

PRO/CON: How did World Cup soccer become cool?

By McClatchy-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.14.14

Word Count **1,380**



United States fans watch a World Cup soccer match between the U.S. and Belgium at a public viewing party in Detroit on July 1, 2014. AP Photo/Paul Sancya

PRO: This is so cool

VIENNA, Va. — Unbelievably, World Cup soccer has become the topic of conversation at work.

In recent weeks, television ratings for the sport have soared. Games involving Team USA have equaled the recent NBA finals and surpassed baseball's World Series. "Watch Parties" drew tens of thousands nationwide and huge crowds at AT&T Stadium in Dallas and Soldier Field in Chicago.

This time around America embraced the "beautiful game" of stunning goals and incomprehensible offsides, joyous patriotism and comic-looking flops due to several key reasons:

Convenient starting times: First-round group games from Brazil began at noon, with another contest to follow and the final match at early evening on the East Coast. They soon became a great reason to skip out early from work.

Games Move Along Nicely

Short durations: The games take 2 1/2 hours to play. Without timeouts, except for an occasional water break due to the jungle heat, you can set your watch by soccer. Less than three hours to watch a sporting event? That's been downright delightful and makes you realize what time-vampires baseball, football and even college basketball have become with their commercial breaks and constant timeouts.

Shaky goaltenders: With the exception of Mexico's Guillermo Ochoa and the USA's Tim Howard, few keepers demonstrated they could single-handedly steal a game for their side. Any shot became a good shot in Brazil. That's quite different from hockey's Stanley Cup playoffs, for example, where you sometimes wonder if anybody is going to score.

Upsets galore: After the dust settled in Week One, reigning champion Spain and always powerful England had already been eliminated. That left the door open for such countries as Colombia, Costa Rica, Algeria and Chile to show their stuff.

Chants of USA!

"USA, USA:" Despite being placed in the same division with such heavyweights as Germany, Ghana and Portugal, the Americans made it out of the so-called "Group of Death" and took Belgium to overtime before being eliminated.

To his credit, American coach Jurgen Klinsmann urged his team to go toe-to-toe with the traditional soccer powers and thanks to scoring star Clint Dempsey and such youngsters as DeAndre Yedlin (20 years old) and Julian Green (19) that often happened. No more siege mentality for this crew, and that's a far cry from former American squads in the World Cup.

"We are all very, very proud of this team," Klinsmann said. "They made their country proud with this performance and also their entire performance in this World Cup."

Team USA may be out of this year's tournament, but it didn't go quietly. If anything it left the world stage with some attitude, even defiance. That could make all the difference in the years ahead.

Kids Get Hooked On The Game

For decades, kids in this country, as in the rest of the world, have grown up playing soccer. Drive through suburbia on the weekends, and you'll see fields of tykes chasing a speckled ball.

Until now, that's where it ended. Once kids stopped playing the game, they fell into the more traditional viewing habits of college football on Saturdays, the National Football League on Sundays, with a baseball and college basketball game when there was more at stake.

Yet this time around, more Americans checked out the World Cup than ever before and they often enjoyed what they saw. For once you give the beautiful game a long look, as the rest of the world knows, it's difficult to turn away. Especially when you're cheering a team that refuses to back down.

ABOUT THE WRITER Tim Wendel is the writer-in-residence at Johns Hopkins University and the author of 11 books, including "Summer of '68" and "Castro's Curveball."

This essay is available to McClatchy-Tribune News Service subscribers. McClatchy-Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of McClatchy-Tribune or its editors.

CON: What's with America's sudden fascination with soccer?

WASHINGTON - Soccer is easy to mock and poke fun at. In what other sport can we put together a scorecard of the number of fake "injuries" or the time the supposedly injured players spent writhing on the ground in apparent agony?

In what other sport can "injured" players be regularly carried off on stretchers only to return to the game seconds later? When's the last time you saw that in any American sport?

I am not here to mock. I've tried to like soccer because it seemed like the open-minded thing to do.

Let me set the stage: it is the summer of 1994 and I am a graduate student living in London. Each summer, the dormitory in which I lived had an arrival of Italian students who, in a pleasant example of international outreach, insisted that I watch the World Cup with them.

I did so, game in and game out, in the name of sportsmanship and good will. And, to the joy of my newfound friends, Italy progressed all the way to the final against mighty Brazil.

And so we watched what I was told would be sports at its best. For 90 minutes we watched. And no one scored. We watched through extra time and still no one scored.

At last the game was settled through a shootout, in which the goalie guesses which side of the goal the opposing player will kick the ball and dives in that general direction. Italy's goalie guessed wrong and Brazil walked off the World Cup champions. A coin flip might have been slightly less dramatic, but the effect was pretty much the same.

As Dull As Baseball

This helps explain why soccer may be the world's sport, but not yet America's. I don't begrudge my foreign friends' love of soccer. And I am honest enough to admit that baseball is pretty dull.

Soccer is a fine game. However, American football and basketball are a battle, based on deceptive tactics, drive and the repeated attack on the opponent's weaknesses.

When a football or basketball coach isolates a gap in the opposing team's strategy — or plan — or a mismatch of players, he will take advantage of that weakness again and again. And his team will score points as a result.

The level of teamwork and coordination demanded of athletes, and strategic thinking of coaches, is simply far higher in American sports. And a strategic error by coaches or a substantial playing mistake by athletes on the field will almost always cost that team on the scoreboard.

Sure, a basketball or American football game can be decided by a lucky play or a bad call, if it's very close. But the relative ease by which teams can score in the most popular U.S. sports makes it very unlikely that the better team will lose the game. Not so in soccer, which is filled with fine plays that go unrewarded and terrible errors that go unpunished.

Something's Up With The Stats

Or simply consider basic statistics such as time of possession, which measures which team controls the ball throughout the game.

Controlling the ball is a basic measure of a team's dominance, and in American football the team that wins the battle for ball-control wins the game around two-thirds of the time. In soccer, by contrast, time of possession appears to be unrelated to victory. American sports are famously buried in statistics, but all these stats are meaningful in understanding who won and why.

At the end of the day, sports are entertainment — not a matter of life or death, unless you're the Colombian defender who was murdered after scoring an own-goal in that same 1994 World Cup by deflecting a U.S. shot past his own goalie. He would have been 47 this year.

If millions of people want to watch a bunch of men kick a ball around for 90-plus minutes only to end in a scoreless tie, that's OK by me.

ABOUT THE WRITER Andrew G. Biggs is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, where he concentrates on Social Security and pension reform.

This essay is available to McClatchy-Tribune News Service subscribers. McClatchy-Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of McClatchy-Tribune or its editors.