

Creating Future Peronists through Sports:
The *Campeonatos Evita* and the Political Socialization of Children in
Twentieth-Century Argentina, 1948-1955

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On February 15, 1951, thousands of boys from across Argentina visited the Argentine National Congress to celebrate their participation in the fourth-annual *Campeonatos Evita*. First organized in 1948 by the Department of Youth Sports of the Eva Perón Foundation in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Vicente López, the *Campeonatos* featured soccer tournaments for boys across the country. Within a few years, the tournaments had emerged as one of the most visible forms of state propaganda directed at children in twentieth-century Argentina. In her remarks to the children, their parents, the Argentine Congress, and her husband President Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955), First Lady Eva Duarte de Perón (the founder and face of the games) declared that children, whom the president and first lady frequently referred to as “the only privileged Argentines,” would not only discover the benefits of sportsmanship and recreation through the games but also “[learn] to maintain a Peronist revolution for centuries to come.”¹ Eva’s comments spoke to the increasing efforts of the state to recruit children, especially from working-class families, into the Peronist Party. As Perón boasted after his second electoral victory in 1951, he had won his first election through the vote of men, the second by recruiting women, and he would win the third with the help of children.²

This project uses the *Campeonatos* as a case study to better understand how the Peronist state politicized the leisure time of children as a way to transform children into agents of state rhetoric and symbols of national progress. I will draw primarily from the

¹ Eva Perón, Speech given at the National Congress in honor of the participants in the Argentine Soccer Championship “Evita” (February 15, 1950), in *Eva Perón Discursos Completos, 1949-1952* Vol. 2, ed. Carlos Alvarez (Buenos Aires: Editorial Megafón, 1986), 196. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² Although I have seen this quote referenced in numerous secondary sources, it is always paraphrased and I have never found the exact quote. For one example, see Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón’s Argentina*, trans. Keith Zahniser (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 192.

coverage of the tournaments in the state-sponsored children's magazine *Mundo Infantil* (Children's World), the official mouthpiece of the games.³ *Mundo Infantil*, published weekly and never exceeding the price of one peso, was produced by the government-owned publisher Haynes between 1949 and 1955. *Mundo Infantil* showcased team pictures, game results, team standings, and spotlights of professional soccer players in almost every issue, perhaps as a way to get working-class children fixed to the magazine. *Mundo Infantil* would also often picture children on the front cover dressed in soccer uniforms provided by the Foundation for the games.⁴ The magazine referred to the tournaments as "a space for children" and even proclaimed to its child (and perhaps parent audience), "Do not be fooled. The games are not propaganda. The *Campeonato* does not need propaganda."⁵

Although the Peronist Party contained multiple (and at times competing) ideologies regarding the fluid relationships between the state, the body politic, and state-produced propaganda, I have chosen to use 'the state' and the Peronist Party interchangeably.⁶ The relationship between the state, the party, and the Eva Perón

³ The tournaments also found coverage in the magazine *Mundo Deportivo* (1949-1955). Although *Mundo Deportivo* and *Mundo Infantil* were both produced by the state-owned publisher Haynes and edited by Carlos Aloe, *Mundo Deportivo* was not specifically a children's magazine.

⁴ See, for example, *Mundo Infantil*, November 21, 1949, front cover.

⁵ "Allá donde la patria pierde sus fronteras," *Mundo Infantil*, November 21, 1949, 9.

⁶ My conceptualization of media, the state, hegemony, gender, and the reproduction of broader power relations in the modern world has been influenced by Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 120-167; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), especially his essays on hegemony and the multiplicity of writing; Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); William Rosberry, "Hegemony, Power, and Languages of Contention," in *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power*, ed. Edwin N. Wilmsen and P.A. McAllister (Chicago: University of

Foundation (1948-1955) was also intertwined and fluid throughout Perón's presidency.⁷ Indeed, in 1950 the Argentine minister of Education ordered that exams in secondary schools be postponed so they would not interfere with the games.⁸

I argue that the tournaments allowed the Peronist state to politicize the leisure time of children, particularly from working-class families, by portraying children's participation in the *Campeonatos* as an affirmation of Argentine citizenship and national identity for the child participants as well as their parents and guardians. The tournaments ran for seven of Perón's nine years in power and represented the most effective means for the Peronist state to blur the lines between public politics and private lives. Through the *Campeonatos* the Peronists transformed mundane spaces of leisure into contested symbols of party and national loyalty—and, in the process, shaped the political and historical consciousness of an emerging working-class body politic that would come of age as the light of the Peronist era began to dim in the mid-1950s.

Peronism, Children, and the Emergence of the *Campeonatos*

Peronism is one of the more heavily studied and controversial periods in the Latin American historiography. Although Peronism is primarily associated with twentieth-century Latin American populism, there is an ongoing debate regarding its political, economic, and social character. In addition to a form of populism, scholars have also

Chicago Press, 1996), 71-84; Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000).

⁷ Notable works on the Eva Perón Foundation include: Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, *Eva Perón* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980); Néstor Ferioli, *La Fundación Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1990); Omar Acha, Carolina Barry, Karina Inés Ramacciotti, and Adriana María Valobra, eds., *La Fundación Eva Perón y las mujeres: entre la provocación y la inclusión* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2006).

⁸ *Democracia*, March 7, 1950, as cited in Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 185.

associated Peronism with corporatism, quasi-Fascism, and political mobilization.⁹

Populism emerged in Latin America in the age of modernization as a political alternative to the authoritarian states that dominated the political landscape between the 1870s and 1920s. It merged the figure of a charismatic leader with nationalistic, anti-imperialist, and anti-elite discourse.¹⁰ With the backdrop of urbanization, industrialization, and elite domination of the export-based economy, populism gained support among the working class, the military, and a minority of anti-status quo elites.¹¹

While there were notable examples of populism in Latin America prior to Perón's 1946 election, such as Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1930-1945) and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico (1934-1940), Perón's emergence onto the political scene ignited new and contentious debates about the perceived merits or dangers of populism in the region.¹² Since the 1950s, scholars have devoted significant attention to Peronism and, as the

⁹ The tension between these terms appears in the various essays found in Marcela García Sebastiani, ed. *Fascismo y antifascismo, peronismo y antiperonismo: conflictos políticos e ideológicos en la Argentina (1930-1955)* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2006).

¹⁰ Similar traits were also emblematic of nineteenth-century *caudillismo* across Latin America. W. John Green points to such comparisons in his work on Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. See *Gaitanismo, Left Liberalism, and Popular Mobilization in Colombia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), especially chapter 2.

¹¹ For a better sense of populism in twentieth-century Latin America, see Gino Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1965); Torcuato Di Tella, "Populism and Reform in Latin America," in *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*, ed. Claudio Véliz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 47-74; Alan Knight, "Populism and Neo-populism in Latin America, especially Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (1998): 223-248; Karen Kampwirth, ed., *Gender and Populism in Latin America: Passionate Politics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Robert S. Jansen, "Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism," *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 2 (2011): 75-96; Michael L. Conniff, ed. *Populism in Latin America 2nd ed.* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2012).

¹² For a sense of the governments of Getúlio Vargas and Lázaro Cárdenas, see Hélio Silva, *O ciclo de Vargas* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1964); Enrique Krauze and Aurelio de los Reyes, *Lázaro Cárdenas, general misionero* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económico, 1987); Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994): 73-107; Joel Wolfe, "Father of the Poor' or 'Mother of the Rich'?: Getúlio Vargas, Industrial Workers, and Constructions of Class, Gender, and Populism in São Paulo, 1930-1954," *Radical History Review* 58 (1994): 80-111; Robert M. Levine, *Father of the Poor?: Vargas and His Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: The First Vargas Regime, 1930-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

fractious political climate in present-day Argentina suggests, the movement continues to impact the lives of Argentines almost sixty years after Perón's removal from power.¹³

Although the scholarship on Peronism is vast, children of Peronist Argentina, whom Mariano Ben Plotkin has labeled “the seeds for the Peronization of all society,” are just beginning to gain historians' attention.¹⁴ While there is a well-developed literature on the experience of children in other twentieth-century states (both democratic and authoritarian) prior to or concurrent with the Peronist state, the historiography of children's lives during the Peronist era is just beginning to expand.¹⁵ Scholars have started analyzing the role of children through various state-directed media, primarily neighborhood youth centers, primary school textbooks, children's readers, and various initiatives of the Eva Perón Foundation.¹⁶

The Eva Perón Foundation undertook its most intensive initiative towards children in 1948 when it held the first annual *Campeonato Infantil de Fútbol Doña María*

¹³ It would be impractical to enumerate the many works on Peronism. For a useful overview of the historiography, see Mariano Plotkin, “The Changing Perceptions of Peronism,” in *Peronism and Argentina*, ed. James P. Brennan (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1998), 29-54.

¹⁴ Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 192.

¹⁵ For a sense children's experiences in other twentieth-century states and their relationship to state propaganda, see H.W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development 1922-45* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976); Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Cari Williams, “Progeny of Progress: Child-Centered Policymaking and National Identity Construction in Brazil, 1922-1954” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2011).

¹⁶ Works on the Peronist period and twentieth-century Argentina that underscore children and their relationship to these various state-directed media include: Clive Foss, “Selling a Dictatorship: Propaganda and the Peróns,” *History Today* 50 (2000): 8-14; Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*; Omar Acha, *Los muchachos peronistas: Orígenes olvidados de la Juventud Peronista (1945-1955)* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2011); Michael Gobel, *Argentina's Partisan Past: Nationalism and the Politics of History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011). For a historiography of children's lives and the Peronist state, see Thomas J. Brinkerhoff, “The Experience of Children in Perón's Argentina: Recent Interventions and Future Directions,” *History Compass* 12 no. 11 (2014): 833-842.

Eva Duarte de Perón (later shortened to the *Campeonatos Evita*).¹⁷ During its inaugural season, nearly 12,000 boys from the city of Buenos Aires and 4,000 from surrounding provinces took part in the games. In 1950, the state claimed that more than 200,000 children took part in the games and after 1951 the Eva Perón Foundation added additional sports to accompany soccer (including swimming, track, boxing, rope climbing, and water polo).¹⁸ Beginning in 1952, the *Campeonatos* welcomed girls into the tournaments for most sports. Most teams were organized as part of neighborhood clubs and first prize was generally a full-sized soccer field in the neighborhood of the winning team as well as a state-issued grant to improve the club's facilities.¹⁹ As a result of the *Campeonatos'* success, the state created the *Campeonatos Juveniles Deportivos Juan Perón* (Juan Perón Youth Sports Tournaments) for teens in 1953. Perón and Evita often referenced the material gains the state delivered to children and communities through the *Campeonatos* as signs of national progress. The president and first lady frequently proclaimed that as a result of Peronist programs such as the *Campeonatos*, "children learn to dream from the cradle."²⁰

Dr. Ramón Cereijo, the minister of finance and general manager of the Eva Perón Foundation, served as the president of the organizing committee for the games. While the

¹⁷ Although there is not a large body of scholarship focused on children and sports, the historiography on mass sports and politics in Latin America (especially Argentina) is enormous. For some of the more recent scholarship, see: Eduardo Archetti, *Masculinities: Football, Polo, and Tango in Argentina* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Richard Giulianotti, *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Pablo Alabarces, *Fútbol y patria: el fútbol y las narrativas de la nación en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Promoteo, 2002); J.A. Mangan and Lamartine Pereira da Casta, ed. *Sport in Latin American Society: Past and Present* (London: F. Cass, 2002); Alan Thompson and Christopher Young, ed., *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Joshua H. Nadel, *Fútbol!: Why Soccer Matters in Latin America* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2014).

¹⁸ "Evita cristalizó tus sueños de deportista," *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 27.

¹⁹ "Palabras de Evita, 1950," *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 15.

²⁰ See, for example, Eva Perón, Speech given in the Plaza Luro of Mar de la Plata (October 14, 1948), in *Eva Perón Discursos Completos* vol.1, 295.

Campeonatos were initiated and run by the Foundation, Congress also allocated funding for the games. In 1952, a year of severe economic recession and uncertainty in Argentina, Congress allocated more than three million dollars (USD) to help carry out the competitions.²¹ The tournaments used a large portion of their annual funding to ensure that children from the provinces could take part in the games.²² Since assuming the presidency in 1946, the Peronist state worked to better incorporate the provinces into the political fabric of Buenos Aires—and the same held true in the context of the *Campeonatos*.²³ A December 1949 edition of *Mundo Infantil*, for example, pictured all provincial teams from the second annual *Campeonato* and explained that children from the provinces were eager to travel great distances for the honor of participating in the games [Image 1].²⁴ As the games evolved to include additional sports and female participants, they also began to attract more provincial teams. As *Mundo Infantil* explained in 1952, “Provinces that never participated in games such as these are now preparing to compete with their brothers and sisters around the country under the tutelage of Evita, the creator of these magnificent tournaments.”²⁵

While the Peronist state had numerous propaganda initiatives directed at children, it relied primarily on print media (such as textbooks, children’s readers, magazines, and pamphlets), which did not circulate as widely outside the capital city. Similarly although

²¹ Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 181. For an excellent economic analysis of the Peronist period, see William C. Smith, *Authoritarianism and the Crisis of the Argentine Political Economy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

²² To get a sense of how many Argentines resided in the provinces outside of Buenos Aires, in 1949 4,524,437 out of 16,961,456 resided just in the province of Buenos Aires. In 1951, 4,743,584 out of 17,855,269 lived in the province of Buenos Aires. See República Argentina, *Anuario Estadístico de República Argentina, 1957* (Buenos Aires: Dirección Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 1957), 23-24.

²³ James p. Brennan and Marcelo Rougier, *The Politics of National Capitalism: Peronism and the Argentine Bourgeoisie, 1946-1976* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 36-37.

²⁴ “El primer campeón,” *Mundo Infantil*, December 19, 1949, 7.

²⁵ “Deportes Infantiles Evita,” *Mundo Infantil*, November 17, 1952, 39.

provincial public schools were regulated by the state, they were less subject to intervention and regulation than those located in Buenos Aires—which Perón proclaimed served as the capital of his program of *Justicialismo* (social justice).²⁶ The *Campeonatos* allowed the state to reach a portion of the child demographic previously beyond the reach of the increasingly tightening hand of the Peronist propaganda machine. By distributing uniforms and sports equipment with Peronist patches and slogans as well as state-printed pamphlets on topics such as sportsmanship and health, the *Campeonatos* allowed the state to bring Peronist images and rhetoric into provincial homes. Although a lack of oral histories makes it unclear the extent to which provincial children and their families embraced or rejected such imagery and rhetoric, the increasing number of provincial children participating in the games speaks to the continued efforts of the state to target the provinces and the enthusiasm of provincial families for Peronist initiatives.

Molding the Future Body Politic: The *Campeonatos* and Children’s Citizenship

The Eva Perón Foundation consistently sought ways to attract children to the games. From the inaugural tournament in 1948, the Foundation emphasized that participating in the *Campeonatos* was a way for children to ensure proper physical health and child happiness. Eva Perón explained that through participation in sports, children would grow up to be strong and happy—symbolizing unprecedented hope for this emerging generation of Argentines.²⁷ Yet *Mundo Infantil* emphasized that physical fitness and child happiness were not just benefits of the tournaments, but rather requirements for all children. The magazine declared, “Children like to play in the games

²⁶ Mónica Esti Rein, *Politics and Education in Argentina, 1946-1962* (New York: M.E. Sharp, 1998), 78.

²⁷ Eva Perón, Speech given at the awards for teams of the *Campeonatos Evita* (August 28, 1950), in *Eva Perón Discursos Completos* vol. 2, 255.

and also understand that they *need* to play. By participating, they will be healthier, stronger, and better children.”²⁸ The rhetoric in the magazine linked participation in the tournaments to the state’s conception of the ‘ideal’ child. By casting participation in children’s sports as a necessity, the state worked to transform leisure activities and mundane spaces into symbols of Peronist loyalty. In this sense, participation in the *Campeonatos* not only symbolized the indoctrination of children, but the allegiance (or at least openness) to Peronist ideology by their parents and guardians. As Janet Lever has noted in her analysis of sports and authoritarian regimes, participating in sports (or in the case of the *Campeonatos*, having one’s children take part in sports) represented a means for the state to channel anxieties among the body politic.²⁹ It stands to reason that children’s health was an important concern for working-class parents and the tournaments offered children a new means of recreation and socialization.

In addition to linking the importance of physical health with the tournaments, the state also branded the tournaments as the best way for children to learn sportsmanship and overall manners. In an October 1949 edition of *Mundo Infantil*, the state instructed that losing teams must acknowledge the superiority of their opponents and congratulate them after every match. The *Campeonatos* even created a *Campeonato de Consolación* (Consolation Championship) where “the losers of today will be the winners of tomorrow.”³⁰ Practicing good sportsmanship and manners on the soccer field, according to *Mundo Infantil*, would enable a child to become a “respectable adult” (*hombre*

²⁸ “Allá donde la patria pierde sus fronteras,” *Mundo Infantil*, November 21, 1949, 9.

²⁹ Janet Lever, *Soccer Madness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

³⁰ “¡A no desmayar!,” *Mundo Infantil*, October 31, 1949, 49.

digno).³¹ Much like the rhetoric concerning physical health, the *Campeonatos* allowed the state to portray the *Campeonatos* as spaces of instruction within the context of ‘proper’ comportment. By emphasizing that lessons learned through participation in the games were a means to ‘respectable’ adulthood, the state presented the competitions as a critical stage in child development rather than a set of isolated sports matches. The presentation of physical health and sportsmanship within the context of the tournaments parallels the larger efforts of the Peronist propaganda machine to instill ideas of naturalization in the context of citizenship among adults. As Eduardo Elena has suggested in his study of citizenship and consumption in Peronist Argentina, “References to the *vida digna* [respectable life] revealed how Peronists reformulated understandings of justice around an ideal of enhanced citizenship and elevated living standards.”³² The *Campeonatos* served as a conduit for talking about citizenship within the context of children. Physical health and sportsmanship represented ‘ideal’ and ‘necessary’ markers of that citizenship.

Another important symbol of citizenship within the context of the *Campeonatos* was child honor. *Mundo Infantil* classified children’s soccer matches as “fights for honor” and urged children to participate in the games as a way to “defend the colors of their neighborhoods, cities, and provinces.”³³ Regional pride and belonging were popular Peronist tropes that took center stage in rhetoric concerning the *Campeonatos*, especially in the context of provincial children. *Mundo Infantil* emphasized that children from the provinces practiced long hours and traveled great distances to Buenos Aires in order to

³¹ “Nacional de Flores’ es ahora ‘gloria al Fournier’ *Mundo Infantil*, October 31, 1949, 19.

³² Eduardo Elena, *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011), 8.

³³ “¡Adelante, Campeones!” *Mundo Infantil*, October 31, 1949, 7.

represent their towns with pride and bring a championship home to their community. The magazine went so far as to declare that winning the *Campeonato* would be “one of the greatest feelings anyone could ever experience in their lives.”³⁴ While the *Campeonatos* engendered regional rivalries by pitting neighborhood teams against one another and underscored the importance of regional honors, the games nevertheless fit with the larger Peronist program to instill national unity. Perón highlighted regional distinctiveness, especially within the context of economic production (i.e. industrial and agricultural labor). However, Peronist rhetoric always stressed that the state united everyone under Perón’s program of *Justicialismo*. As Daniel James has shown, Peronist rhetoric presented social justice and national sovereignty as inherently intertwined themes, rather than abstract talking points.³⁵

The magazine’s declaration that participating in the games would be one of the most memorable events in one’s lifetime speaks to the hyperbole of Peronist rhetoric surrounding child participation in the games and such exaggeration was often centered around conceptions of childhood honor. Perhaps the most outlandish anecdote surrounding honor and participation appeared in an October 1949 edition of *Mundo Infantil*. The magazine featured a story about a boy named Romero Falco who played for the team “The Shirtless boys” (*Juventudes Descamisados*).³⁶ Romero’s father had died the day before the team’s next match and, unable to find a substitute player, Romero

³⁴ “En provincias y territorios ya juegan campeones,” *Mundo Infantil*, December 19, 1949, 8; “Los campeones en nuestra casa,” *Mundo Infantil*, July 20, 1953, 46.

³⁵ Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21.

³⁶ When some 300,000 workers assembled in front of the Casa Rosada in Buenos Aires to protest Perón’s arrest on October 17, 1945, some took off their shirts to bathe in the city fountains. The elite labeled them *descamisados* (shirtless ones) and Perón appropriated the term as one of pride and would often remove his jacket when speaking to workers. See Clive Foss, *Juan and Eva Perón* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 35-36.

suiting up and played for his team, father, and community. The story concluded, “With children like Romero Falco, Argentina does not have to worry about its future.”³⁷ The story emphasized an almost religious devotion to the games and, in turn, Peronist programs. Romero exhibited honor not only through his willingness to play in his team’s soccer match, but also his role as a model for his peers and a symbol of Perón’s future ‘New Argentina.’ To be sure, the authenticity of Romero Falco is unclear. *Mundo Infantil* often published stories and anecdotes featuring ‘children’s stories’ with questionable authenticity. However, in most of those cases, the magazine did not print the child’s last name, let alone the name and picture of a team [Image 2]. It stands to reason that Romero’s story was, to a large extent, authentic—further underscoring the power of Peronist rhetoric concerning honor and citizenship within the context of the games.

While physical participation in the games represented the most visible sign of honor, the state stressed that children were more than passive participants. Rather, the state asserted that children were active agents in the organization of teams and, especially, in their naming. This was an important claim given that soccer teams often chose nationalistic and historical names. Popular team names included: Sarmiento, Mitre, Belgrano, San Martín, Quiroga, San Perón, 17 de Octubre, Malvinas Argentina, River Plate, and Evita Morning Star (with the later two names spelled in English).³⁸ The decision to use team names in English is curious, particularly given Perón’s acerbic relationship with the United States and ongoing negotiations with British companies to purchase state utilities and the rail road.³⁹ Yet since the state argued that the

³⁷ “Un minuto de silencio,” *Mundo Infantil*, October 31, 1949, 50.

³⁸ “Aumenta el entusiasmo en todo el país,” *Mundo Infantil*, November 21, 1949, 8.

³⁹ Foss, *Juan and Eva Perón*, 44.

Campeonatos were the only such tournaments in the world, it is reasonable to believe that the English names were intended to represent the games' wider reach as a symbol of Peronist honor and progress throughout the western hemisphere.

The state claimed that the names reflected “the spirit of *all* Argentine children” who sought to “demonstrate their admiration and respect for their heroes.”⁴⁰ By arguing that children were responsible for team names, the state sought to mask the propagandized and politicized nature of children's sports. The state's emphasis on ‘all’ children speaks to wider Peronist efforts to align children across class lines with Peronist ideas and inherently tie Argentine nationalism (*Argentinidad*) with the Peronist Party.⁴¹ The team names reflected that state's larger efforts to shape historical consciousness among children (and in turn their parents), particularly through textbooks.⁴² The Peronist state aligned with historical figures it found desirable and honorable (such as José de San Martín) and silenced and eliminated historical actors with whom anti-Peronist intellectuals unfavorably compared Perón, especially nineteenth-century *caudillo* Juan Manuel de Rosas (1829-1832, 1835-1852).⁴³ Yet the state also underscored that while children selected a diverse array of names representing their excitement for Argentine history and Peronist progress, “there was always one name fixed in the hearts of the child participants: Evita”⁴⁴

Through physical health, lessons of sportsmanship, and childhood honor (as seen through participating on and naming neighborhood teams), the Peronist Party converted

⁴⁰ “Nacional de Flores’ es ahora ‘Gloria al Fournier,’” *Mundo Infantil*, October 31, 1949, 8.

⁴¹ Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 192.

⁴² Rein, *Politics and Education in Argentina*, 51.

⁴³ Michael Goebel, *Argentina's Partisan Past: Nationalism and the Politics of History* (Liverpool: Liverpool university Press), 87.

⁴⁴ “Aumenta el entusiasmo en todo el país,” *Mundo Infantil*, November 21, 1949, 8.

mundane spaces of recreation into contested symbols of party and national loyalty. However, the tournaments appealed to large numbers of children beyond the power of Peronist rhetoric. Participating in the games afforded children tangible rewards. As Eva Perón explained in 1950, “Our affection for children is not only seen through securing higher salaries for their parents, but in creating schools, hospitals, homes, and cities for children themselves.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the state classified neighborhood clubs as “the kingdom for children” and enriched those spaces in return for active participation in the games.⁴⁶ The biggest reward for winning teams was a new state-of-the-art soccer field in their neighborhood and a state-issued grant to improve other sports and recreation facilities in the area.⁴⁷ Additionally, the tournaments offered individual players the lure of free sports equipment, uniforms, and the chance to interact with professional players as well as the president and first lady—who often appeared at the beginning of different matches.⁴⁸

The state underscored the value of these material rewards in its rhetoric surrounding the tournaments. *Mundo Infantil* pointed out that older children would have to “empty their piggy banks” in order to secure a soccer ball or authentic jersey—and even then, they were unable to find a field and forced to play in pastures.⁴⁹ However, providing substantial material gains to neighbored teams and their players was not new to Peronism. As Joel Horwitz has argued, the Argentine state in the early twentieth century (more than any other South American state) identified adult club teams in Buenos Aires as key political constituencies and provided them substantial resources to gain their

⁴⁵ Eva Perón, Speech given at the awards for teams of the *Campeonatos Evita* (August 28, 1950), in *Eva Perón Discursos Completos* vol. 2, 255.

⁴⁶ “Comienza la rueda final de quintas,” *Mundo Infantil*, November 21, 1949, 48.

⁴⁷ “Palabras de Evita, 1950,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 15.

⁴⁸ Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 183.

⁴⁹ *Mundo Infantil* (1949), as cited in *Ibid.*

allegiance.⁵⁰ Perón's intervention came in extending sizable resources and political energy down to children's teams and children participants. Although children did not have a vote and were not visible actors in the nation's political economy, their allegiance to the state proved just as critical as that of adult Argentines. Like players on club teams in the first half of the twentieth century, children proved to be critical performers and central faces of mass propaganda. Through children, the state could promote Peronist ideals and champion 'national progress.'

Children as the Conduit for Peronist Progress

The *Campeonatos* represented an informal political contract between the Peronist state and the nation's children. The state offered individual and community rewards for child participation and, in turn, used the games and the child participants as a medium to promote Peronist rhetoric to the larger body politic. The state argued that the very creation of the tournaments was a symbol of the wider benevolence of Perón that previous regimes had denied. With respect to the tournaments, Eva Perón explained, "We are working to repay an old debt that past oligarchies have stricken our children with, one that Peronist social justice is now resolving."⁵¹ The state noted that like his acts of kindness toward workers, the elderly, and *amas de casa* (homemakers), Perón sought to improve the lives of children and allow them to dream of a better future in the 'New Argentina.'⁵² By emphasizing gains for children, the state could place the *Campeonatos*

⁵⁰ Joel L. Horowitz, "Football Clubs and Neighborhoods in Buenos Aires before 1943: The Role of Political Linkages and Personal Influence," *Journal of Latin American Studies* (2014): 557-585.

⁵¹ "Palabras de Evita, 1950," *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 15.

⁵² "Ella cristalizó tus sueños de deportista," *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 26.

into larger Peronist rhetoric concerning social justice and state intervention geared toward addressing past oversight and repression.

Perón's rhetoric of *Justicialismo* centered on children began as early as 1944 (prior to his presidency) when the then secretary of labor used the earthquake in the city of San Juan (and the thousands of orphaned children) as an impetus for his presidential aspirations.⁵³ Like with the catastrophic earthquake, Perón linked the state's responsibility to provide basic needs for its citizens with its obligation to ensure child happiness. One issue of *Mundo Infantil*, for example, went so far as to assert that the state's distribution of leather soccer balls during the *Campeonatos* was comparable to its need to provide its citizens with electricity, heat, and running water.⁵⁴ The rhetoric in *Mundo Infantil* parallels other Peronist language concerning the state's appropriated 'responsibility' to provide its citizens with venues for entertainment, such as access to movies, theater, and radio.⁵⁵ However, unlike rhetoric concerning the need for the state to provide adult recreation, the *Campeonatos* assigned almost all of the credit to Evita, not President Perón. Although the Eva Perón Foundation organized the games, the silencing of Perón is surprising, especially given that one of the state's popular catchphrases (for adults and children alike) was *Perón Cumple!* (Perón Delivers)!

The state's relative silencing of Perón in its rhetoric surrounding the games can best be explained through its desire to use the *Campeonatos* to promote Eva as a "spiritual mother"—an intriguing aim given that Eva herself was not a biological

⁵³ Mark A. Helaey, *The Ruins of the New Argentina: Peronism and the Remaking of San Juan after the 1944 Earthquake* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 134.

⁵⁴ "Allá donde la patria pierde sus fronteras," *Mundo Infantil*, November 21, 1949, 9.

⁵⁵ Matthew B. Karush, *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 178.

mother.⁵⁶ The state classified Eva as the epitome of a “mother, sister, and friend,” consistently placing her role as a mother above the others.⁵⁷ While Eva held many honorific titles, her most notable was ‘the mother of the poor.’ As the motherly protector of the poor, the elderly, and children, Eva served to represent Peronist ideals of motherly sacrifice and virtue. As Nicholas Fraser and Maryssa Navarro have noted, “pure, virginal, and without sexual desire, she became the ideal mother.”⁵⁸

Within the context of the *Campeonatos*, the state reasoned that Eva created the games because the first lady still had the heart of a child and was able to connect with the “child in the street” on an intimate and emotional level.⁵⁹ *Mundo Infantil* reasoned that Eva’s “greatest reward” for organizing the games was witnessing children’s happiness.⁶⁰ According to the magazine, Eva created the tournaments “not as acts of philanthropy, compassion, or goodness, but as markers of *Justicialismo*.”⁶¹ It is in instances such as these (though references to larger Peronist ideas such as *Justicialismo*) where the relative absence of Perón in state rhetoric on the *Campeonatos* is most pronounced. Like other Latin American populists, such as Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Perón classified himself as the ‘father of the nation’ and, in turn, a universal father for all children.⁶² Even if the state viewed the *Campeonatos* as a primary venue to underscore Eva’s contributions, the omission of Perón’s fatherly image from the rhetoric on the competitions does not fit with

⁵⁶ Eva Perón, Speech given at the presidential residence in Olivos and broadcast on LRA Radio (April 14, 1948), in *Eva Perón Discursos Completos* vol. 1, 206.

⁵⁷ “Por los siglos de los siglos, Evita,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 5.

⁵⁸ Fraser and Navarro, *Eva Perón* (1996), 140.

⁵⁹ “Ella, tu amiga,” *Mundo Infantil*, July 20, 1953, 7.

⁶⁰ “Su sombra tutelar asegura tus privilegios,” July 20, 1953, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Levine, *Father of the Poor?*, 73.

the state's continued emphasis on the sanctity of the nuclear family.⁶³ Perón's absence (I argue) is suggestive of the wider divide between agencies and ideologies within the Peronist party as well as the relative autonomy of the Eva Perón Foundation within larger state hierarchies. The Foundation, according to Clive Foss, was unlike any other state agency. He explained, "The Foundation was a state within the state, the closest contact between the government and the people..."⁶⁴ It is in this light that Eva appears more as an active populist agent rather than a mere extension of Perón. Nonetheless, rhetoric on the *Campeonatos* (regardless of whom served as the face of the competitions) paralleled other state propaganda efforts targeted at adults and children that sought to engender Peronist ideology around state conceptions of citizenship and Argentine nationalism.

With Evita as its image and primary spokesperson, the *Campeonatos* worked to mold children into agents of Peronism and future party members. Molding children into future Peronists had been a principal goal of the party from Perón's earliest days in office. As Eva famously declared, "children must learn to maintain the Peronist revolution for centuries to come."⁶⁵ The *Campeonatos* served as one of the forefronts of that initiative. The state presented the games as a type of social conquest that underscored the differences between the 'progressive' 'New Argentina' and the authoritarian states of the earlier twentieth century headed by the oligarchical elite.⁶⁶ The state even justified spending large sums of money to carry out the tournaments by highlighting that the child

⁶³ Isabella Cosse, *Estigmas de nacimiento: Peronismo y orden familiar, 1946-1955* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de San Andrés, 2006), 96.

⁶⁴ Foss, *Juan and Eva Perón*, 54.

⁶⁵ Eva Perón, Speech given in honor of the participants in the Argentine Soccer Championship "Evita" (February 15, 1950), in *Eva Perón Discursos Completos*, Vol. 2, 196.

⁶⁶ "Los campeones en nuestra casa," *Mundo Infantil*, July 20, 1953, 46.

participants represented “the *pueblo* (community) of the future.”⁶⁷ This catchphrase is significant given that Peronist rhetoric consistently employed the binary of the oligarchy and *el pueblo* (which also became a popular term for Perón’s political base).⁶⁸

Eva emphasized that the *Campeonatos* represented more than simply children’s sports tournaments. Rather, they served as spaces to inculcate ideas and beliefs into the nation’s youth. Eva declared that the tournaments would “create men and women with virtuous morals that, with such values, could secure the bright future of the *Patria Justicialista* (loosely, Peronist state).”⁶⁹ Given the political aims of the games, it would be helpful for future works to incorporate oral histories as a way to gauge how many children from upper-class and (seemingly anti-Peronist) households took part in the competitions. While the tournaments were primarily targeted at working-class children and families, they nevertheless used children’s literature connected with the games to encourage children to “convert” their peers to the Peronist party.⁷⁰

While the lack of oral histories limits our knowledge of how successful such approaches at political conversion were within the context of the games, the state’s emphasis on children as political agents nonetheless speaks to the degree of agency and potentiality children had within Peronist Argentina. *Mundo Infantil* instructed children that in the ‘New Argentina’, they were “free and sovereign.”⁷¹ Eva Perón echoed such sentiments by encouraging children that they too “have rights,” even asserting, “the word

⁶⁷ “Palabras de Evita, 1950,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 15.

⁶⁸ To inaugurate his second five-year plan, Perón initiated a letter writing campaign to gather suggestions entitled, “Perón Wants to Know What the Pueblo Wants.” For a discussion of the campaign and Perón’s appropriation of the term “el pueblo,” see Eduardo Elena, “What the People Want: State Planning and Political Participation in Peronist Argentina, 1946-1955,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005): 81-108.

⁶⁹ “Palabras de Evita, 1950,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 15.

⁷⁰ Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 181.

⁷¹ “Ella cristalizó tus sueños de deportista,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 27.

of children is the word of God.”⁷² The state’s emphasis on children’s agency not only allowed Peronism to mark a departure with the authoritarian regimes of the earlier twentieth century, but also mobilize children as active Peronist agents and emissaries of Peronist ideologies within the confines of the nuclear family. Eva noted this openly in 1950 when she explained to the mass of children gathered at the *Campeonatos* that children served as the state’s “messengers of affection” within broader Argentine society—and one can infer, the working-class home.⁷³

Indeed, when speaking about adult engagement and interaction with the competitions, *Mundo Infantil* affirmed, “We are captivating all Argentine hearts: this is the *other* victory of the *Campeonatos*.”⁷⁴ It is reasonable to surmise that if the primary objective of the tournaments was to mold children into agents of Peronism through rhetoric centered on children’s citizenship, a secondary (though equally important) ambition was to further influence the political consciousness of adult Argentines. Although the Peronist state produced unprecedented amounts of propaganda aimed at adult and child Argentines alike, perhaps none were as open in their intent to ‘Peronize’ and recruit the populace as the *Campeonatos*.⁷⁵ Unlike print material (such as magazine and textbooks) or other state-created spaces like the Peronist Children’s City (*La Ciudad Infantil*), the *Campeonatos* actively (not subtly) catered to the needs and desires of children as well as parents. Although they were, on the surface, tournaments centered on children’s sports, we will see that the games also represented an aggressive means to

⁷² “Evita: mártir del trabajo,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 44; “La niñez abandonada,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 46.

⁷³ Eva Perón, Speech given at a reception for the child participants in the *Campeonato Argentino de Fútbol Infantil Evita* (February 15, 1951), in *Eva Perón Discursos Completos*, vol. 2, 299.

⁷⁴ “¡A no desmayar,” *Mundo Infantil*, October 31, 1949, 49.

⁷⁵ For an analysis of the extent of Peronist propaganda in Argentine society, see Foss, “Selling a Dictatorship.”

influence the political and economic consciousness of adult Argentines and, thus, served as a unique form of state propaganda for the entire nuclear family.

Adult Participation and Politization

As a way to further engage adults with the *Campeonatos*, the state stressed that sports were a perfect bond to link different generations within the Argentine family. *Mundo Infantil* advised children that they should speak to their parents and grandparents about the competitions, especially soccer games, because their reach was “universal.”⁷⁶ The magazine went on to explain that sports had such a broad appeal within the family that they helped engender family bonding and encouraged conversation between generations.⁷⁷ The state’s rhetoric concerning the appeal of sports across generations represents the Peronists aim to target parents and grandparents through programs seemingly intended for children. Like children, the elderly had been largely silenced in earlier-twentieth-century political rhetoric prior to Perón’s election. While Perón had come to power in 1946 through the support of industrial laborers, he realized that he would have to broaden his base of political support to maintain authority and social control. Mariano Ben Plotkin has reasoned that the Peronist Party identified and targeted groups it viewed as socially and economically marginalized, particularly children, the elderly, and homemakers (*amas de casa*).⁷⁸ Given that it was common for several generations to live under one roof in mid-twentieth-century Argentina, especially in

⁷⁶ “Un amigo que es todo un ejemplo,” *Mundo Infantil*, November 17, 1952, 29.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*, 112.

working-class neighborhoods, children served as agents that could impact the political consciousness of multiple political targets within the confines of the private home.⁷⁹

Although we are not left with any documents or oral histories that allow us to gauge how grandparents reacted to the tournaments, we do have evidence that suggests that many working-class parents embraced the games and ensured that their children participated. During the second-annual *Campeonatos* in 1949, the Peronist state claimed that more than 2,000 adults (mostly parents) from the city of Buenos Aires volunteered to serve as referees for the games. The state asserted that it was easy to find adult volunteers because they “considered it an honor to serve the future champions of the games.”⁸⁰

While it is unclear how inflated the state’s statistics were, the numerous pictures in *Mundo Infantil* of adults engaging with the tournaments suggest there was a strong level of engagement. The magazine pictured adults serving as referees and enthusiastic parents gathered along field sidelines cheering for their children [Image 3]. Future works may wish to incorporate oral testimonies to probe how actively engaged parents from the provinces were with respect to serving the tournaments. Given that the state only funded provincial children’s travel to the games, it is reasonable to assume that parents from the provinces did not play as active a role in the workings of the games as their contemporaries from Buenos Aires.

Yet even just examining parents from Buenos Aires, it is important to consider their motivations for volunteering and attending the games. While Peronist allegiance and parental pride are possible explanations for adult excitement for the *Campeonatos*, the material gains available for working-class parents through the games (much like those

⁷⁹ Ezequiel Adamovsky, *Historia de las clases populares en la Argentina: Desde 1880 hasta 2003* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2012), page.

⁸⁰ “¡A no desmayar,” *Mundo Infantil*, October 31, 1949, 49.

offered to the children participants themselves) are a more tangible explanation for adult support. The state required all child participants to receive free medical examinations before they were cleared to play in the games. Perón argued that he mandated such examinations to create “children that [were] healthy and strong in both mind and body,” yet there was also a growing concern and demand for state-subsidized medical programs from Perón’s working-class supporters.⁸¹ As Eduardo Elena has shown in his examination of the 1950 Peronist letter-writing campaign (“Perón Wants to Know What the *Pueblo Wants*) designed to solicit suggestions for the second five-year plan, many individuals wrote to Perón and Evita requesting medical care.⁸² In the years proceeding Perón’s election, families had allocated roughly eight percent of the household budget to “general spending” that included hygiene and medical expenses.⁸³

Additionally, the *Campeonatos* provided the child participants and adult volunteers free lunches, proclaiming they were designed to promote healthy eating.⁸⁴ While it was only lunch, it is reasonable to believe that the free meal for children was attractive to working-class families given that families had spent fifty-seven percent of their total income on food in the years proceeding Perón’s election (with an additional four percent of the familial budget allocated to fuel for cooking and heating).⁸⁵

Throughout Perón’s presidency, access to healthy food for the working-class had become

⁸¹ “Ella cristalizó tus sueños de deportista,” *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 12.

⁸² Elena, *Dignifying Argentina*, 145. For an analysis of public health programs during Perón’s presidency, see Karina Ramacciotti, *La política sanitaria del peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2009); Karina Ramacciotti, “Las voces que cuestionaron la política sanitaria del Peronismo (1946-1949),” in *Las políticas sociales en perspectiva histórica*, ed. Daniel Lvovich and Juan Suriano (Buenos Aires: Promoteo, 2006); Eric Carter, “God Bless General Perón’: DDT and the Endgame of Malaria Eradication in Argentina in the 1940s,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 64, no.1 (2009): 78-122.

⁸³ Departamento Nacional de Trabajo, *Condiciones de vida de la familia obrera* (Buenos Aires: 1937), 30.

⁸⁴ Eva Perón, Speech given at a reception for the child participants in the *Campeonato Argentino de Fútbol Infantil Evita* (February 15, 1951), 299.

⁸⁵ Departamento Nacional de Trabajo, *Condiciones de vida*, 30.

another banner of his program of *Justicialismo*, (correctly) emphasizing that, prior to his rule, the working-class not only ate less, but also maintained an unhealthy diet.⁸⁶ As Secretary of Public Health, Ramón Carillo established food education as a national priority and began a propaganda campaign designed to promote proper eating and emphasize the state's efforts to provide healthy food, such as the free lunches distributed during the *Campeonatos*.⁸⁷

However, the material goods (such as sports jerseys and equipment) given to children as part of their participation in the games also represented a reward for working-class parents. Advertisements in *Mundo Infantil* often featured soccer equipment and appeared found in stores of downtown Buenos Aires. Advertisements often dazzled children with images of sports equipment and clothing, urging them that they were necessary “to play like a champion.”⁸⁸ [Image 4]. A December 1949 edition of *Mundo Infantil*, for example, juxtaposed a story on the provincial teams competing in the *Campeonatos* with a full-page advertisement for Casa Testai, with several locations throughout Buenos Aires. The AD proclaimed across the top of the page (to working-class parents), “The Dream of the Year...Make it a Reality!” Casa Testai featured soccer balls selling for between \$29.90 and \$7.90. Soccer shirts started at \$4.70, soccer shoes

⁸⁶ Natalia Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), page; Rebekah E. Pite, *Creating a Common Table in Twentieth-Century Argentina: Doña Petrona, Women, & Food* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), page.

⁸⁷ The campaign for food education began in 1947. See Secretaria de Salud Pública de la Nación, *Plan Analítico de Salud Pública*, preparado bajo la dirección técnica del Profesor Ramón Carillo, Vol. 2 (Buenos Aires, 1947), 1311-1373.

⁸⁸ Advertisement for “Sportlandia,” *Mundo Infantil*, November 17, 1952, 13.

from \$21.90, shorts between \$3.90 and \$6.90, and soccer socks between \$3.80 and \$4.75.⁸⁹

Although Perón increased workers' real wages by some 53% between 1946 and 1949 and workers share of the national income increased from 40.1% to 49% during Perón's nine years in office, the prices for luxuries like children's sports gear were still outside the limits for the average working-class family.⁹⁰ For example, a metallurgic worker earned \$17.60 pesos daily in 1947 and \$25 pesos daily in 1952.⁹¹ Throughout 1951, working-class Argentines throughout Argentina wrote letters to Perón and Evita as part of the state's "Perón Wants to Know What the *Pueblo* Wants" campaign and continually complained that common expenditures (especially for food) outstripped workers' incomes by a wide margin.⁹² Additionally, the state suffered an economic downturn beginning in 1949 and culminating in 1952, with the implementation of an economic 'austerity plan.' During that time, the state urged families (particularly mothers) to be careful consumers. Perón stressed that "families should organize themselves...save not squander....economize purchases, acquire necessities, consume essentials."⁹³ Yet, the state continued to champion a better life for parents and children through economic turmoil, one, as we have seen, that included access to amenity consumer goods such as children's sports accessories.⁹⁴ Mundane equipment and sports

⁸⁹ Advertisement for Casa Testai, *Mundo Infantil*, December 19, 1949, 9.

⁹⁰ James, *Resistance and Integration*, 11.

⁹¹ Victor Larralde, *¿Qué aumentaron los precios o los salarios?* (Buenos Aires: Partido Comunista, 1951), np. These statistics are consistent with those reported in 1951 by a group of bakery workers from the Buenos Aires suburb of Iomas de Zamora. See Elena, *Dignifying Argentina*, 292 (fn 24).

⁹² Elena, *Dignifying Argentina*, 198.

⁹³ As cited in Luis Alberto Romero, *Argentina una crónica total del siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Aguilar, 2000), 394. **GET DIRECT QUOTE.**

⁹⁴ Elena, *Dignifying Argentina*, 193.

clothing served as yet another symbol of the state's slogan, "Perón Delivers!" [*Perón Cumple*].

Although it is unclear the extent to which parents understood the value of the free sports clothing and equipment their children received, the state argued that the tournaments (particularly their material rewards) engendered unprecedented enthusiasm in parents. The state claimed that parental excitement for the games was one of the main factors that distinguished the *Campeonatos* from any other state-initiative in the world, even noting that Brazil and its president Getúlio Vargas could learn from Evita's model in the context of the tournaments.⁹⁵ Similarly, *Mundo Infantil* asserted that, as a result of the games, parents felt "rewarded for all of the care and concern shown to their children."⁹⁶ The "care" and "concern" detailed by the magazine have a twofold meaning. Firstly, they represent the efforts of the state to provide children with opportunities and spaces of recreation previously unavailable to this segment of the population—especially from working-class families—in the previous decades. Secondly, the "care" and "concern" symbolize the role of Juan And Eva as alternative and universal parental figures (as we have seen, this was particularly true with respect to Eva in the context of the tournaments). As part of the obligation as universal parents, the Perón's had to provide financially for the nation's children—easing the financial strains on working families. By providing the most up-to-date clothing and gear to the child players, the state not only appropriated the role as a parent, but also one as a modern state able to deliver 'the dignified life' [*la vida digna*] to its citizens.

⁹⁵ "Ella cristalizó tus sueños de deportista," *Mundo Infantil*, August 4, 1952, 29.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Moreover, the numerous advertisements in *Mundo Infantil* for similar accessories being sold in Argentine stores—almost always juxtaposed next to articles on the *Campeonatos*—along with the pleas to Perón for higher wages in the thousands of 1951 letters to the state suggest that such a gesture did not go unnoticed. The manner in which *Mundo Infantil* incorporated advertisements for children’s sports products (which were directed at parents, usually mothers) speaks to both the subtle and wide-reaching aims of the *Campeonatos*.⁹⁷ As we have seen, although the *Campeonatos* were (on the surface) children’s sports tournaments, they served as an important vehicle for the state to transform children into political agents that could help impact working-class parents’ understanding of citizenship and the role of the state in guaranteeing a ‘dignified life’. In this instance, the state showcased the New Argentina through the sports clothing children donned and the sound of soccer balls hitting against new cleats ringing through local *barrios*.

Concluding Thoughts

In July of 2013, Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, with a larger-than-life photograph of Eva Perón embracing children in the background, addressed the more than one million children and adults registered to take part in the annual *Juegos Nacionales Evita* [Evita National Games] [Image 5]. In 2003, then President Néstor Kirchner reintroduced the tournaments under the direction of the

⁹⁷ The state identified mothers and homemakers as “the guardian angels of the domestic economy” and urged them to control familial budgets. See Natalia Milanese, “The Guardian Angels of the Domestic Economy’: Housewives’ Responsible Consumption in Peronist Argentina,” *Journal of Women’s History* 18, no.3 (2006): 91-117.

national government.⁹⁸ While the name is slightly different and there are a greater variety of sports and cultural activities (for children as well as adults), the Kirchners have preserved (and appropriated) the memory of Evita as a spiritual leader and guiding light for the nation as it advances in the twenty-first century. Almost seventy years after the Peronist state first introduced the *Campeonatos*, they continue to serve as a political platform and space for political socialization of children and adults across Argentina. Although Perón's first presidency only lasted nine years, its aftermaths—particularly state attempts to shape political consciousness—still reverberate throughout the nation.

This paper has used the *Campeonatos Evita* and the politicization of sports as a lens through which to understand how the Peronist state politicized the leisure time of children and crafted children into agents of state rhetoric and symbols of national progress. I have argued that the *Campeonatos'* success lay in their ability to recruit children (and adults) to the games by portraying participation in the tournaments as an affirmation of Argentine citizenship and national identity. Intertwined with state rhetoric concerning national citizenship and identity were ideas of national advancement in Perón's 'New Argentina' and the role of the state in securing a 'dignified life' for the working-class body politic.

Future works on sports and nationalism within the context of Latin America may wish to devote more attention to children's roles (as either active participants or spectators) to better understand state conceptualizations and formulizations of citizenship and ideals of national belonging. Much like how sports can symbolize national hope, children represent the prospect for a brighter national future. States can proclaim

⁹⁸ Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, "Juegos Nacionales Evita: Historia de los Juegos," Presidencia de la Nación, <http://www.juegosevita.gob.ar/historia/hitos/> (accessed January 4, 2015).

supremacy in international competitions through winning as well as a voice on the global stage through investments in their nation's future—most aptly seen through the advancement of their children. A more integrated analysis of sports, the state, and children (it would seem) will not only enhance our understanding of ideas of citizenship and national identity in the past, but also enable us to make better sense of politization in the contemporary world. As the imposing image of Eva Perón behind President Cristina Kirchner and the more than one million participants in the annual Evita National Games suggest, sports matches may be evanescent, but the political and national consciousness they engender are not quite as fleeting.