

Futebol No Longer Has the Same Taste

1.

I like football.

"duh, of course! As you should..."

Wait, hold on! We may not be talking about the same thing...

Although it also has 11 players on each side and a ball to make it happen, I am referring to what you probably know by "soccer."

As a Brazilian, I need to say – with all due respect – that the debate of calling it soccer or football has been a constant topic of long hours of conversation at the bar tables I frequented with my friends. However, since it is my text, I will call it *futebol*, the name in Brazilian Portuguese. But hey, I promise to open a Reddit post for comments on the soccer vs. football debate.

Because of where I was born – Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil – I didn't have many choices regarding which futebol team to support. To be more specific, only two, *Internacional* or *Grêmio*, the two biggest ones in the state. *Inter*, as it is affectionately called, has red and white as its colors, and those who support it are called *colorado*, the same name as the state here in the USA, and please, do not ask me why. *Grêmio*, or *tricolor*, bears the colors white, black, and blue, and their supporters are called *gremistas*. Against each other, they form what is known as the *GRENAL* Classic (a mix of Grêmio and Internacional), and they are their #1 rival.

Honestly? Choosing between the two is a big deal. Having a futebol team is almost an obligation. It is something that might define your identity and your next years in the community you are part of. In elementary school, it might be a decisive factor in forming your first group of friends.

"Bom Dia kiddos! ... shall we start? Nice! Good! Well, what about we start saying our names...favorite food... and...how about...hmmm.....say if you support Grêmio or Inter?..."

No more choices, just these two.

In the community events that take place in the neighborhoods to celebrate [insert here any important commemoration], there is *always* a host who starts with

"Boa noite! I hope you all are having fun so far. But,

I WANT TO HEAR THE CHEERING OF THE GREMISTAS

... WUUUUUUUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH

OKAY!!! COOL, IT WAS NICE Y'ALL! CAN THE COLORADOS MAKE IT LOUDER?...

WOOOOOOUAHHHHHHHHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA..."

Still, in these events, the organizers can raffle two cakes, and guess what?

Yes, I know, corny! But, each of them with the Grêmio and Inter flag drawn right on the top.

When we had school trips, the tourist attractions used to be to go to the futebol stadiums of the two teams. When I was 10 years old – on one of these trips – I really realized that I was Gremista. I cried, got emotional, and screamed – and this wasn't even a match – it was just a regular trip with my classmates in an empty stadium.

2.

The square table with four chairs in the kitchen was the greatest witness to all our family meals and deep stories and theories. My mother has always been someone who is not a big fan of talking about the past. But on that day, presumably a Sunday, the day in the state characterized by eating *churrasco*, she was inspired to open the book of her life about her futebol experiences.

My mother grew up in Rio de Janeiro, and from a very young age, she was already a huge fan of *Flamengo*, the richest club in Brazil with R\$3.787 billion (\$700M). The team, which has

red and black as its representative colors, had my mother as a guest at its games throughout her adolescence and early adulthood. She participated in the FLA x FLU classics, a tricolor team from the state of Rio de Janeiro, which is Flamengo's number one rival; She has run away from the police; Used to be part of the *torcida organizada* singing all the songs and executing all the hand movements and used to cry in the bleachers after the loss of a match. After her confessions, I knew it was generational.

At 14, when I went to a Grêmio match for the first time, I began to understand all the feelings she described, and from then on, it became a lifestyle.

Seeing the futebol field with packed bleachers for the first time was like stepping into a parallel reality, I did not exactly know where I should pay attention. The noise of the fans echoed everywhere and the green immensity of the field was the only possible landscape. Everything was huge except for the people who were very small and unidentifiable.

3.

My first Grêmio match unlocked a 'skin' that I didn't know existed.

The first thing before making any plans? Checking the Grêmio games schedule.

"Oops! Can't do it tomorrow, I'll be at the Grêmio game!"

The funniest part is that the people around me started getting used to it, and sometimes, before asking me, they would check the calendar themselves to avoid wasting their time.

When I say that it has truly become a lifestyle, I am not just talking about attending every game, but about changing my entire life to align with this new routine.

Every game day was like a sacred day.

If the game was at 6 pm, the pre-game would start at least four hours earlier, with a delicious Brazilian churrasco with beef, garlic bread, chicken hearts, and sausages.

Ps: If you ever have an interest in trying it in the United States, I highly recommend Texas de Brazil.

Ps 2: They're not paying me for advertising.

This pregaming can even be compared to the tailgate of football games. We fill the street around the stadium with tents, bars, restaurants, and people selling tickets and accessories while the fans are around wearing the team's jersey.

At our tailgate, you will not only have churrasco, but also the famous *podrão*, or "big rotten." Yup, I know that the name itself is not very appealing, but it is a kind of burger that is filled with everything. What is everything? Well, it depends. Beef, chicken, bacon, chili, eggs, onions, *farofa*, lettuce, tomato, corn, some sauces, etc. I must be honest, it's delicious! BUT, I can't guarantee that you won't have a stomach ache for two days in a row. However, I believe that maybe it's a worthwhile pain to have a full experience.

You can also eat *churrasquinho*, the diminutive form of churrasco, that is served in a bamboo skewer, called *espetinhos* and those can come in various forms; made with chicken hearts, beef, chicken breast, and some people say it can even be made with cat meat, but that's just a rumor. This is because the price of beef in Brazil is so high right now that it has become a luxury item, while we have a lot of street cats.

IMPORTANT

Brazilian barbecue must be done using lump charcoal

"Is that a law in Brazil, Brenda?"

No! But it's my most genuine recommendation for an explosion of flavors in your mouth when it is ready.

We buy a bag of lump charcoal at the supermarket and then we lit it on fire on a *churrasqueira* made of brick, but can also be cooked in a grill that allows charcoal. Churrasco and churrasquinho cooked with lump charcoal fire are authentic, as it ensures the original taste of the meat and contributes to the flavor.

"Okay, Brenda, what if I'm vegetarian or vegan?"

Our fanbase embraces everyone, so of course we do have vegan and vegetarian churrasco options, where vegetables and garlic bread are also cooked over a charcoal fire. No worries, you will have your food and will be able to enjoy the pre-game.

By the way, if you like beer, this is the place for you. There will be plenty everywhere in all colors, flavors, and textures (I swear).

My journey with this addiction to Grêmio lasted long years.

4.

Libertadores da América – the futebol league in which the teams from South America who have won their national championships compete against each other.

"Mom, tomorrow I won't go to school, okay? The Grêmio bus leaves at 4 pm...

And you know!!! Tomorrow's game is *the* game! It's important!"

She didn't even hesitate.

The blue smoke signal flare obstructed our view of the field, people from the upper bleachers were throwing rolls of toilet paper, and the long flags spread across the crowd were what characterized that I was at a Libertadores game. It was a fierce match. We were winning, then *San Lorenzo* tied, and it went to penalties, and that was when I thought my life was going to end. We lost.

I watched approximately 50,000 people leave the stadium. Suddenly, all the bleachers that were colored blue, black, and white disappeared. The silence was so deep that the only sound I was able to hear was the soles of shoes shuffling toward the exit. The face paint of some fans with the team's colors was already smudged, and tears were slowly running down the faces of fans of all ages. I saw everyone leaving while my brain was trying to process all the information. For someone so young as I was, it was a disappointment that felt irrecoverable. I cried for an hour and a half on my way back home. When I made it there, my mom was sitting on the living room couch, waiting to receive me with a cup of tea. In my bedroom, a bath towel and pajamas that smelled like lavender, freshly laundered, were waiting. My favorite ones.

She knew I would need them because a few years ago she needed them too.

I cried lying down in her lap as if the world was about to end.

5.

When I woke up, the world hadn't ended. The players were receiving their millions, and I was going to school.

I went through many years of crying, celebrating, pre-gaming, and eating churrasco. But in 2017, that changed.

6.

Grêmio won the Libertadores in 2017, and in December would be playing against the winner of the Champions League, "the Libertadores of Europe," in this case, Real Madrid.

While I was at home with my family, we were watching without hope, after all, it was Real Madrid. Surprisingly, they just beat us 1-0.

At that point, I had already accepted all the challenges my team had suffered over the years, so I was not worrying too much about it. But I can't deny, it was a big deal. Immediately

after the game, Inter fans started setting off fireworks to celebrate their rival's loss. The Grêmio fans at the bar across the street weren't as calm as I was, and these Inter commemorations were enough for one of them to throw a stone at the window of an Inter fan's apartment, who happened to be my neighbor.

When we thought everything had calmed down, we decided to go downstairs and check the street. In less than a minute of walking, my then-boyfriend, who was wearing a Grêmio jersey, was suddenly pulled by the shoulder and punched in the face by an Inter fan who was in a bad mood, for no reason. My brother and I started defending him and diffusing the conflict.

There, a cycle change occurred. This was just one of the incidents that put me and the people I loved at risk. Futebol should unite and not be a tool for violence. I was tired of the game's threats of cheering for my team. Police, pepper spray, gas bombs. It all was enough and too much for my age.

Today, I still cheer for Grêmio, how could I not? However, I don't follow or know what is going on anymore. I have not participated in a Sunday churrasco ever since because even with the lamp charcoal, they no longer have the same taste.