However, Villas Unidas understood the importance of this opportunity for their player and the team as a whole. They made all the necessary arrangements and efforts so that Adriana could travel and finally debut for her country in a friendly against the Brazilian national team.

At that time, Adriana stated that her participation would not have been possible without the support of the Club while she was part of the squad. From Villas Unidas they believed that the key factor was the player's own abilities, which elevate the prestige of women's promotion football competitions.



Adriana Artega, captain of Villas Unidas



Keep growing

The Villas Unidas journey seems to have just begun. Now in its seventh year, the club is filled with ambition and the desire to grow. In the short term, they dream of acquiring their own facilities to expand social and sports activities. This includes the ability to host young athletes from rural areas who aspire to play for venues affiliated with the AFA. In the medium term, the commitment to enhance sporting performance is viewed as strategic for this club, which aims for its players to serve as role models for many boys and girls and to be a source of pride for all their communities.

As long as the ball keeps rolling, the club will continue to fight, and just before the final whistle, Villas Unidas will triumph!

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