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## Ragged Football

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**English Title:**  
Ragged Football

**Original Title:**  
Pelota de trapo

**Studio/Distributor:**  
Sociedad Independiente Filmadora Argentina

**Director:**  
Leopoldo Torres Ríos

**Producers:**  
Armando Bó  
Jerry Gómez

**Screenwriters:**  
Leopoldo Torres Ríos  
Leopoldo Torre Nilsson  
Ricardo Lorenzo  
Jerry Gómez

**Cinematographer:**  
Gumer Barreiro

**Art Director:**  
Ariel Severino

**Composers:**  
Pedro Rubbione  
Alberto Gnecco

**Editor:**  
José Cardella

**Duration:**  
114 minutes

**Cast:**  
Armando Bó  
Florén Delbene  
Carmen Valdez  
Graciela Lecube

**Format:**  
B/W, 35mm

**Year:**  
1948

## Synopsis

Eduardo Díaz, aka Comeuñas, is a boy of humble origins who lives in a marginal Buenos Aires neighbourhood at the end of the 1930s. His dream is to become a professional footballer. Meanwhile, he and his friends spend their time playing football on a waste ground with a rag ball, but their biggest wish is to play with a leather ball. As the children are economically dependent on adults, they raise money through a raffle and only then can the boys acquire the coveted leather ball. As an adult, Comeuñas fulfils his dream, becoming a highly acclaimed professional footballer. However, due to heart failure, he is advised by the club doctor to stop playing. Comeuñas refuses to follow the doctor's advice and conceals his deadly disease from his family, his girlfriend and his friends. He continues playing, and with the money he earns, he buys his mother a house and pays for his brother's college fees. After some time, Comeuñas begins to show signs of poor health. His brother, who is a medicine student, realises what is wrong with him and he therefore seeks to put an end to the footballer's professional career.

## Critique

The Perón administration (1946-1955) had arguably a detrimental impact on Argentine cinema: ineffective protectionist policies, harsh censorship and the exile of actors and film-makers contributed to the decline of the film industry and the poor quality of films. Released in 1948, *Ragged Football* became a notable exception, infusing the languishing national cinema with a breath of fresh air. The film features one of the earliest representations of childhood in Argentine cinema, and Torres Ríos masterfully portrays boyhood and football as two inextricable worlds in an urban working-class setting. With a cast of non-professional boys who are passionate about football, *Ragged Football* struck a chord with the audience of the time, becoming a box office hit. Its success assumed such large proportions that it set the course for the production of other sports films by the same production company such as *En cuerpo y alma (In Body and Soul)* (Leopoldo Torres Ríos, 1951) on basketball and *El hijo del crack (Son of the Star)* (Leopoldo Torres Ríos and Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1953) on football. Furthermore, the fictional Sacachispas – the boys' football team – lent its name to a football club founded a few months after the film premiere. While it never specifically makes reference to Peronism, *Ragged Football* undoubtedly resonated with the prevailing zeitgeist of the time because the story conveys that, regardless of one's social background, upward social mobility is attainable.

Divided into two perfectly delineated parts, the film charts two distinct life phases, childhood and adulthood. Although the second part features several Argentine football stars led by the coach of the 1948 national football team, Guillermo Stábile, it is the child-centred first part that makes the film memorable. To portray childhood in a disadvantaged socio-economic milieu, Torres Ríos resorts to a neo-realist style. The believable performance of the pre-adolescent boys in conjunction with on-location filming furnishes the film with such authenticity that it may well serve as historical documentation. The film chronicles a time when the lower classes were gaining importance on the national scene and sports served as a springboard for upward social mobility. Hence, the rags-to-riches story embodied by Comeuñas's rise from poverty to football stardom signifies that talent together with perseverance determines one's standing in society.

Despite focusing on Comeuñas's football trajectory and achievements, the story is indicative of the fraternity and solidarity that exist amongst the boys. The film accentuates that Comeuñas's success is feasible thanks to the boys' collective efforts. This is eloquently

conveyed through the raising of money in order to purchase the leather ball sold in the neighbourhood's gift shop. The children combine forces to organise a raffle, sell the tickets and finally acquire the leather ball at a fair price. Their collective efforts are further underscored by the prolific use of long shots that capture the entire boy gang at work. At the same time, the purchase of the leather ball becomes the turning point of the tale since it metaphorically symbolises departure from childhood, a fact that is stressed by the death of one of the boys. Torres Ríos employs the scene of death not only as a coda to childhood but also as a transition to adulthood.

In depicting adulthood, Torres Ríos abandons the collective narrative structure of the first part in favour of an individual storyline centred on Comeuñas. As such, the film loses the spontaneity that characterises the boys' performance and occasionally lapses into a melodramatic tone triggered by the protagonist's concealment of his poor health, which in turn provokes his estrangement from his family and friends. Thus, although Comeuñas pursues his career as a professional footballer, the story suggests that fame has a price. As the adult Comeuñas, Armando Bó delivers a credible performance as a sportsman torn between his football career and his disease. Ultimately, the strength of *Ragged Football* lies in the way the two life phases are skilfully interwoven into a single narrative.

**Mirna Vohnsen**