

7-1-1996

## Soccer in America: A Story of Marginalization

Andrei S. Markovits

Steven L. Hellerman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umeslr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman, *Soccer in America: A Story of Marginalization*, 13 U. Miami Ent. & Sports L. Rev. 225 (1996)

Available at: <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umeslr/vol13/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Miami Entertainment & Sports Law Review by an authorized administrator of Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [library@law.miami.edu](mailto:library@law.miami.edu).

## **SOCCER IN AMERICA: A STORY OF MARGINALIZATION**

**ANDREI S. MARKOVITS\* AND STEVEN L. HELLERMAN\*\***

The story of soccer in America is one of failure and marginalization. No less an authority than the president of the United States illustrated this point while commenting on the consequences of the baseball players' strike in 1994-95 as the longest labor strife in the history of professional sports in the US threatened to render America's "national pastime" irrelevant:

I think people will be more interested in their own minor leagues, teams in their own Little Leagues in their own communities, than they are in major league baseball. It could become a community sport again, almost the way soccer is, if they don't fix it.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the stellar success of the 1994 World Cup, the sport has once again returned to the outsider status which distinguished it in this country throughout the past century. This article addresses soccer's travails in America within the context of a political sociology of American culture and development. Towards that end we divide our presentation in the following manner: In the first part, we will link soccer's absence in the US to the same structural and historical mechanisms which rendered socialism—the foremost expression of working-class politics in all advanced capitalist societies—marginal as well. Then we proceed to a brief account of how two American sports (baseball and football) pre-empted and prevented soccer's emergence in America's "sports space," while another sport (cricket), in some ways an antecedent to soccer, failed. In the subsequent section we will offer a more detailed sketch of soccer's marginalized presence in the US. We continue our presentation with an account of World Cup USA '94 in which we will once again corroborate our initial argument: While soccer has become a relatively important physical activity and recreational pastime for 17 million (largely youthful and upper middle class) Americans, it continues to remain an also-ran on the firmament of American sports culture. Our article ends with a brief assessment of the inaugural season of Major

---

\* Professor of Politics, University of California, Santa Cruz.

\*\* Student, Center for Politics and Economics, Claremont Graduate School.

1. Maui News (Associated Press), 3/26/95.

League Soccer (MLS). Our study confirms the lasting power of history. Despite enormous changes in the recreational and entertainment habits of publics all over the world, it seems that in the realm of sport as mass culture the patterns which were developed during the latter half of the 19th century have largely remained intact. The 20th century began with soccer as a marginal phenomenon in the American sports space, and it ends so as well.

SOMBART REVISITED AND AMERICA'S SOCCER 'EXCEPTIONALISM':  
SOME COMPARATIVE CLARIFICATIONS

Like virtually all European observers of the "New World" before and after him, Werner Sombart was both fascinated by and ambivalent to it. The ambivalence reflected the invariable combination of both negative and positive generalizations based upon the "uniqueness" of the US as a European extension with certain puzzling peculiarities. To Sombart, the most puzzling of these "Americanisms" was the absence of a large, well-organized, mass-based working-class movement headed by a political party, which he erroneously called "socialism."<sup>2</sup>

Just as Sombart noted the absence of what he called "socialism" in the US, we too observe a basic absence of soccer as the dominant participant and spectator team sport in the US throughout the 20th century. This does not discount both soccer and socialism from the American experience. Both appeared in the US virtually simultaneous to their respective "inventions" in Europe, and both continue to flourish in various guises. Socialist parties and movements have always existed in 20th century America, just as soccer has been played virtually without interruption in the US since its introduction in the 19th century. Socialism has ebbed and flowed in the larger context of American politics and intellectual life without ever coming close to attaining a dominant, let alone hegemonic, position as in Europe. Comparatively, soccer has never posed a serious challenge to America's "big three-and-one-half" of spectator team sports: football, basketball, baseball and ice hockey (the 'one-half'). Neither of these two "un-American" phenomena will likely disappear in the future, thus lending further testimony to America's pluralism in intellectual thought, politics and sports. However, neither will likely assume a place of national prominence in the US for the foreseeable future, though soccer may continue as a popular recreational pastime for many

---

2. Werner Sombart, *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?*, Tübingen, 1906.

Americans and the World Cup will draw the interest of the American public every four years, provided the US team qualifies. Socialism, though denoting a pejorative connotation for many Americans in the wake of the Cold War, government fiscal crises and right-wing electoral victories, will likely continue in its traditional role as a tolerated, even somewhat appreciated, eccentricity. We are not arguing that there is a direct relationship between the absence of soccer and socialism in the US compared with other industrial democracies. Rather, we will try to show that some of the same American peculiarities which led to an American "exceptionalism" regarding socialism also account for the subordinate place of soccer among American sports. That soccer is relatively insignificant to Americans is apparent in that what the rest of the world calls "football," Americans know only as "soccer." Thus, already in the world of nomenclature we can observe the game's American "separateness" and marginalization compared to its standing in other countries of the globe.<sup>3</sup> Soccer's subordinate position in the sports topography of the US was created by the prevalence of three indigenous team sports. Baseball, football and basketball have continued to enjoy unrivaled popularity as mass sports among the American public since their respective introduction. Having successfully exported hockey south of the border, Canada provided the US with yet another popular team sport and gave many countries of the globe's northern hemisphere one of their favorite winter activities.<sup>4</sup>

#### AMERICA: THE FIRST NEW NATION

The most important common denominator for both "exceptionalisms," and the single most pervasive underlying variable for an understanding of American politics and society, is the quintessentially bourgeois nature of America's objective development and subjective self-legitimation from its very inception to the present. This "natural," hence all the more comprehensive, bourgeoisification of American politics and society created certain structures and an accompanying atmosphere which definitely distinguished the US from all others in the "old world" and from the latter's mere colonial extensions overseas (as opposed to "new world"

---

3. We believe that this linguistic exceptionalism reflects the American case very well. Thus, unless otherwise stated, "football," in this article will always refer to "American football" and "soccer" to what the rest of the world calls "football."

4. The rest of Canada's sports space is dominated by America's "big three," with baseball and basketball exact replicas of the American games, while Canadian football displays only minor variations from its American sibling.

which, as a concept, remained tellingly reserved almost exclusively for the US). Central to this burgeoning "Americanism" was the free individual who was to attain his fulfillment by being an independent, rational actor in a free market unfettered by any oppressive collectivities, be they the state or social classes, organized religion or the army. In short, bourgeois America created a new identity which prided itself on being explicitly different from anywhere in aristocratic Europe. Only by separating church and state could this new society develop a politically unchallenged secularism which in turn could be viewed as being among the most religious in the advanced industrial world. Moreover, only by establishing an unprofessional military under strict civilian control—in addition to the continued presence of the "frontier," yet another ingredient of "American exceptionalism"—could the US develop into one of the most heavily armed societies among the advanced industrial nations. By establishing a broad concept of equality which, however, was to remain permanently subservient to the individual's freedom by merely providing him with equal access to an abundance of opportunities, this new country created an ingenious system of popular participation which was at once mediated yet comprehensive. Above all, it constructed a framework for the development of powerful myths of unbound freedom and limitless opportunities, which became one of the most attractive ideologies of the modern world. Indeed, as Leon Samson has persuasively argued, "Americanism" carried a veneer laden with terms rather similar to those used by socialism and other movements of the left, thanks to the above-mentioned myths. Thus socialism was "crowded out" from the consciousness and praxis of this bourgeois America (Americanism = Socialism so to speak).<sup>5</sup> Among the most important components of "American exceptionalism" which affirmed the bourgeois order have been the persistence of two "non-ideological," "pragmatic" and self-defined middle-class parties which, aided by a highly centrist electoral system, have successfully "crowded out" any newcomers; and the crucial role of an integrating nationalism exemplified by the "melting pot." America's soccer exceptionalism is also rooted in this bourgeois order.

Modern sport are inextricably linked to the development of mass democracies. The creation and—perhaps more important—dissemination of modern sports are thus part and parcel of a bourgeois mode of life. While most modern sports were actually

---

5. Leon Samson, *Towards a United Front*, New York 1936.

“invented” by members of society’s “higher stations” either of aristocratic or, more often, quasi-aristocratic bent, they soon became the purview of the bourgeoisie and the “masses” if they were to gain any significance beyond that of polo. Thus it was the two most bourgeois societies of the latter half of the 19th century, Great Britain and the United States, which founded organized, professional, team sports played and enjoyed by the masses in their own countries—and in the case of Britain’s inventions, especially soccer—everywhere in the world. The dissemination of the respective national sports correlated positively with the two countries’ global position. Britain was still the leading imperial power and as such, the main opinion leader and cultural “hegemon” of the time. The US, on the other hand, was still by and large an isolated “new world” which fascinated the European public, yet America’s concrete presence was still marginal in the affairs of global politics. This isolation was in part self-imposed by America’s self-identification as being distinctly non-European, perhaps even anti-European. Whereas Britain derived much of its internal legitimacy from being the center of a huge empire, America attained its legitimacy by being a new, self-contained “frontier” society, independent of the mother country unlike its Australian and Canadian cousins. This strong ambivalence towards Great Britain, manifesting itself in a clear affinity fostered by a common language and a disdain for the old colonial master, whose very presence threatened the “new world’s” identity formation, greatly influenced the development of public discourse in the US during the latter half of the 19th century. This “special relationship,” marked by both admiration and rejection, proved particularly significant in the realm of sports. Both football and baseball developed into American sports par excellence within the framework of this ambivalent and largely one-sided dialogue which America conducted with Britain about its ways. Both sports evolved out of largely pre-industrial British team games. Through complete bourgeoisification, they became adapted to a new, commercialized industrial order in a “new world.” By the time Britain’s own mass sport, soccer, had been successfully exported all over the world, America’s sport space was already occupied by former British imports now converted into genuine American games. Why was soccer crowded out in the US? First, the American bourgeoisie had successfully established its own national game, baseball, while rejecting a sport closely associated with the old country and its aristocratic ethic, cricket. Baseball’s “downward dissemination” to the American masses (including immigrants, or at least

their children) then coincided with soccer's proliferation as a mass sport in England. Secondly, the young elite at the top American universities were keener on playing—and then altering—what had developed into another British 'elite' sport—rugby—rather than expressing their anglophilia by importing soccer, which by that time had undergone a "vulgarization" in Britain similar to baseball's in the US.

In America, soccer remained closely associated with, and mostly controlled by, immigrants, a stigma and handicap that proved fatal to its potential of becoming a popular sport in the new world. The game's various precursors were played in the colonies of the 17th and 18th centuries, with documentation of a game as early as 1609 in Virginia.<sup>6</sup> As in England, games of "football" were played on streets and in open squares, often leading to riot-like disturbances which, in turn, compelled the authorities to forbid the games on a number of occasions. As with all team sports in the US, football did not attain anything approaching social respectability until the first half of the 19th century, when the nation's top colleges—led by Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia—started playing various versions of football on an intramural basis. Periodically assailed by university administrators (as sports were viewed as a dereliction from studies, a threat to student health, and a disturbance of the peace), the game did not become organized until the early 1860s when students and alumni from a number of elite Boston secondary schools formed the Oneida Football Club. This club went undefeated and unscored upon between 1862 and 1865, lending the "Boston Game" exceptional prominence in America's still small, diverse football world. Allowing the use of both hands and feet, the Boston Game soon became the most popular sport across the Charles River in Cambridge, home of Harvard University.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the decade, the game had achieved sufficient inter-collegiate uniformity for the playing of the first college football game in American history on 6 November 1869 between Rutgers and Princeton. This event can be classified both as the first football as well as the first soccer game in modern US history, since the game was played according to rules which were somewhere between those of Association and Rugby Football. By 1872, Columbia, Yale and Stevens had joined the original pair in playing each other in an Association-type kicking game. Even though

---

6. Zander Hollander, *The American Encyclopedia of Soccer*, New York 1980, 35.

7. *Ibid.*, 21.

local differences in rules persisted, all participants agreed that the ball could not be picked up with the hands, caught, thrown or carried. Soccer in its rudimentary form seemed to have assumed an important foothold among leading American colleges. However, it failed to do so at the nation's oldest and most prestigious institution of higher learning: Harvard persistently opposed the kicking game, clinging tenaciously to its Boston Game which it had further refined in the interim. When the other universities uniformly adopted Association rules in 1873, they refrained from calling themselves a league because of Harvard's absence. Indeed, Harvard's unique prestige ultimately reversed the kicking game's apparent victory among American college students of the early 1870s and led to the running game's complete and ultimate triumph by 1877. In search of an opponent, Harvard turned north of the border to McGill University of Montreal, which played rugby at the time. The two universities played two matches in 1874, one according to the rules of the Boston Game (predictably won by Harvard) and a second according to rugby rules played, surprisingly, to a scoreless tie. Most important was the Harvard team's unanimous enthusiasm for the game of rugby which the players embraced wholeheartedly. The Boston Game, having been a hybrid between rugby and soccer and thus still including more kicking and foot-involved ball contact than rugby, was dismissed as sleepy and boring. In its stead, the running game developed in its then purest form as Harvard's unchallenged team sport. Barely a year later, in 1875, Harvard won its first "Game" with Yale in a sport that Yale had never previously played.<sup>8</sup> By 1876 Yale dropped soccer and replaced it with rugby and the other colleges followed, Princeton succumbing last in 1877.<sup>9</sup> Rugby's triumph over soccer at American colleges was so complete that soccer did not reappear on American campuses on an intercollegiate level until 1902. By that time American football—rugby's successor in the new world—had gained an unshakable prominence in American college life. Stigmatized as slow, boring and devoid of action because of the relative paucity of scoring compared with any of the "big three" of American sports, soccer as a university sport languished in the giant shadows cast on it by football, and later basketball. At American universities, as in American society, soccer

---

8. For many years, the annual football game between Harvard and Yale—the sport's premier regular season event until the 1950s—was simply called "The Game" in the US; it is still so-named in New England.

9. Hollander, 25-26.



remained largely the domain of foreigners and recent immigrants, both as players and spectators.

#### CROWDING OUT FROM ABOVE: THE CASE OF AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Once rugby had established itself as the sport of American colleges, it immediately began to evolve from a quasi-aristocratic English game to a quintessentially American activity. Over the next four and one-half decades, American football was repeatedly transformed, adjusted, and reformed, yielding by the eve of World War I a game which has basically remained intact to this day. Subsequent changes to the shape of the ball, in the 1920s, allowed for the elevation of passing in American football, while the game's kicking aspect was permanently relegated to the periphery. When play became so violent as to make maiming routine and deaths not unusual—igniting a public outcry to ban the sport—changes were implemented that regulated the mayhem without severely compromising the game's essential roughness and entertainment value. President Theodore Roosevelt's involvement led to the establishment of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association in 1905, renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1910. This organization would come to rule what continues as another unique feature of American sports culture and political economy: the vast and, in the cases of football and basketball, quite popular and lucrative field of American intercollegiate athletics. Simply put, in no other advanced industrial democracy in the world do *any* university sports assume, even vaguely, the centrality in sports and popular culture which they have in the US for nearly a century.

By the turn of the century, long after the professionalization of baseball, football still enjoyed the amateur trappings of its "student athletes." College football developed into the most popular sport among America's middle classes, though it did not compete directly with baseball by virtue of its autumnal season. While soccer was making its triumphant conquest of the European continent and Latin America, football in the US spread rapidly from the elite institutions of the East Coast, establishing itself at colleges and high schools across the land.

That football remained the virtual prerogative of collegiate America underscored the middle-class nature of the sport's first four decades. Football games on Saturday afternoons in the fall became essential ingredients of American bourgeois culture. College football attained such a dominant position in American mid-

dle-class culture that it succeeded in crowding out the professional game, as well as soccer, well after the founding of the National Football League in 1920. The explicitly professional game originated in the cultural peripheries of America's steel and coal regions, such as Pittsburgh, spreading soon to the industrial regions of Ohio and the meat-packing towns near Chicago. It was not until the late 1940s that college graduates (or at least players with college experience) began to comprise the majority of professional football players. It was not until the late 1950s that the professional game rivaled, then surpassed, college football in popularity.<sup>10</sup>

Since the 1960s, professional football has become far and away the most popular American spectator sport. By virtue of its once-a-week schedule of televised games on Sunday afternoons, its exclusive weekly Monday night game (which easily boasts the highest cumulative television ratings of any regular-season American sports programming for the last 20 years; indeed, for almost all regular television programming of any kind), and a format that allows for continual pre-play and post-play analysis (and regular commercial advertising), professional football succeeds in the place that now matters most in the American sports space: television.<sup>11</sup> That most Americans have never actually played the game in its organized form (that is, beyond the casual and "safe" games of "touch" or "flag" football, or the youth games of sandlot tackle football without coaches, rehearsed plays, and equipment), or rarely—if ever—attend an NFL game in person, attests to the triumph of professional football in the context of that most modern and post-modern of mediums. Football's tremendous success as televised non-participatory entertainment is one of the most important factors which continue to undermine and impede soccer's potential to succeed as a big-time spectator sport in the US.

---

10. The information in the preceding passage is from *The NFL's Official Encyclopedia History of Professional Football*, New York 1977; D.S. Neft, R.M. Cohen and R. Korch, *The Football Encyclopedia*, New York, 1994; Beau Riffenburgh and Jack Clary, *The Official History of Pro Football*, New York, 1990; Alexander M. Weyand, *The Saga of American Football*, New York, 1961; and Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle*, Chapel Hill, 1993.

11. For an account of how this came about, see Phil Patton, *Razzle-Dazzle: The Curious Marriage of Television and Professional Football*, Garden City, N.Y.: 1984.

CROWDING OUT FROM BELOW AND AN ANTECEDENT TO SOCCER IN THE US: THE CASES OF BASEBALL AND "AMERICAN" CRICKET

Almost from the very beginning of its modern development as an adult recreation and entertainment, baseball owed a good deal of its successful proliferation among the American masses to its identity as "American." Hence baseball (or actually the collection of individuals and organizations that came to be known as "organized baseball") went to great lengths to deny any relationship to any of its "Old World" ancestors, particularly the English game of rounders. Ties to rounders were consciously denied and baseball was systematically defined against its first and for many years only rival, cricket: Baseball was faster, more action-packed, tougher; it required more ingenuity and individual initiative; and above all, it appeared more competitive and egalitarian than its English cousin. In short, baseball was better suited to—and more accurately reflected—life in the "New World."

In post-colonial American towns, groups of young men might pass the time in crudely organized games called town ball, goal ball, round ball or base ball.<sup>12</sup> In an interesting and lasting parallel to soccer, baseball's success was in part based on the fact that virtually no equipment or special physical attributes were necessary to enjoy or excel at the game. Like soccer, baseball thus enjoyed "democratic access" in that the game was accessible to all and no exotic equipment or locale was required. The first known baseball club, the New York Knickerbockers—composed mainly of middle-class men who aspired to the status of gentlemen—is credited with formulating the first written rules of the game in 1845. The first recorded baseball game took place on June 19, 1846 (incidentally the same year that J.C. Thring organized the first football team at Cambridge), between the Knickerbockers and another team, the New York Baseball Club.

Within ten years there were several teams in the New York area, and by 1855 the sporting press was regularly devoting editorial space to baseball, though cricket still commanded greater coverage. But baseball was drawing spectators. Concurrent with a growth of baseball's partisanship and competitive ethic there ensued a rapid "downward" dissemination throughout the 1850s of the game's popularity, as skilled workers soon became some of

---

12. For a historical thesis on the precursors to baseball and most modern sports, as well as the definitive debunking of the "Doubleday myth," see Robert Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop: The Origins of Ball Games*, New York 1947.

the game's most skilled players and dedicated fans.<sup>13</sup> Baseball would soon imbed itself deeply into American culture, while cricket, in some ways as a foreshadow to soccer, would turn insular and become marginal.

In direct contrast to baseball, most cricketers both desired and succeeded in keeping their game exclusive to mostly upper-class participants with British origins. Cricket would not experience the "downward class dissemination" that would make baseball a game for all Americans. As play on the typical baseball field evolved from an emphasis on sportsmanship to one on competition, "American" cricket decidedly and deliberately retained a more reserved style and ethic. Furthermore, unlike baseball, efforts at organizing cricket clubs into a true umbrella organization in America never reached fruition. The American cricketers were, for the most part, content to keep the game a gentlemen's activity, though not without gambling and professional players. That baseball might indeed be structurally superior from an egalitarian viewpoint did not necessarily preclude cricket from gaining American adherents.<sup>14</sup>

But while baseball's advocates increasingly touted the game's "Americanness," cricketers generally felt that the English origins of

13. For baseball's early history as the "New York Game" see Harold Seymour *Baseball Volume I: The Early Years*, S. 13-22; Melvin Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820 -70*, Chicago, 1990, Section II; Warren Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball*, Ithaca 1989.

14. The athletic skills needed for both sports are quite similar, though baseball provided much greater opportunity to utilize those skills and, most importantly, the opportunity to improve them. A baseball player will have his turn at bat a minimum of three times in a full game—usually four or five—while a cricketer batted once in a match that lasted two days. If a cricket batsman is out quickly, he's little to do but sit and watch until his entire team finishes batting (which could be a whole day). But regardless of how he did at bat, a baseball player gets to play in the field at short intervals, minimizing the time spent sitting and watching. And regardless of skill, all who play baseball get a relatively equal amount of time at bat and thus equal opportunity to improve their game while engaged in a competitive contest. Hence, when a team of professional baseball players traveled to England in 1874, they soundly defeated, at cricket, a team composed of some of the best cricketers in the world. Except for the English-born brothers, George and Harry Wright, none of the Americans had ever played cricket before.

In our view, baseball does indeed have an advantage of modern access over cricket from at least the standpoint of participation. The comparative strengths and weaknesses of the two games within the context of spectatorship is something else: Perhaps a matter of cultural indoctrination and/or simply taste. However, it is not a cultural presumption to state that baseball in America, like soccer in England, was better suited to the tastes of the masses than cricket and thus captured their hearts and minds. But unlike their British counterparts, the American working-classes of the latter 19th century were emulating the earlier bourgeois preferences of their middle-class countrymen in their sport of choice.

the game provided it with a model to be completely emulated, not adapted or improved upon. Like those who would later organize and regulate soccer in the US, cricketers disdained any attempts to "Americanize" their game and often implicitly excluded native-born Americans. The blame for cricket's failure as a sport for the American public can mostly be traced to those who played and controlled it within the historical context of the era, the timing of cricket's dissemination against baseball's emergence, and on the structure of the game itself (always in opposition to baseball). By the end of the Civil War, baseball would decisively win the battle and American cricket would soon fade into relative obscurity, eventually descending into near-extinction by 1920.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not cricket and baseball could have shared the American "sports space" became a moot issue and an academic question by the time the American Civil War had ended, though, in our view, cricket as mass culture in the US makes for a very unlikely scenario. Nevertheless, the lessons of American cricket were lost on those who would steward the game of soccer in the US in the coming century.

In a wide variety of ways, the history of baseball is a reflection of America's "Gilded Age." The game played a significant role in assimilating immigrants, or at least their children, into American society. By 1876, when the National League of Professional Baseball Teams—the world's first and oldest professional sports league—was organized, baseball had become "the national pastime." Ten years later, after the American Association had successfully targeted a more diverse and less upscale audience with on-premises beer sales, twenty-five cents admission and Sunday games, baseball was by far the dominant recreational and spectator sport of the American masses. At the turn of the century, after a decade of turmoil in both baseball's ballparks and board rooms, the middle classes were rescued for the sport (or vice versa) by the reforms of the fledgling American League.<sup>16</sup> Until the post-World War II era, baseball would continue to enjoy unrivaled popularity, at least from April through October, in America as both a recreational and spectator sport.

---

15. See George B. Kirsch, *The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-72*, Chicago 1989; and Adelman, *A Sporting Time*, Section II.

16. See Seymour, *Vol. I*, and *Vol. II: The Golden Years*, New York 1989; Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*, Westport 1985; David Quentin Voigt, *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System*, Norman 1966; Robert Burk, *Never Just a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920*, Chapel Hill 1994; Ted Vincent, *Mudville's Revenge*, New York, 1983, Section II.

The most popular sport in the US until the ascendancy of television and professional football in the 1950s, baseball now trails both professional football and basketball in terms of television ratings, advertising dollars, and ancillary product marketing revenue. Baseball has also lost its position as America's most popular recreational team sport to basketball, to its "prodigy" slow-pitch softball and, with children in an increasing number of places, to soccer. But despite the encroachments made upon baseball's "sport's space," and the recent strife between the owners and managers of Major League Baseball that forced the cancellation of a World Series for the first time in over 90 years, baseball is still, in many ways, "the American National Pastime." By virtue of baseball's historical and seasonal place in American culture, its "egalitarian access" in terms of physical requirements for players, and its recent tribulations and decline in relation to football and basketball, any future advance by soccer upon America's "sports space"—particularly for Major League Soccer—would likely have to be accomplished, to a large extent, at baseball's expense. Formerly the "hegemon" in America's "sports space," baseball has become its Achilles heel whose vulnerability might offer soccer's long-awaited chance to make some meaningful inroads into the domain of American big time spectator-sports in the 21st century.

### SOCCER IN AMERICA

Soccer failed to gain more than a marginal existence in American sports culture for four reasons. First, as we have shown, soccer as both a recreational and spectator activity was, in the 19th century, crowded out, from below by the emergence and success of baseball as a sport for the American masses (who aspired to adopt bourgeois values and status) in spring and summer, and from above by American football as a sport for the middle and upper-middle classes in autumn. Second, like the first modern British sport to be played and watched in the US, cricket, soccer was perceived by both native-born Americans and immigrants as a non-American activity at a time in US history when nativism and nationalism emerged to create a distinctly American self-image. Soccer enthusiasts refrained from any attempts to integrate their sport into the culture of their adopted land. For the typical soccer-playing immigrant, as with the transplanted British cricketer, soccer served as a link to one's European roots in the midst of the inexorable "melting pot" of America; hence "Americanizing" the sport would have negated its *raison d'être*. Third, once soccer did

gain converts among native-born Americans after the turn of the century, it was almost exclusively as a recreational sport for college or high school athletes who were viewed as somewhat alien from the mainstream, “above”—or inadequate for—the accepted American sports of football and baseball. Many who played soccer did so only as a way to remain active in the off-season of the sport of their first choice. Like the game of lacrosse, soccer came to occupy a certain niche at American universities that remained the domain of a small, though dedicated, coterie of enthusiasts who were usually aloof from the mainstream of campus athletic activity that revolved around football and, later, basketball. Furthermore, those who regulated soccer with FIFA sanction in the US pointedly ignored scholastic soccer, and the colleges and high schools reacted in kind. Fourth, also echoing the experience of cricket, those who regulated soccer in the US failed miserably at developing any sort of comprehensive organization to promote and “modernize” the sport on American soil. Instead, they engaged in petty rivalries and shortsightedly sought to preserve individual power and the status quo, at the expense of affecting a policy of marketing the sport to the vast majority of the American public. In Weberian terms, American soccer did not develop the modern organizational characteristics necessary to move beyond marginality in a modern society.

### SOCCKER AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

At the turn of the century, a few wealthy secondary schools in the Philadelphia area, after banning rugby (actually American football), fielded teams and organized the Intercollegiate Football Association. Harvard fielded a team in 1905 and, over the next decade, most of the other Ivy League schools followed suit. Beginning around 1910, students at other colleges around the nation, not all of such well-heeled variety, began to take up the sport. By 1926 there were two college conferences for soccer, six by 1936, eight by 1954, and ten by 1959 when the NCAA inaugurated a championship for soccer.<sup>17</sup> There were occasional exceptions, but the sport tended to draw minor spectator interest on campus. Soccer was viewed mainly as a recreational activity that could be enhanced by inter-school competition, and an alternative for those students who might not have had the athletic skills, or physical size, required for football. Many students considered their soccer-

---

17. Hollander, 29-32, 135-141.

playing schoolmates, as either alien, aloof, "snobby", or simply odd.

By the 1960s, colleges were regularly awarding athletic scholarships in the sport, and some like St. Louis University into the 1970s, and the University of Virginia, a frequent NCCA champion of recent years, developed into true soccer powerhouses. By the '70s, some college soccer players were being touted as good enough for the North American Soccer League, the first and only—until the arrival of Major League Soccer (MLS) in 1996—upper division league in the US. Alas, most were not. However, in the years to follow, US colleges did produce some players who have been good enough to play, on occasion, on first-division teams in Europe, such as Tab Ramos, John Harkes and Eric Wynalda, around whom the US National Team as well as the new MLS have been built. The biggest handicap that American college soccer players have in acquiring and developing the necessary skills for the professional level is the brevity of the scholastic playing season. Additionally, some view the coaching at most colleges as woefully inadequate and/or unimaginative. Moreover, most soccer experts agree that, typically, by the time an athlete has been graduated from college and is ready to join the professional ranks, he is too old to develop into a world class soccer player. Knowledgeable observers of the game reiterate that virtually all the soccer greats have their skills—if not their experience—fully developed by the time they have turned twenty, at the latest.

Though soccer has recently become more popular on some campuses than it used to be, it is still on the level of volleyball, lacrosse and wrestling, nowhere near the status of football and basketball. There is one area where soccer at US colleges is played at the highest level in the world: women's soccer. American universities have provided the players for the US team that won the first Women's World Cup in China in 1991, and the gold medal at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, the first time that women's soccer became a full-scale Olympic sport with medal status. However, spectator interest in women's soccer, like that of most women's team sports save, perhaps, basketball, remains completely marginal in collegiate sports, let alone in America's popular "sports space." This still seems to be the case despite the fact that the gold medal game between the US and China attracted nearly 80,000 spectators to Athens, Georgia, thereby making that match the most well-attended women's sports event



anywhere in the world, ever.<sup>18</sup> But short of the quadrennial Olympic pedigree, it is still hard to imagine that a regular women's soccer game could attain a spectatorship even remotely close to that momentous occasion.

### YOUTH AND RECREATIONAL SOCCER IN THE US

Soccer as a participatory sport has recently experienced a tremendous boost in popularity in the US. This trend began in the early 1980s, ironically concurrent with the decline of the NASL. Since at least the 1950s, soccer has been a regular staple at American high schools as both an organized inter-school varsity sport and as an informal game for recreational classes. Since 1980, the sport has experienced a huge increase in number of players of both genders under the age of 18 in school and youth club leagues, far surpassing the percentile increases for baseball and basketball participants in similarly organized activities. According to a self-described national trade organization representing soccer equipment and clothing businesses, by 1993 soccer was equal to softball and trailed only basketball (by a wide margin) and volleyball (by a slim margin) in terms of overall recreational activity for boys and girls under 18.<sup>19</sup>

Though data for soccer participation prior to 1980 is mostly non-existent, an obvious "soccer boom" in the US in terms of participatory recreation has occurred since the late-1970s. High school (that is boys and girls school varsity and junior varsity teams consisting of players from age 14 to 18) registration of players has gone from approximately 190,000 in 1980 to over 420,000 in 1993.<sup>20</sup> Soccer participation in high schools from 1983 to 1993 rose 77 percent, while total high school sports participation rose just 3.7 percent during the same period.<sup>21</sup>

---

18. It is most interesting to note that NBC, which covered the Olympics with an admitted eye towards female viewers, provided no live coverage of women's soccer, only highlights and interviews, mostly in retrospect to the competition. Coverage for the gold medal-winning US women's softball squad was similarly cursory, though some live competition from women's basketball was broadcast. Apparently, NBC's highly successful strategy decidedly directed at women assumed the primacy of "feminine" individual sports like gymnastics and not "masculine" team sports, such as soccer, regardless of the gender of the participating athletes.

19. Soccer Industry Council of America (SICA), "Soccer in the USA: Statistical Abstract on Soccer Participation," 3. SICA, "Soccer in the USA: An Overview of the American Soccer Marketplace," 5. Numbers of "recreational participants" include all those who by survey state they have participated in an activity at least once a year.

20. SICA, "Statistical Abstract," 4.

21. SICA, "Overview of the American Soccer Marketplace," 5.

Soccer for young children has also seen a tremendous growth since the early 1980s, mostly among the suburban middle classes. Many parents find the sport attractive for its egalitarian access (everybody gets to play and no special skills are required at the entry level) and, compared to America's big three, its seemingly non-competitive ethic (it usually doesn't really matter who wins provided that "everyone has a good time"). There are three mostly national organizations for youth soccer in the US. The American Youth Soccer Organization and the Soccer Association for Youth are focused toward broad-based participation for all boys and girls under the age of 18. The United States Youth Soccer Association, the youth division of the USSF, places a much higher emphasis upon high-skilled competitive soccer than its two counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Total player registration for youth soccer in the US has grown from just under 890,000 in 1980 to over 2,630,000 in 1994, an increase of 196 percent.<sup>23</sup>

Participation in recreational leagues for adults over the age of 18 in the US is organized and sponsored through the U.S. Amateur Soccer Association, the adult division of the USSF. Player registration by the USASA has grown from approximately 103,000 in 1985 to over 160,000 in 1994. However, there are some adult teams and leagues—many consisting of Hispanic players—not registered with the USASA.<sup>24</sup>

Many American soccer fans and boosters view the growth in recreational soccer, particularly amongst young people, as an indication of soccer's inevitable success as a spectator sport in the US. However, few of the American youths who participate have become in-person or television spectators of soccer except, perhaps, during the 1994 World Cup. American boys and girls who play for the local school or club team find their sports heroes on television playing football, basketball or baseball. Until something approaching the skill-level of first division European soccer is played on a regular basis in the US, this situation will continue.

After basketball and soon, if trends continue, soccer, the team sport providing the most participatory activity for American youth is volleyball. Efforts at making volleyball a major professional sport have never gotten off the ground, though "beach volleyball," when played by athletic young women in bathing suits, has found a modest television audience. Like most of those who

---

22. SICA, *ibid.* 12-13.

23. SICA, "Statistical Abstract," 3.

24. SICA, "Statistical Abstract," 8.

have played or continue to play volleyball, Americans who have participated in recreational soccer have shown little inclination to support the sport as spectators. The symbiosis between the success of recreational soccer and that of professional soccer in the US is lopsided: the former seems to prosper almost to the detriment of the latter. The upward rise of soccer's popularity as a participatory activity is expected to continue (though not as dramatically as in the past) "with or without pro leagues."<sup>25</sup> However, any professional soccer venture will be dependent upon participation by American youths to supply both potential players and fans. There is no guarantee that the millions who play will watch, and we feel reasonably certain in our prediction that this imbalance will continue for the foreseeable future.

#### CLUB AND PROFESSIONAL SOCCER IN THE US

In the last quarter of the 19th century, soccer was played by many immigrants to the eastern US who formed amateur teams almost always composed of members of a specific ethnic group, as demonstrated by their names: Brooklyn Celtics, Anglo-Saxons F.C., Spanish-Americans F.C., and Clan McKenzie F.C. The American Football Association (AFA) was formed in 1884, the first soccer league ever to be organized outside of Britain. Bickering between the clubs commenced almost immediately, and the teams from New York soon formed their own organization, the American Amateur Football Association (AAFA). These two leagues, composed of both amateur and semi-professional teams, each requested recognition from FIFA at its 1912 Congress, in Stockholm. They were told first to consolidate and, after settling the inevitable turf-war, they did so, forming the United States Football Association, an organization that was run by amateurs ("in the pejorative sense of the word") very few of whom were native-born Americans.<sup>26</sup> This organization never achieved its goal, as stated by its English-born first president, of making "soccer the national pastime of the winter of this country," as it proved inept and incapable at organizing, promoting, and accumulating capital, while never moving beyond the ethnic insularity that has always hindered soccer's meager advancement into American culture.

25. SICA, "Overview of the American Soccer Marketplace," 8.

26. Paul Gardner, *The Simplest Game*, New York 1994, 212. Notably, it took the intervention and imprimatur of FIFA, at the time a relatively new European conception, to mediate and validate the organization and regulation of American soccer.

The USFA also completely ignored college and high school soccer, depriving itself of any sort of influence amongst native-born players and potential fans. As for the professional game, the USFA (stubbornly using the term “football” for what most Americans knew as soccer) did more to hinder than help its advancement.<sup>27</sup> However, club soccer—as in amateur and/or semi-professional—had fair success in attracting players, if not spectators, under the tutelage of the USFA. But the overwhelming self-identification of American soccer with ethnicity clearly reinforced its separateness for most Americans, especially when viewed against the Big Three.

Throughout the 20th century, regional club leagues would proliferate around the US, most notably in the New York area and, as a result of a concerted effort on the part of local enthusiasts to promote the sport as recreation for youth, in St. Louis a city which likely held the distinction as the unofficial capital of native-born American soccer players, fans and clubs for much of the sports’ history in the US. Organizations like the German-American League in the New York area, founded in 1923 with five clubs, and consisting of over 50 when its name was changed to the Cosmopolitan League in the 1970s, organized competition for clubs and players of a fairly wide range of ethnicity. Historically, most of the club soccer played in the US by adults was through affiliation with various ethnic organizations, and the most successful teams—amateur and semi-pro alike—were almost always based upon ethnicity, such as the Macabees of Los Angeles, four-time Challenge Cup (the US amateur title) champs in the 1970s.<sup>28</sup>

There have been several overtly professional soccer ventures—some with legitimate qualifications for “the bigtime”—attempted in the US over the last century. The first, a poorly planned venture on the part of some National League baseball owners in 1894, lasted less than three weeks.<sup>29</sup> The most recent and, apparently, most solidly financed, committed, and organized, is Major League Soccer, which began play in April of 1996. The hundred years between witnessed various associations and leagues that ranged in scope from the second American Soccer

---

27. *Ibid.*, 212-213. Also see Sam Foulds and Paul Harris, *America's Soccer Heritage*. Manhattan Beach, CA, 1979.

28. Harvey Frommer. *The Great American Soccer Book*. N.Y, 1980, 69-70.

29. For a brief description of the American League of Professional Football of 1894, see Foulds and Harris, as well as Daniel L. Ciccarelli, *A Review of the Historical and Sociological Perspectives Involved in the Acceptance of Soccer as a Professional Sport in the United States*, Dissertation, Temple University, 1983.

League—a mostly regional and ever-changing association, founded in the 1930s, which still exists on a continuing minor league level to this day—to the over-ambitious North American Soccer League, which lasted from the late-1960s to 1984 and experienced huge, but ultimately ephemeral, fanfare in the mid-1970s as a direct result of the two-and-one-half year American career of the legendary Pele.

In 1921, the American Soccer League, a professional venture formed with the backing of major investors on the East Coast, found success in drawing spectators. But the ASL's stability was eventually undermined by internecine battles between club owners and with the USFA, creating a split within the league and the defection of its most solid ownership on the eve of the stock market crash of 1929. The ASL folded the following year. This league had included some top-flight players from Europe, mostly Scottish, and contributed most of the US team that went to the semifinals of the first World Cup in 1930.<sup>30</sup>

The next attempt at a professional soccer league in the US came in 1933 with the second American Soccer League. Playing in the spring and summer, this outfit managed to survive in various guises, despite lack of capital, poor attendance, almost non-existent promotion, and the tradition of fielding ethnic-based teams which generally guaranteed the apathy of most of the American public.<sup>31</sup> Presently, it exists as part of a conglomeration of regionally-based professional outdoor leagues in the US and Canada, playing at a quality which at best attains a level comparable to that of the lower end of the second division in most European countries. Aside from its relatively long and overwhelmingly marginal existence—one that is, in many ways, a reflection and representation of the history of American soccer itself—and the introductions of televised soccer (locally in New York, in 1952) and indoor soccer (in 1939) to the US, the most noteworthy contribution of the second ASL was the initial post-war era presentation of first division soccer from abroad to the US.

Beginning in 1946 with a visit by Liverpool, the ASL sponsored exhibition matches with, and more successfully between, teams from overseas, sometimes on the hallowed grounds of baseball. In 1947, a match featuring Hapoel of Israel (in what was likely a fund-raiser for the nascent Zionist state) drew 43,177, including Mayor William O'Dwyer, to New York's Yankee Sta-

---

30. Gardner, 214.

31. Hollander 263-279.

dium. The following year, nearly 20,000 were in attendance at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field to watch teams from England and Sweden. However, Downing Stadium on Randalls Island was the much more typical New York venue for soccer. In 1965, an ASL-sponsored exhibition featuring the American debut of Pele drew over 40,00 to Yankee Stadium.<sup>32</sup>

The success of the ASL in presenting foreign teams to American spectators engendered the creation of a venture based upon a similar concept. The International Soccer Tournament, initially affiliated with the ASL and beginning play in 1960, was the set-up whereby eleven teams from overseas and one team of American "all-stars" would compete in a "league" for an eventual champion. The International Soccer League played most of its games at New York's Polo Grounds, consistently showing attendance in "the five figures." The ISL lasted until 1965, at which time the concept of organizing a truly bigtime soccer venture in the US had drawn the attention of several wealthy investors.<sup>33</sup>

### THE NASL

By 1966, as professional baseball, football, basketball and hockey were experiencing unprecedented growth in the number of franchises, three distinct groups of wealthy investors sought approval from the USSFA (the second "S" standing for the added word "soccer," a concession finally made to the rest of the American public in 1945), so as to gain FIFA sanction for a new professional league. Two of the groups merged to form the National Professional Soccer League (NPSL), and landed a television contract with the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), one of the nation's largest television networks. This conglomerate balked at the demand by the USSFA for a percentage of both gate receipts and television money, thereby forcing it to operate as a "pirate" organization. The other group, which included some of the country's wealthiest men, went along with the antiquated and self-important USSFA, forming the United Soccer League (USA—an acronym that was hardly an accident) which enjoyed FIFA approval.<sup>34</sup>

Despite its outlaw status, the NPSL was able to sign enough foreign players to field ten teams for a 1967 season. It secured a two-year television commitment from CBS for weekly telecasts,

---

32. Gardner, 215; Hollander, 270, Foulds, 77.

33. Gardner, 215.

34. Hollander, 282-283; Gardner, 216-217.

while filing an \$18 million lawsuit for restraint of trade against FIFA, the USSFA and the USA. Meantime, the USA rushed into the 1967 season with twelve hastily assembled teams of its own. In this league too, most of the players were foreign. The play in either league was anything but top quality, and television ratings were abysmal. The lawsuit was settled in time for the 1968 season by merging the two leagues into the seventeen team North American Soccer League. That year proved even more disastrous, as television ratings were again in the low decimal point range while attendance was not much better at the games. CBS prudently refrained from renewing its commitment and the league was down to five teams for 1969. The NASL managed to hang on over the next six years, mostly because of the presence of Lamar Hunt, the wealthy owner of the league's Dallas franchise and the NFL's (as in American Football) Kansas City Chiefs.<sup>35</sup>

The NASL was reinvigorated in 1975 when the New York Cosmos signed Pele to a contract of \$4.5 million for three years, bringing soccer by far the most media coverage it had ever enjoyed in the US. CBS made a point of broadcasting Pele's first NASL game, and attendance skyrocketed. In the next year, other top foreign players signed NASL contracts, notably Franz Beckenbauer, Giorgio Chinaglia and George Best, legends all. The Cosmos continued to draw well in New York; in 1977 77,000 fans saw their playoff game against Fort Lauderdale. In 1979, the league signed a television contract with the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), another of the nation's major broadcast networks.<sup>36</sup>

Though it seemed that big-time soccer, in the guise of the NASL, had arrived in the US, the high stakes maneuvers and media attention masked inherent weaknesses in both the structural integrity of the league, and soccer's appeal to the American public. In 1982, ABC, dissatisfied with perpetually low ratings for soccer, did not renew the league's television contract. The same year, the NASL, which had lost three franchises the year before, lost seven more, including the Dallas Tornados belonging to Lamar Hunt. It came to light that all of the league's franchises had been losing vast sums of money since the expansion of the mid-70s; none had ever turned a profit. The remaining owners scapegoated NASL commissioner Phil Woosnam for all of their problems, and hired New York politician Howard Samuels to replace him. Samuels instituted massive reforms, such as cutting

---

35. Hollander, 282-286; Gardner, 218.

36. Gardner, 220; Hollander, 301-329.

roster sizes while negotiating a salary cap agreement with the NASL Players Association. The league was down to nine franchises in 1984, when Samuels suddenly died of a heart attack. No move was made to find a new commissioner and the NASL was out of business by the following year.<sup>37</sup>

In retrospect, there were several factors that ruined the NASL, only some financial. The league had found itself in several "Catch-22" situations. Realizing that only top quality soccer would draw major league-type crowds to matches, the owners of the NASL had competed with each other in lavishing huge contracts upon players from abroad. Revenues never matched the salary outlay for these players, though without these players there would be no revenue at all, as the quality of play on the field would not draw spectators, nor attract a network television contract. That there were few American players on these teams was a powerful factor in limiting spectatorship both in-person and on television, once Pele had retired in 1978. But American players were simply not good enough to provide the league with the necessary quality of play. The appeal of the NASL would be limited with a majority of players from the US, just as it had with a majority of players from overseas. The only alternative would have been to build slowly, with limited revenue and an emphasis on home-grown talent. But there was already soccer on that level in the US and it had always remained minor league. Besides, once committed to major league status, the NASL owners could not hope to downgrade their product and still recoup their huge financial losses. Additionally, the NASL had succumbed to what had always kept soccer out of the mainstream in the US: the complete absence of a soccer culture in relation to the culture of the "big three and one-half" of American sports. Simply put, most Americans were not interested in watching soccer. This was reflected in the television ratings, and the demographic composition of the ever-declining number of spectators in the stands.

One lasting legacy of the NASL to the US is indoor soccer. Initially begun by some NASL clubs as a way to keep players active in the off-season and hopefully win converts of American sports enthusiasts to soccer,<sup>38</sup> an indoor league (the result of the original NASL offshoot's merger with a later-formed organization) now operates in several cities in the summer months. Played with six players to a side, indoor soccer is perhaps closer to hockey than

---

37. Gardner, 221.

38. Gardner, 221-222.



soccer in its presentation. Considered an abomination by most soccer fans, it is the only form of the game to be truly "Americanized." Some indoor teams have had fair success in drawing spectators, while the game has become a way for indoor arenas to obtain moderate revenue in the off-seasons of basketball and hockey. Indoor soccer matches usually draw between two to seven thousand spectators per game. The Dallas indoor team drew almost seven thousand fans to a game the night after the 1994 World Cup had opened in the same city.<sup>39</sup>

### THE 1994 WORLD CUP

The United States was chosen, by the way, because of all the money to be made here, not for any soccer prowess. Our country has been rented out as a giant stadium and hotel and television studio for the next 31 days—and that's fine. I have no illusions about this World Cup being the breakthrough for American soccer, but for the next month we are the center of the universe.<sup>40</sup>

The World Cup USA organization, responsible for staging the 1994 World Cup in the US, had set several specific goals for the event. Foremost was the maximization of profits for itself, the USSFA, FIFA, television networks, and the nine World Cup host cities. This required making each match successful in terms of attendance, security and logistics, as well as television and press access. Additionally, arrangements with corporate sponsors and retailers, based upon advertising sales and product licensing, brought in substantial revenue.<sup>41</sup> Another goal was to attract a respectable American television audience by utilizing a strategy that sought to attract the casual American sports viewer (as in someone who might not watch weekly NFL telecasts but watches the Super Bowl).<sup>42</sup> This included the requisite of bringing World Cup soccer to the attention of an American public that, on the eve of the games, was woefully uninformed regarding the event.<sup>43</sup> Finally, there was the stated objective of using the World Cup as a vehicle to launch a new professional soccer league that would

---

39. Dallas Morning News, 6/19/94.

40. George Vecsey, New York Times, 6/12/94.

41. Dallas Morning News, 6/14/94.

42. Dallas Morning News, 6/12/94.

43. USA TODAY, 6/12/94. According to a Harris Poll conducted 5/23 - 5/26/94, 71% of Americans were not aware that the 1994 World Cup was taking place in the US.

eventually showcase First Division soccer in the US, with mostly American players.<sup>44</sup>

The 1994 World Cup was a singularly unique, sensational and financially successful event that managed to put soccer at the forefront of the American sports agenda for a short period of time. As a result, future World Cups may draw the attention of the American public comparable to that of the Olympics: a sensational event to be watched and talked about every four years, so long as there is a US team Americans can cheer. We expect that the 1998 World Cup in France will be watched by more Americans—provided the US team qualifies—because of World Cup 94. Perhaps this might furnish an eventual payoff for professional soccer in the US sometime down the road, say in fifteen or twenty years or after another four or five World Cups. However, the direct impact of World Cup 94 on the future of professional soccer in the US is likely to be marginal at best, as the attention it provided for the sport was ephemeral for most of the American public. The World Cup succeeded in the US as a big sensational event, but it ultimately failed to provide the hoped-for impetus for the advancement of soccer into the American “sports space.” Though Major League Soccer (MLS), as the new venture is labeled, got off the ground in 1996, whatever marketing and promotional advantage it may have gained from the World Cup was mostly gone. Most Americans remain disinterested in the world’s most popular spectator sport, and that is unlikely to change anytime soon.

That the World Cup was a successful event in the US is corroborated by record attendance figures, good television ratings, and the substantial amount of coverage provided by the American press. All of the matches took place without any major problems. Most of the games sold out, and only a few were attended at less than 90 percent capacity, in stadia ranging from just under 60,000 to over 100,000 spectators. Morocco played Saudi Arabia in New Jersey’s Giants Stadium before a near-capacity crowd of more than 72,000.<sup>45</sup> It is not presumptuous to assume that this contest would not have drawn one-fifth of that figure in Italy 1990, or Mexico 1986. Clearly there was great interest by both Americans, as well as international “soccer tourists,” to watch the World Cup in person. Cumulative television ratings ranked above the 4.0 to 4.3 that Alan Rothenberg, president of World Cup USA, had predicted. Overnight ratings initially peaked at 10.4 for the second

---

44. USA TODAY, 6/17/94.

45. San Jose Mercury News, 6/26/94.

round matchup of Brazil and the US on July 4th, to be surpassed by the Brazil-Italy final at 12.4.<sup>46</sup>

The American media, not only that of the sports pages and sports news shows, devoted a tremendous amount of editorial space to World Cup coverage, reporting events on the field, describing the sometimes carnival-like atmosphere in the nine host cities, and exploring various aspects of soccer and its culture both internationally and domestically.<sup>47</sup> However, no World Cup coverage came at the expense, in terms of newspaper space and air time, of any other sports including baseball, basketball (which saw the conclusion of the NBA playoffs the same day the US upset Colombia), football and hockey (both in their respective off-seasons), or professional golf and tennis (which held major tournaments as the World Cup tournament unfolded). Instead, the sports pages of newspapers were expanded. A few matches—some specific to the host city where they occurred, as well as those of the US team—did occasionally manage to crowd out other sporting events, but only in terms of priority in the placement of headlines and stories. Numerous American sports columnists wrote pieces debating the merits of soccer, most identifying positively with the World Cup, some with the game itself. Most were non-committal on the prospects for professional soccer in the US, though a few became quite enthusiastic. There were some columnists who were quite negative, and a few who were downright nativist and chauvinistic (though the latter attitude was sometimes a reaction to similar sentiments sometimes expressed by foreign journalists concerning the alleged inferiority of American sports compared to soccer).<sup>48</sup> However, many US sports magazines, most notably *The Sporting News*, America's foremost weekly sports journal, completely ignored the World Cup.

There was a "four day soccer boom" in the US, beginning with the US team's upset of Colombia and ending with its loss to Romania. Media coverage of the US team, as well as the World Cup itself, was most extensive in this brief period, and US players such as Alexi Lalas, Cobi Jones, and Tony Meola became recogniz-

---

46. USA TODAY 7/6, New York Times 7/19

47. The following passage is based upon a research survey of all the daily newspapers, covering the period of 6/1/94 to 7/31/94, from the nine American host cities; several newspapers from other American cities; various American sports magazines; and interviews with several American sportswriters and sports editors.

48. It is also interesting to note how often European journalists decried the fact that the US—a country without a viable soccer culture—was awarded the 1994 World Cup.

able to the American public at large (not least because of their hair styles). Television and newspaper advertising “tied into” the World Cup, prolific from the opening ceremonies, kicked into high gear with the appearance of US players on innumerable promotional ads. Press coverage, and the interest of the average American, began to decline after the US loss to Romania, dropping substantially after the US was eliminated. Additionally, once the tournament narrowed, newspapers in cities no longer staging games also significantly decreased their World Cup coverage.

Foreigners, “ethnic” Americans, or those expressing the pride of their ancestry, were the most visible fans at most matches. But the attendance of native-born, “non-ethnic” white Americans was also quite high. In our view, however, most of those not of the traditional soccer base required the appeal of World Cup-quality play backed by the fanfare of a big event in order to attend. Once the Cup was over, few if any of these types of spectators continued to attend soccer matches in the US. Within a few days after the final match, soccer coverage in American newspapers returned to what it had always been before the World Cup: marginal to non-existent. Reader complaints to sports editors that there wasn’t enough coverage of soccer also returned to that of pre-World Cup levels—a few very strident and loud, but lonely, voices amid the dominant majority consisting of football, basketball, baseball, hockey, golf, tennis and boxing fans.

#### MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER AND THE FUTURE

On the eve of the World Cup, Major League Soccer, also headed by Rothenberg, announced the award of franchises to seven cities, five short of the twelve-team league as planned. Financing for the additional five teams was incomplete, and the required number of deposits for season tickets had not been met.<sup>49</sup> The league’s blueprint, which included limitations on player salaries and a plan to distribute players from a central “pool”—meant to avoid the mistakes of the NASL—was initially a major hindrance in attracting investors. MLS had planned to begin play in the Spring of 1995, but in November, 1994 Rothenberg announced a postponement until 1996.<sup>50</sup> Aside from dribbling away whatever goodwill and enthusiasm average Americans might have felt towards soccer in the aftermath of the World Cup, this delay also wasted the opportunity to garner fan interest and media attention

---

49. USA TODAY, 6/17/94.

50. New York Times, 11/16/94.

provided by Major League Baseball's unprecedentedly long and acrimonious work-stoppage in late 1994 and early 1995.

And yet, when MLS concluded its long-awaited first full season of league play in October 1996, all experts as well as MLS participants were favorably surprised about the league's achievements during its inaugural presence in America's "sports space." The average attendance of 17,416 people per game exceeded the projected 10,000 by about 80 percent.<sup>51</sup> Nearly 34,000 enthusiastic fans withstood torrential rains and other adverse conditions to watch the first MLS Cup between D.C. United (the eventual winner and thus first MLS champion) and the Los Angeles Galaxy at Foxboro Stadium near Boston on October 20, 1996. The game also attained respectable numbers on television, where it was broadcast by ABC. Perhaps most telling of all, concerning the MLS's respectability was the presence at the championship game of 43 foreign journalists from eleven countries, something no other previous intra-American soccer game had ever achieved.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps more than any other datum, this bespoke the fact that soccer played in the US had finally reached a level of international respectability which went much further than being a sort of anthropological curiosity. In the all-important world of television, the MLS could also rejoice in unexpectedly good numbers. National telecasts of MLS games, mainly by ESPN (still the nation's most eminent and accessible cable sports channel), reached viewership figures quite similar to that network's regular season national broadcasts of the National Hockey League, a much more established venue than the one-year old MLS.<sup>53</sup> However, confirming soccer's continued weakness, it is important to note that local broadcasts of MLS matches did not attract anything close to the number of viewers of local NHL broadcasts.

To be sure, nobody inside and outside the MLS claimed that the league's first fine year assured soccer's permanent presence in America's sports culture. The sport's mostly sorry history in the course of its century-long marginality in America's "sports space" tempered all premature celebrations of MLS and its commendable performance. For the first time, those in charge of America's soccer establishment seemed to have learned a sufficiently thorough lesson from the past not to repeat it. Thus, it was confirmed that the slow and deliberate growth of MLS would in no way be sacri-

---

51. New York Times, 10/22/96.

52. Ibid.

53. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 10/19/96.

ficed to the joy of the moment and replaced by the reckless abandon so characteristic of (and ultimately detrimental to) the NASL. The original ten teams were not to be augmented anytime soon. Moreover, the emphasis of maintaining a viable mix of foreign players with American talent remained paramount to the league's future. To help the development of American players, the league approved what it calls "Project 40," which will select 40 players out of high school and place them on development teams beginning in 1997, thus countering the criticism of American soccer, noted above, that America's sports' "second exceptionalism"—namely the prominence of its college athletics—delayed and impeded the development of the country's finest soccer talent.

Lastly, in addition to league play and the club scene as manifested by the MLS, in the US—as with other countries around the globe—it will be the success of the national team which will ultimately decide soccer's popularity in the nation's sports culture. And here, too, one can observe certain new and interesting trends. As the American national team has successfully completed the first round of games in its quest to reach the 1998 World Cup competition in France, the number of spectators increased with each successive game and victory. In the last game played on American soil in this round, 40,527 spectators crowded into Stanford Stadium on December 14, 1996 to see the US defeat Costa Rica, 2-1. While representing the largest crowd ever to watch a World Cup qualifying match in the history of the US, it was, incidentally, also the third largest attendance for any event in Stanford Stadium for 1996 (only barely outdone by the crowds of 41,980 and 41,150 who watched Stanford play football against USC and Oregon, respectively).<sup>54</sup> Simply put, by the end of 1996, soccer in the US was still marginal in the nation's "sports space," but it was no longer an exotic or obscure curiosity.

### CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the particular nature of America's development as "the first new nation" contributed considerably to the crowding out of soccer as one of this country's major spectator sports. Specifically, it is our contention that some of the most salient social and historical constellations which led to the absence of a large working-class party in the US, making the world's only advanced industrial nation a considerable exception

---

54. San Jose Mercury News, 12/15/96.

in the conduct of its politics, also helped to exclude the US from the world's most popular mass sport. It was above all America's early and comprehensive bourgeoisification—as myth and reality—which created both “exceptionalisms,” the legacies of which remain to this day. This is not to say that an understanding of the pre-First World War situation is completely sufficient as an explanation for the failure of socialism and/or soccer in contemporary America. The phenomena of Stalinism and McCarthyism—to mention the most obvious cases—certainly contributed to the continued absence of a large mass-based left-leaning party in the US today.

Similarly, soccer's continued marginal existence as a spectator sport in contemporary America has as much to do with its continued inability to compete with America's “big three and one-half,” as it does with its inability to establish itself in the medium that matters most in this post-industrial age: television. This predicament can be seen from the viewpoints of production and supply, as well as those of demand. As soccer does not provide the requisite play-stoppages necessary for television advertising, there is only passing incentive for both potential broadcasters and advertisers to promote the sport. Additionally, there are not enough quality players of American origin to stock a first-rate top division soccer league in the US. Hence, the problem of “hero identification,” one of many problems that doomed the NASL, remains. Perhaps this may be rectified over the next generation as more Americans play in Europe and the quality of play in MLS improves considerably. Thus, a “critical mass” of players would provide enough “performers” necessary for a “show” that would succeed in the television ratings. Though World Cup 94 demonstrated some appetite on the part of the American public for top-quality soccer, history has shown little interest by the same group for “minor league” soccer, nor for soccer without American players.

As far as the American sports consumer is concerned, as demonstrated by both the 1994 World Cup and the NASL, soccer needs top quality play to draw interest. But that level of play appears years away for a viable American professional soccer league. Additionally, that any sort of soccer venture in the US must submit to the will of a foreign body—FIFA—further the perception that soccer is not an American sport, especially when compared to those sports that have unquestionably established their “Americanness.” Many soccer enthusiasts point to the sport's tremendous recreational popularity in the US as evidence of a growing generation of soccer spectators. But as one specialist in

sports marketing said, regarding soccer, on the eve of World Cup USA '94: "Participation does not necessarily translate into spectatorship. If there was a correlation, we (Americans) would all play football on Saturday afternoons or the Tour de France would be the top spectator event."<sup>55</sup> In this age of mass spectatorship by way of television, the world's most popular sport has yet to develop beyond recreation mostly for children in the single largest television sports culture. Still no soccer in the United States, at least on any meaningful scale.

---

55. Nye Lavelle, President of Sports Marketing, Inc., quoted in the San Jose Mercury News, 6/17/94. Just prior to the World Cup, Lavelle released a survey of 1,200 American adults over the age of twelve ranking the World Cup as 95th out of 129 favorite spectator sports.



