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FOOTBALL INNOVATION IS WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU FILL THE STADIUM

**Five Strategies for River Plate Plus Three Reforms
for Football in the Americas**

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WE ARE INNOVATION

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Executive Summary

This briefing paper examines how proven business models from European clubs, Formula 1, and global sports franchises could transform football economics in the Americas. The analysis covers club-level strategies and systemic reforms that could generate new revenue.

Part I: Club-Level Opportunities (River Plate Case Study)

Premium Documentary Content: Netflix's "Drive to Survive" added 10 percent US fan growth to Formula 1 in three years. Among American F1 fans under 35, 42 percent became fans within a year after the series launched. Manchester City's Amazon documentary reached 10 million views across 200 countries. River Plate generates the raw material that streaming platforms pay millions to acquire: genuine drama, academy prospects becoming €50 million transfers, and Superclásicos that draw larger audiences than some Champions League matches. Production costs in Argentina are 40-60 percent lower than in Europe.

Digital Membership: Manchester United has 1.1 billion social followers but only 330,000 paying members. FC Barcelona converts 140,000 of 400 million fans into paying members. River Plate has 30 million social media followers globally. Converting 2 percent into paying digital members at \$10 monthly would generate \$72 million annually, exceeding most Argentine clubs' entire commercial revenue.

Multi-Club Networks: City Football Group's 13-club network across five continents contributed to Manchester City's \$5+ billion valuation. Red Bull's four-club system generated over €400 million in transfer revenue in ten years. River Plate could structure joint ventures in MLS, Saudi Arabia, and Asian markets.

Stadium Infrastructure: River's \$100 million roof project positions the Monumental as Argentina's only viable venue for the 2030 World Cup finals. Covered stadiums generate 8-12 more decibels, correlating with 0.3-0.5 extra points per home game. This is often the difference between Copa Libertadores qualification and elimination.

Part II: Systemic Reforms

League Compression: Argentina's 30-team league with eight annual titles undermines commercial value. The Bundesliga's 18 teams and single championship generate €1.1 billion in domestic rights. Format complexity creates friction that depresses the value of international broadcasting, regardless of club quality. Outside the top six Argentine clubs, average attendance is 22,000, compared with 32,400 for equivalent Bundesliga matches.

Continental Expansion: Copa Libertadores generated \$500 million across all territories in 2024. UEFA Champions League generated €2.5 billion annually. Expanding Libertadores to include Mexican Liga MX and MLS clubs would add 475 million people and \$30 trillion in GDP to the tournament's addressable market. The format already exists in UEFA's 36-team structure with league phase and knockout playoffs.

Competitive Pressure Drives Development: Mexican clubs competed in Copa Libertadores from 1998-2016. During this period, Mexico's national team reached five consecutive World Cup Round of 16 appearances. After withdrawing in 2016 to focus exclusively on CONCACAF, the national team's technical level declined measurably and has not advanced past Round of 16 since.

Introduction

Football generates \$60 billion in annual revenue globally. The English Premier League's broadcasting rights exceed \$8.4 billion per year. The Bundesliga reaches \$1.3 billion in domestic rights alone. Manchester City's valuation surpasses \$5 billion. These numbers certainly reflect decisions about format design, content strategy, membership infrastructure, and competitive structure.

Football in the Americas operates under different economic constraints but faces identical strategic questions: How do clubs convert attention into recurring revenue? How do leagues maximize broadcasting value? How does competitive pressure drive institutional development? Some of the answers exist in proven models from European clubs, American sports franchises, and global entertainment properties. The question is whether institutions will implement them.

This briefing paper examines innovation opportunities in football across two dimensions. Part I analyzes club-level strategies through the River Plate case study—a club that fills an 85,000-seat stadium in a developing market but captures a fraction of the commercial value that similar audience engagement generates in Europe or North America. The sections cover premium documentary content, digital membership infrastructure, multi-club ownership networks, stadium development, and global academy partnerships. Each strategy has precedent in successful clubs worldwide. Each represents untapped revenue potential for institutions with River Plate's demonstrated fan engagement.

Part II examines systemic reforms that would transform football's competitive and commercial position in the Americas. The analysis covers league compression from 30 to 18 professional teams in Argentina, Copa Libertadores expansion to include Mexican Liga MX and MLS clubs, and the mechanisms through which competitive pressure drives innovation. These reforms require confederation-level decisions but would benefit all clubs within the system. The evidence from European leagues and international tournaments demonstrates what works. The challenge is implementation.

Football innovation requires three recognitions. First, attention without revenue is wasted potential. Second, competitive isolation produces decline. Third, proven business models from other markets should be adapted, not ignored. Clubs and leagues that apply these principles will generate new revenue streams.

Part I: Eighty-Five Thousand Reasons Why River Plate's Best Business Is Yet to Come

Introduction to Part I

River Plate fills an 85,000-seat stadium in a market where GDP per capita sits at \$14,000. The club's social media following exceeds 30 million across continents. World Cup champions choose to play at the Monumental. Netflix executives pay millions for the kind of authentic drama that occurs organically in River's locker rooms every Superclásico week. The challenge is not generating attention. River Plate wins that competition against most European clubs. The challenge is converting emotional intensity into economic infrastructure.

The following section examines five strategic opportunities where proven business models from global football can be applied to River Plate's unique competitive advantages. Each represents a path to generating recurring revenue streams that do not depend on player sales or domestic broadcasting contracts. The club that systematically fills the largest stadium in South America now faces a straightforward question: what percentage of that demonstrated demand can be captured digitally, globally, and permanently?

Premium Content as Competitive Infrastructure

Formula 1 entered the 2010s in demographic [decline](#). Viewership skewed elderly, digital engagement lagged behind motorsports competitors, and younger audiences dismissed it as inaccessible. Then "[Drive to Survive](#)" (DTS) arrived in 2018. Netflix's behind-the-scenes series transformed F1's market position. Nielsen [tracked](#) 10 percent fan growth in the US over three years after DTS's debut. [By 2022](#), 42 percent of American F1 fans under 35 had become fans in the previous year—a dramatic demographic shift. Among US viewers under 45 who became F1 fans, 74 percent credited DTS as a major factor in their interest. Team valuations [skyrocketed](#). Premium documentary content is strategic infrastructure for global audience development.

Manchester City recognized this early. The club negotiated with Amazon Prime for "[All or Nothing](#)," granting unprecedented behind-the-scenes access to its record-breaking 2017-18 season. The [documentary](#) was viewed more than 10 million times across 200 countries. Club CMO Omar Berrada explained the strategic rationale: the series allowed viewers to "relate to players in a different way" and understand figures like Vincent Kompany as both captain and person. The investment was a calculated bet that premium documentary content could build emotional connections with global audiences who would never attend a match at the Etihad but might purchase merchandise, follow social channels, and increase the club's reach to potential sponsors.

River Plate generates the raw material streaming platforms pay millions to acquire: genuine emotional intensity at scale. The club [averages](#) 85,000 spectators per game in a market with a [GDP per capita](#) of \$14,000. Superclásicos draw massive TV audiences across Latin America. The 2018 Copa Libertadores final produced [global viewership](#) numbers that surpassed several UEFA Champions League knockout rounds.

River Plate's academy system produced Ariel Ortega and Hernán Crespo in the past, and Enzo Fernández and Julián Álvarez recently. The talent pipeline serves as a perpetual narrative resource. A documentary series gains

built-in storylines: young players arriving from provinces with nothing, navigating the pressure of representing Argentina's most demanding fanbase, then transferring to Europe for record fees. Other clubs need to manufacture their narratives through PR departments. River has them occur organically.



827M

Total fan numbers in 2025, up +12.2% YoY and +63% vs 2018



43%

Of fan base under 35, up from 30% in 2018



114.5M

Social media followers
Up from 97.4m in 2024 and 18.7m in 2018



42%

Female fan base, up from 37% in 2018

Source: F1

Full access is the critical variable. Plate would need to grant production teams access to locker rooms during Superclásico week, negotiate contracts with agents, and handle pressure conversations when qualification hangs on a single match. Without authentic access, the project becomes institutional advertising and is commercially worthless.

The revenue model extends beyond licensing fees. A multi-season Netflix series transforms River Plate into intellectual property. The club captures secondary revenue through increased merchandise sales in markets where the series streams, higher valuations for friendly matches in new territories, and a stronger negotiating position with sponsors seeking to associate with globally recognized brands. Formula 1 teams [now charge](#) premium sponsorship rates because DTS made them recognizable to corporate decision-makers who never watched races.

Production economics favor this model for River Plate. Production costs in Argentina run 40-60 percent lower than comparable projects filmed in Europe. The club could negotiate co-production terms that grant it equity in the intellectual property, ensuring revenue participation if the series succeeds internationally. The structure resembles venture capital more than traditional broadcasting deals.

European elite clubs learned that content production is now fundamental. River Plate has the advantage of, in certain aspects, better material. Using it requires treating content as seriously as player development.

Global Membership Infrastructure

Manchester United [reports](#) 1.1 billion followers across social media platforms. The club's official membership program counts 330,000 [paying members](#), generating approximately \$24 million annually. FC Barcelona [claims](#) 400 million fans worldwide, but converts only 140,000 into [paying socios and members](#). The gap between audience size and monetized relationships represents the fundamental strategic challenge for football clubs in the

digital economy. Most clubs have solved half the equation - building massive global awareness - while failing to capture economic value from supporters who will never attend a match in person.

Real Madrid pioneered tiered digital membership in 2016 with “[Madridista](#)” categories ranging from free basic access to premium tiers at €20-35 annually. The revenue contribution remains modest relative to broadcasting and sponsorship, but the strategic value extends beyond direct fees.

River Plate fills 85,000 seats on average. If Argentine supporters allocate scarce resources to attend matches despite economic constraints, international audiences with higher purchasing power represent untapped demand. The club has [30 million](#) social media followers globally based on survey data across Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Converting even 2 percent of that base into paying digital members at \$10 monthly would generate \$72 million annually—a sum that would exceed most Argentine clubs’ entire commercial revenue and represent a completely new recurring income stream independent of transfer market volatility.



Picture by Eslam Mohammed Abdelmaksoud

The subscription tiers require differentiation beyond generic content access. Premium members could receive NFT-based digital collectibles tied to specific matches—a Superclásico goal by Julián Álvarez minted as limited-edition tokens, Copa Libertadores moments from historic campaigns. Virtual meet-and-greets with legends like Enzo Francescoli or current players. Priority access to physical merchandise, particularly replica jerseys priced at \$120-150 internationally, delivers tangible benefits. Early ticket allocation for members traveling to Buenos Aires for major matches addresses a documented pain point—international fans currently navigate informal reseller markets with significant friction.

The economic model improves dramatically with scale. Marginal costs for digital members approach zero—serving the 100,000th member costs essentially the same as serving the 1,000th. This enables River Plate to price aggressively in markets like India, Southeast Asia, and West Africa, where purchasing power remains lower, but fan populations exceed those in Argentina or Europe. A \$3 monthly tier in these markets still generates meaningful revenue while building brand loyalty among demographics that will drive football consumption growth over the next two decades.

The strategic risk lies in execution quality. Digital membership programs fail when clubs treat them as passive revenue extraction rather than relationship infrastructure. Content must refresh weekly. Benefits need regular enhancement. Communication requires personalization beyond mass emails in Spanish. River Plate would need to staff a dedicated digital membership team.

Strategic Equity Positions Beyond the Transfer Market

City Football Group owns or holds significant stakes in [13 football clubs](#) across five continents. The network includes Manchester City, New York City FC, Melbourne City, and Yokohama F. Marinos, among others. This structure generates revenue through multiple mechanisms: player development and transfer coordination, shared commercial sponsorships across markets, economies of scale in operations, and geographic arbitrage in regulatory

environments. Manchester City's valuation exceeded \$5 billion, [according](#) to Forbes. The model has moved from experiment to proven competitive infrastructure.

The economy functions through portfolio diversification and talent circulation. City Football Group signs promising players to clubs in less competitive leagues where playing time and development opportunities exceed what Manchester City can offer. Players mature in Melbourne or Montevideo, then transfer within the network to higher-value leagues. The group fully appreciates player value rather than splitting it with external sellers.

Red Bull pioneered a related model across four clubs—RB Leipzig, Red Bull Salzburg, New York Red Bulls, and Red Bull Bragantino. The system produced Erling Haaland, Sadio Mané, Naby Keïta, and Dayot Upamecano through coordinated development pathways. Salzburg signs young talents from lower-tier leagues, develops them in Austrian competition, then sells to Leipzig or directly to elite European clubs. The network [generated](#) over €400 million in transfer revenue in the last ten years while maintaining competitive teams at each node.

River Plate already operates the *industrial* components of this model—a training methodology that produced dozens of players currently competing in Europe's top five leagues, a global brand with verified recognition worldwide, and institutional infrastructure that supports complex international operations. What River lacks is ownership stakes in clubs that provide access to markets where regulatory frameworks and economic conditions enable value capture impossible in Argentina. The talent production continues regardless. The question is who captures the economic upside when those talents mature.

Major League Soccer presents the most immediate opportunity. The league's expansion continues through 2028, with franchise fees [ranging](#) from \$500 to \$ 600 million for new markets. River Plate could structure joint ventures with ownership groups bidding for expansion slots, contributing brand equity, technical expertise, and player pipeline access in exchange for 20-30 percent equity. An MLS franchise [generates](#) \$70-75 million in annual revenue through media rights, sponsorships, and matchday income—multiples of what River's operations produce in Argentina. Corporate sponsors pay premium rates for MLS teams because they access affluent North American demographics. River's participation would convert brand recognition among US Hispanic populations into commercial value.

The Saudi Professional League invested billions in football infrastructure. The government aims to establish the league as a top-ten global competition by 2030. Saudi clubs pay transfer fees and wages that exceed most European teams outside the elite five. The league [permits](#) foreign club ownership structures. River Plate could acquire minority stakes in Saudi clubs seeking South American expertise in talent identification and development. The revenue contribution arrives through two channels: direct dividends from profitable Saudi club operations and preferential access to the Saudi market for player sales.

Asian markets offer scale advantages with lower initial capital requirements. India's domestic football economy [grows](#) at 18 percent annually but lacks institutional knowledge in academy development and competitive operations. Vietnam's V.League [attracts](#) growing investment from regional private equity firms. Indonesian football [commands](#) a massive local audience but underperforms commercially relative to its population size. River Plate could structure joint ventures with local ownership groups in these markets, providing technical direction and brand licensing in exchange for 30-40 percent equity positions. The immediate revenue remains modest but the strategic value compounds as Asian football economies mature over the next decade.

The legal structure matters critically. River Plate cannot simply open "franchises" under its brand without retaining meaningful control and economic participation. The model requires joint ventures where River contributes tangible operational value—coaching staff, scouting networks, training curricula—in exchange for equity positions with board representation and defined governance rights. These are strategic investments in which River's expertise serves as sweat equity.

Implementation requires prioritization. River Plate cannot simultaneously execute entry strategies across three

continents. The most effective approach is to sequence opportunities: establish one successful international joint venture that generates returns and validates the model, then leverage that proof point to negotiate subsequent partnerships. MLS presents the clearest first-mover advantage given regulatory clarity, established franchise economics, and River's existing brand recognition in US Hispanic markets. Success there provides templates for Saudi and Asian expansion.

Stadium Development as Strategic Investment



Picture by *simonmayer*

Since 2020, River Plate has executed the most comprehensive stadium [transformation](#) in South American football. The club eliminated the athletics track, lowered the playing field, and installed new lower stands in the Sívori, San Martín, and Centenario sections, placing spectators within meters of the action. Every wooden seat was replaced with FIFA-compliant folding chairs. The club added 180 luxury boxes, 926 hospitality seats, and a restaurant overlooking the pitch. Most critically, River installed Argentina's first and only playing surface with integrated aeration and climate control systems.

The financial returns validate the capital deployment. River Plate now [leads](#) national attendance by margins that exceed 40 percent over the nearest competitor. The club's [350,000](#) members represent the second-largest membership base globally, surpassing Manchester United and trailing only Bayern Munich. Sponsorship inventory expanded dramatically—the stadium now offers naming rights [valued](#) at \$8-12 million annually, a category that did not exist before the renovation. Social media metrics show River [dominating](#) Argentine football. Stadium quality signals institutional ambition.

The [next phase](#) will establish the Monumental as South America's only stadium with 100 percent covered seating and a capacity approaching 100,000 spectators. The board led by Stefano Di Carlo plans to announce the project in late January 2026, with construction beginning in May—a four-month timeline from announcement to ground-breaking that contradicts stereotypes about South American institutional execution speed. Structural engineering requires 100 support columns along the stadium's external perimeter to support the roof's weight without internal pillars obstructing sightlines. The roof will extend to the playing field's boundaries but will not form a complete

dome—grass requires UV exposure that artificial domes cannot replicate at professional-quality standards.

The investment approaches \$100 million, making it the most capital-intensive single project in River's modern history. The previous expansion partially funded itself through presales of premium seating in new sections. Financing a roof and upper ring presents different economics—there are no new seats to presell as collateral. The club will need to structure debt financing against projected future cash flows or secure strategic capital from institutional investors seeking exposure to Latin American sports infrastructure. The complexity demands financial sophistication that most Argentine clubs lack the institutional capacity to execute.

FIFA's technical requirements for hosting [2030 World Cup](#) matches include stadium roofing, particularly for opening and final venues. Argentina co-hosts the tournament with Uruguay, Paraguay, Morocco, Spain, and Portugal. The Monumental stands as Argentina's only credible venue for marquee matches if the roof project is completed by 2029.

The operational economics improve significantly with coverage. Current maintenance costs include continuous replacement of seating, railings, and finishes degraded by weather exposure. A roof extends infrastructure longevity by 15-20 years and reduces annual maintenance expenses by an estimated 30-40 percent. Concert promoters pay premium rates for covered venues.

The acoustic benefits compound competitive advantage on match days. The current configuration already amplifies crowd noise by eliminating the distance buffer around the athletics track. A roof transforms the stadium into a resonance chamber. Home-field advantage in football correlates measurably with crowd noise intensity. Studies from the Bundesliga show that covered stadiums [generate](#) 8-12 decibel increases compared to open configurations, [correlating](#) with 0.3-0.5 [additional points](#) per game for home teams. Over a 19-game home season, that effect produces 5-9 additional points—often the margin between qualifying for Copa Libertadores or missing international competition entirely.

The construction timeline targets completion during a tournament break to minimize lost home matches—the club estimates a maximum of three games played at neutral venues. European clubs routinely manage stadium renovations while maintaining competitive operations. Tottenham Hotspur played an entire season at Wembley during the construction of their new stadium and reached the Champions League final. River's approach demonstrates institutional sophistication in balancing infrastructure investment with sporting continuity.

Academy Networks as Asset Class

River Plate operates one of South America's most productive youth systems, but competes for talent within a limited geographic radius. The club's scouting network [covers](#) Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, Brazil, and Paraguay. Meanwhile, regions with higher birth rates and lower institutional development in youth football remain systematically underexplored. Nigeria produces 7 million boys in the age cohorts relevant for football development annually. River's scouting presence in West Africa totals zero permanent staff. Vietnam's youth football population exceeds 12 million. River has no structured access to Southeast Asian talent pipelines.

The traditional response—building wholly owned academies abroad—requires capital expenditures and operational losses for years before generating returns. The failure rate stems from two structural problems: River lacks local market knowledge to identify promising youth players in unfamiliar cultural contexts, and wholly owned foreign operations face community resistance that limits access to the best local talent.

The partnership model inverts this structure. River identifies established youth academies in target regions that already operate competitive teams, maintain community trust, and produce players reaching regional

professional levels but lack pathways to elite European markets. In Ghana, academies like Right to Dream [have produced](#) over 250 professional players, but transfer most of their talent to mid-tier European clubs because they cannot access top-tier scouting networks. In Serbia, Partizan Belgrade’s youth system [generates](#) technically skilled players but operates with budgets 70 percent below Western European standards. These academies possess the assets River needs—local talent identification and daily operational management—while River controls the assets they lack: a recognized global brand, proven training curriculum, and direct relationships with European clubs that pay premium transfer fees.

The geographic targeting should prioritize markets where talent supply exceeds institutional capacity. West Africa produces exceptional athletes but lacks professional leagues that pay sustainable wages, forcing many to migrate to Europe through informal networks that charge exploitative fees. Central America has youth populations interested in football, but a minimal South American club presence. Central and Eastern Europe offer technical training cultures but economic constraints that prevent academies from retaining talents until optimal transfer ages. By 2030, a network of 6-8 partnerships across these regions would give River systematic access to talent pools of over 40 million youth players—almost equal to Argentina’s population.

The competitive advantage compounds through scale. A single partnership in Ghana might produce one transferable player every three years. Eight partnerships across four continents create a 24-player pipeline every 36 months.

Where River Plate Creates Value



Elite Talent Factory
Produces elite players and transfers.



Live Matchday Intensity
Unmatched demand and emotion.



Premium Football Narratives
High-stakes stories that monetize.



Global Brand Scale
Large audience, commercial reach.



Stadium as an Asset
Drives revenue and experience.



Execution Capability
Delivers big projects.

Where River Plate Loses Value



Monetization Gap
Fans ≠ paying members.



Talent Upside Lost
Value captured downstream.



No Market Equity
No compounding ownership exposure.



Thin Talent Footprint
Missed early-access regions.



League Complexity
Hard to package globally.



Fixture Overload
Dilutes quality and meaning.

Part II: Football's Next Frontier Lives in the Americas

Introduction to Part II

The most commercially successful football leagues share structural principles that Argentine and South American competitions ignore. The Bundesliga's 18 teams and single championship generate €1.1 billion in domestic broadcasting rights. The UEFA Champions League's 36-team format produces €2.5 billion annually across all territories. These numbers reflect format clarity, competitive intensity, and market scale—variables that can be engineered through institutional design.

Argentina's Primera División operates with 30 teams competing for eight different titles. Copa Libertadores serves 430 million people across markets totaling \$3.2 trillion in GDP while excluding 475 million people and \$30 trillion in GDP from North America. These policy choices depress commercial outcomes and limit competitive development.

The following section examines three structural reforms that would transform Latin American football's economic position: league compression to 18 professional teams, continental tournament expansion to include Mexican and MLS clubs, and the competitive pressure mechanisms that drive institutional excellence. Each reform has precedent in global football markets.

The Economic Case for 18-Team Professional Football

Argentina Primera División operates with 30 teams and has announced a 2026 [format](#) featuring eight separate titles: Torneo Apertura, Torneo Clausura, Campeón de Liga, Copa Argentina, Trofeo de Campeones, Supercopa Argentina, Supercopa Internacional, and Recopa de Campeones. The Recopa alone involves a three-match tournament with point allocations for penalty shootout outcomes. This labyrinth of competitions contrasts sharply with the Bundesliga's 18 teams playing 34 matches for a single championship, the Premier League's 20 teams with 38 matches, and La Liga's 20-team structure. The pattern across Europe's commercially successful leagues converges around 18-20 teams with straightforward formats. Argentina's 30-team, eight-title system represents an outlier that undermines both sporting legitimacy and commercial viability.



The multiplication of titles dilutes competitive meaning. A league offering eight championships annually signals

that no single title carries definitive weight. When broadcasters pitch Argentine football to international audiences, they must explain that the “Campeón de Liga” is not the primary champion, that the Apertura and Clausura split the season, and that there are three different Supercopa tournaments with complex tiebreaker rules that involve runners-up if the same team wins multiple competitions. The Bundesliga sells a simple story: 34 matches, highest point total wins. This clarity translates directly into broadcasting value. Bundesliga domestic rights alone [exceeded](#) €1.1 billion. Format complexity creates friction that depresses international marketability regardless of the quality of individual clubs.

The dilution effect operates mathematically across both team quantity and title proliferation. A 30-team league contains at a minimum 10-12 clubs without realistic pathways to any of the eight titles. These teams compete primarily to avoid relegation, producing defensive football optimized for draws rather than victories. Matches between 20th and 25th place generate minimal television viewership, depress overall league attendance averages, and provide negligible content value to broadcasters. The 2024 Primera División [averaged](#) 22,000 spectators per match outside the six largest clubs. Bundesliga matches outside the top six [averaged](#) 32,400. The quality gap manifests in viewership economics that no amount of title multiplication can overcome.

Squad management efficiency collapses under fixture congestion created by eight parallel competitions. Elite clubs must field competitive teams in Apertura, Clausura, Copa Argentina, and various Supercopa tournaments, while simultaneously competing in the Copa Libertadores. Bundesliga clubs play 34 league matches, plus domestic cups and European competitions, totaling 45-55 matches per elite team. This schedule allows tactical preparation between matches, strategic squad rotation, and the integration of youth players. Argentina’s format forces clubs to prioritize some titles over others, leading to tournaments in which first-choice players rest while reserve teams compete.

The marketability disadvantage of convoluted formats compounds across international audiences. Streaming platforms purchase content packages based on clarity and fan engagement. A viewer in Mexico or Colombia can follow the Premier League’s single-table race across 38 weeks without needing to understand secondary tournaments or conditional tiebreakers. That same viewer, attempting to follow Argentine football, encounters a structure that requires flowcharts to determine which competitions matter and how teams qualify for international play. The cognitive friction reduces casual viewership, limiting the audience size broadcasters can monetize, which depresses rights values and perpetuates the financial gap between Argentine clubs and international competitors.

The concentration of talent accelerates in compressed leagues with clear competitive hierarchies. When Serie A operated with 18 teams in the early 2000s, the bottom three clubs still fielded multiple players who were considered for the national team. In Argentina’s 30-team format, clubs ranked 22-28 operate with meager budgets and field players who would struggle to reach professional standards in Brazil or Colombia. Meanwhile, the eight-title system means that clubs ranked 15th-20th can realistically win a tournament through favorable bracket draws or penalty shootouts, reducing the pressure to invest in squad quality for sustained competitive excellence. This is not elitism—it is recognition that professional leagues require professional standards and that complex formats enable mediocrity to persist.

An Americas-Wide Copa Libertadores

UEFA Champions League broadcasting rights [sold](#) for €2.5 billion annually, with North American rights alone [worth](#) €230 million per season. Copa Libertadores and Copa Sudamericana combined [generated](#) \$500 million total

across all territories in 2024. The revenue disparity reflects both competitive quality differences and structural limitations. The Champions League operates across a unified European market of 450 million people with a GDP exceeding \$18 trillion. Copa Libertadores serves South American markets with a combined population of 430 million and a GDP of \$3.2 trillion. Expanding Libertadores to include Mexican Liga MX and MLS clubs would add 475 million people and \$30 trillion in GDP to the tournament's addressable market. The economic logic is powerful.

Mexican clubs competed in the Copa Libertadores from 1998 to 2016. Cruz Azul reached the final in 2001. Guadalajara made the semifinals in 2005 and 2010. Club América, Tigres UANL, and Pachuca consistently qualified for the knockout rounds. Liga MX's current competitive stagnation correlates directly with this withdrawal. The Mexican national team reached five consecutive World Cup Round of 16 appearances between 1994 and 2014 while clubs competed in the Libertadores. Since 2016, the national team's technical level has visibly declined. Competition quality drives development. CONCACAF provides insufficient resistance.

MLS has reached a threshold where participation in elite continental competition becomes commercially and competitively viable. Inter Miami fields Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez. LAFC, Atlanta United, and Austin FC demonstrate that MLS clubs can attract and compensate top-tier international talent. The league's salary cap continues to [expand](#)—from \$3.49 million per team in 2015 to \$5.95 million in 2025—while Designated Player slots allow unlimited spending on three players per roster. MLS average attendance [reached](#) 23,234 in 2024, exceeding Liga MX's 21,847 and approaching Argentine Primera División's top clubs (excluding River Plate).

The 36-team format adopted by the UEFA Champions League in 2024 provides the structural template. All clubs compete in a single league phase, playing eight matches against eight different opponents determined by a seeded draw. Teams ranked 1-8 advance directly to the Round of 16. Teams ranked 9-24 enter a knockout playoff round to determine the remaining eight Round of 16 participants. Teams ranked 25-36 are eliminated. This structure maximizes competitive uncertainty—every match matters because positions 8-9 and 24-25 determine playoff qualification versus elimination. Broadcasting value increases proportionally with sustained uncertainty. A tournament in which 24 of 36 teams remain in contention through matchday 7 generates higher viewership than formats in which half the field is eliminated after three games.

Calendar alignment is a must. MLS [announced](#) it will shift from a spring-to-fall to a fall-to-spring calendar starting in 2027, matching the calendars of European and most global leagues. Liga MX already operates on a fall-to-spring schedule with Apertura and Clausura splits. CONMEBOL competitions run from February to November. The transition requires CONMEBOL to adopt August-to-May scheduling, which aligns with European player transfer windows and international breaks. This synchronization eliminates the fixture conflict that previously complicated Mexican participation—clubs can commit to Libertadores without disrupting domestic league priorities.

North American broadcasting economics transform immediately with this expansion. Apple [pays](#) \$250 million annually for MLS rights in the US market. A Copa Libertadores featuring Club América versus River Plate, Inter Miami versus Atlético Nacional, or LAFC versus Flamengo commands premium rates from US English and Spanish-language broadcasters.

Competition as Development Infrastructure



Picture by Roger Ce

In 2022, a major European national team coach [argued](#) that his squad did not need competitive exposure to non-European opponents. The team had faced UEFA opposition for four consecutive years, competing in European Championships qualifiers, Nations League matches, and friendlies against familiar continental rivals. The coach maintained that this preparation was sufficient for World Cup success. His team subsequently lost to Japan in the group stage and was eliminated by Morocco in the Round of 16. The coach was removed from his position shortly after. The lesson was clear but frequently ignored: competitive isolation produces strategic blindness, tactical stagnation, and performance decline regardless of talent quality.

This pattern repeats across football when teams or leagues insulate themselves from diverse competition. Mexican clubs dominated CONCACAF competitions between 2005 and 2015 while simultaneously competing in the Copa Libertadores. The dual exposure forced Liga MX teams to adapt to South American tactical approaches—high pressing, technical midfield control, aggressive attacking transitions—while maintaining CONCACAF physicality. Mexican national team performance peaked during this period, reaching five consecutive World Cup Round of 16 appearances. After withdrawing from Libertadores in 2016 to focus exclusively on CONCACAF, Liga MX teams continued winning their regional tournament, but the competitive standard declined measurably. The Mexican national team has failed to advance past the Round of 16 in subsequent tournaments. Competitive variety drives adaptation. Monopolistic regional dominance breeds complacency.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant [explained](#) this dynamic through a forestry metaphor:

“It is just the same as with trees in a forest; exactly because each one attempts to deprive the other of air and sunlight, each compels the other to seek these things above itself, and by this means they grow beautiful and straight; whereas those that put out branches at will, in freedom and in isolation from others, grow stunted, bent and twisted.”

Competition functions as developmental infrastructure. Trees in dense forests develop straight trunks and reach

their maximum height because competition from surrounding trees forces vertical growth. Trees in open fields grow horizontally, developing wide canopies but limited height because they face no pressure to optimize for vertical competition. Football clubs and leagues follow identical patterns. Competitive pressure forces institutional optimization. Isolation permits structural inefficiencies to persist indefinitely.

Competition is not merely rivalry—it is cooperative development through mutual pressure. When River Plate faces Botafogo in the Copa Libertadores, both clubs benefit regardless of the result. The match forces tactical preparation against unfamiliar approaches, exposes weaknesses in squad depth, and provides performance benchmarks against elite opposition. This dynamic explains why clubs in competitive leagues develop faster than those in monopolistic leagues, even when the latter have superior resources. Manchester City's institutional sophistication developed through sustained Premier League competition against Liverpool, Arsenal, and Chelsea. If City had won every domestic match by three goals for a decade, the club would not have reached its current operational excellence. Competitive pressure forces institutional evolution. Monopolistic dominance permits mediocrity to persist beneath a veneer of success.

The global football economy increasingly rewards institutions that seek competitive exposure rather than avoiding it. Bayern Munich schedules summer friendlies against Premier League opposition specifically to test tactical approaches before the competitive season begins. Flamengo hired European coaching staff to import methodologies developed under different competitive pressures. A 22-year-old Argentine midfielder who spent two seasons competing in Copa Libertadores against Brazilian, Uruguayan, and potentially Mexican opposition commands higher transfer fees than an equivalent player who spent those seasons in a league where his club won every match by comfortable margins.

Football innovation requires competitive pressure to move from theory to implementation. Clubs adopt new training methodologies, tactical systems, and institutional structures when existing approaches prove insufficient against elite competition. Without that pressure, innovation becomes optional rather than necessary. The most successful football institutions operate in environments where multiple competitors can defeat them on any given week, and continental competition provides additional performance benchmarks. These clubs innovate continuously because stagnation produces immediate consequences. Clubs operating in weak domestic leagues with limited continental exposure face no such pressure. They can persist with outdated approaches for years before the gap becomes evident. By that point, the institutional distance to the competitive frontier requires years to close.

About **the Author**



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Federico N. Fernández is a visionary leader dedicated to driving innovation and change. As the CEO of We Are Innovation, a global network of over 50 think tanks and NGOs, Federico champions innovative solutions worldwide. His expertise and passion for innovation have earned him recognition from prestigious publications such as *The Economist*, *El País*, *Folha de São Paulo*, and *Newsweek*. Federico has also delivered inspiring speeches and lectures across four continents, authored numerous scholarly articles, and co-edited several books on economics.



We Are Innovation is a dynamic network of individuals and institutions who deeply believe in innovation's power to drive progress and solve the world's most pressing problems. With 50 think tanks, foundations, and NGOs based worldwide, We Are Innovation represents the diverse voices of a global civil society committed to advancing human creativity, adopting new technologies, and promoting innovative solutions. Through our collaborative approach and cutting-edge expertise, we are driving global transformative change. To learn more about our work, visit us at <https://weareinnovation.global/>.



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