

Soccer vs. McWorld

Franklin Foer

Points of Access

1. Despite its relatively low status in the United States, soccer is the world's most popular sport, with leagues that cover entire continents and more fans globally than any other sport. How much do you know about soccer? What images does it conjure up in your mind? Could it ever, do you think, be on par with baseball, football, and basketball in terms of popularity and national significance in the United States? Why, or why not?
 2. Look up the word "parochial" in your dictionary or online, and write down the definition. Now look up the word "globalism" in your dictionary or online, and write down the definition. How are these two words related? Which describes more closely the way you view the world around you? Why?
 3. Assess the various benefits and drawbacks of coming into another culture from the outside. What might a visitor be looking for in coming to a foreign place? How are visitors beneficial to a local community? How are they detrimental? When coming into a culture from outside, especially into somewhere bigger and more powerful, what strategies can the non-indigenous visitor use to succeed in the local culture?
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Two omens of apocalypse, or perhaps global salvation: During the 2002 World Cup, the English midfielder David Beckham, famed bender of the ball, styled his hair in a mohawk. Almost instantly, Japanese adolescents appeared with tread marks on their shorn heads; professional women, according to the Japanese newsmagazine *Shukan Jitsuwu*, even trimmed their pubic hair in homage. A bit further west, in Bangkok, Thailand, the monks of the Pariwas Buddhist temple placed a Beckham statuette in a spot reserved for figures of minor deities.

It should surprise no one that this London cockney has replaced basketball icon Michael Jordan as the world's most transcendent celebrity athlete. After all, more than basketball or even the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, soccer is the most globalized institution on the planet.

Soccer began to outgrow its national borders early in the post-World War II era. While statesman Robert Schuman was daydreaming about a common European market and government, European soccer clubs actually moved toward union. The most successful clubs started competing against one another in regular transnational tournaments, such as the events now known as Champions League and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Cup. These tournaments were a fan's dream: the chance to see Juventus of Turin play Bayern Munich one week and FC Barcelona the next. But more important, they were an owner's dream: blockbuster fixtures that brought unprecedented gate receipts and an enormous infusion of television revenue. This transnational idea was such a good one that Latin America, Africa, and Asia quickly created their own knockoffs.

Once competition globalized, the hunt for labor resources quickly followed. Club owners scoured the planet for superstars that they could buy on the cheap. Spanish teams shopped for talent in former colonies such as Argentina and Uruguay. Argentina plundered the leagues of poorer neighbors such as Paraguay. At first, this move toward an international market inspired a backlash. Politicians and sportswriters fretted that the influx from abroad would quash the development of young local talent. In Spain, for example, dictator Francisco Franco prohibited the importation of foreign players. Brazil's government declared Pelé a national treasure in 1961 and legally forbade his sale to a foreign team. But these stabs at nationalist economics could not ultimately stave off the seductive benefits of cheap, skilled labor from abroad. And, after a while, the foreign stars were needed to compete at the highest levels of European soccer. The game evolved to the point where an English club might field a team without any Englishmen.

By the 1990s, capital frictionlessly flowed across borders in the global soccer economy. European clubs not only posted scouts throughout the developing world, they also bought teams there. Ajax of Amsterdam acquired substantial shares of outfits in Cape Town and Ghana. Newcastle United began using China's Dalian Shide Football Club as a feeder. The biggest clubs started to think of themselves as multinational conglomerates. Organizations such as Manchester United and Real Madrid acquired a full portfolio of cable stations, restaurants, and mega-stores, catering to audiences as far away as Kuala Lumpur and Shanghai. Even with last year's dull markets, Manchester United's pretax profits for the 12 months ending on July 31, 2003, exceeded \$65 million.

It is ironic, then, that soccer, for all its one-worldist features, doesn't evince the power of the new order as much as expose its limits. Manchester United and Real Madrid may embrace the ethos of globalization by accumulating wealth and diminishing national sovereignty. But a tangle of intensely local loyalties, identities, tensions,

economies, and corruption endures—in some cases, not despite globalization, but because of it.

England, Half English?

During Franco's rule, the clubs Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad were the only venues where Basque people could express their cultural pride without winding up in jail. In English industrial towns such as Coventry and Derby, soccer clubs ballasted together communities amid oppressive dinginess. It wasn't just that many clubs had deep cultural roots. Each nation evolved its own particular style of play—the Italian doctrine of *catenaccio* (or defensive lockdown), Brazilian samba soccer, and so on. In part, these were easy clichés. But to anyone who watched World Cups, they were also undeniably true clichés.

Three years ago, England, birthplace of the beautiful game, handed over its national team to a Swedish manager named Sven Goran Eriksson. It is difficult to convey just how shocked English fans felt. For much of the nation's soccer history, beloved, quintessentially English characters had run the team. These "lads," typically ex-players, often turned a blind eye when their squads drank lager on the eve of big games, and forgave men for lack of training so long as they spilled their guts on the field. For all their inspirational power, though, these English managers tended to lack tactical acumen. They recycled stodgy formations that encouraged the same, ineffectual mode of attack—a long ball kicked over the midfield to a lone attacker, a style that perfectly reflected stereotypes about stiff-upper-lip English resoluteness. Their lack of creativity was evident in the national trophy case. Despite England's singular place in the game's history, it has won a lone World Cup (in 1966, as the tournament's host team), and not a single European championship.

The English Football Association installed Eriksson to remedy this sorry situation. He seemed precisely the character for the job. The Swede, a reader of Tibetan verse, exudes cosmopolitanism. During his celebrated career, he has managed clubs in Lisbon, Genoa, and Rome. Whereas the English managers had tended to wear tracksuits, Eriksson dresses in impeccable Italian threads and wears a pair of tiny, chic spectacles. He speaks in far more complete and far more elegant English sentences than any of his predecessors.

Never before had a man from across the channel coached England. This break with precedent wasn't just grist for pub trivia. Throughout the post-imperial decades,

Britain has worried that the continent would encroach on its distinctive way of life—a repeat of the Norman and German assaults on the island. Now, that debate echoed on the populist pages of London's tabloids. A *Daily Mail* headline argued, "We've Sold Our Birthright down the Fjord." Gordon Taylor, the head of the English players' associ-

Fair Trade Soccer

Fans across cultures argue that soccer used to be a lot fairer. A middling team, fueled by gritty players and loyal fans, could emerge from nowhere to hoist the championship trophy. What's more, these underdog teams often hailed from smaller cities, without massive stadiums or deep-pocketed owners.

That level playing field, some fear, has disappeared entirely. With their global chains of superstores and vast array of television deals, the big clubs have become wealthier, not just in absolute terms, but relative to the poorer clubs. Sales from Ronaldo and Beckham's replica jerseys bring Real Madrid more income in a month than many clubs make in a year, so it's no surprise that Real so frequently rolls over its poorer foes in the Spanish game. Indeed, the results of domestic competition are virtually preordained. Manchester United or Arsenal of London has won 10 of the last 11 English Premier League titles. If you support an Italian team other than Juventus or AC Milan, you wake up every morning with a depressingly accurate sense of how the final league table will ultimately shake out.

Such lamentations, which sound a lot like the left's critiques of global free trade, are hard to resist. They have an aura of romance. But they simply don't withstand close examination. The richest clubs have always dominated their leagues. They might not be the same rich clubs; neither Liverpool nor Atlético Madrid nor Borussia Moenchengladbach dominates as they once did. Even so, the ruling elite of European and Latin American soccer has been extraordinarily constant over time. Teams like Juventus and Manchester United only fall from their thrones for brief and historically insignificant spells.

Globalization has actually added a measure of mobility to the system. Foreign investors have created new powerhouses overnight. Chelsea, funded by Russian oil money, looks poised to break the monopoly in English soccer. Parmalat has used money from its international sale of dairy products to rocket clubs in Italy and Brazil to success. Of course, it is possible to overstate the glory of the new soccer order. A few years ago, a Swedish parliamentarian named Lars Gustafson nominated the game for a Noble Peace Prize, unleashing a fury of ridicule. And his critics have a point. Soccer doesn't deserve a prize for peace. It deserves one for economics.

ation spluttered, "I think it's a betrayal of our heritage." Some of these reactions can be chalked up to xenophobia. But the matter is psychologically deeper than that. English fans loved their old managers because they were such authentic representatives of the country, in all their faults and glories.

But the Eriksson era has taken an entirely unexpected direction: The new coach has practiced a caricature of old-fashioned, gritty English football. His system depends on goonish performances from relatively no-name defensive midfielders. Goals come from long passes to the fleet-footed forward Michael Owen. Every time Eriksson abandons the classic English formula, he gets in trouble.

Why hasn't Eriksson been able to remake English soccer in his suave continental image? The answer has to do with the deeply ingrained culture of the game. From a very early age, English players learn certain virtues—hard tackling, reckless winning of contested balls—and not others, such as fancy dribbling or short passing. Remaking these instincts isn't possible in a few seasons, let alone a few training sessions, of Swedish coaching.

The Eriksson story is archetypal. Portugal handed its squad over to a Brazilian; the Polish national team fronted a Nigerian striker who starred for a club in Greece; one of Japan's best players, Alessandro Santos (a.k.a. Alex), was born and raised in Brazil. None of these foreigners has succeeded in transforming the style and culture of national soccer teams. When Eriksson succumbed to Englishness, he upended one of the great clichés of the antiglobalization movement: that a consequence of free markets is Hollywood, Nike, and KFC steamrolling indigenous cultures. It is ironic that the defenders of indigenous cultures so often underestimate their formidable ability to withstand the market's assault.

Corruption 1, Investors 0

While globalization's critics have overestimated the market's destruction of local cultures, so too have its proponents. Take Brazil, for instance. How could a country with so many natural resources be so poor? How could a country with so much foreign investment remain so stymied?

Based on the stylishness of Brazil's most recent World Cup triumph in 2002—Edmilson springing backwards, catapult-like, into a poster-quality bicycle kick; Ronaldo scoring in-stride with a poke of the toe—outside observers would have no conception of the crisis in the national passion. But then, study the team's roster, and a pattern emerges. Between appearances for the national team, Edmilson contributes his

stunts to a club in Lyon, France. The 27-year-old Ronaldo, now with Real Madrid, hasn't played professionally in Brazil since he was 17. Of the 23 players who wore their country's radioactive yellow jerseys in the 2002 World Cup, only 12 currently play in their home country. An estimated 5,000 Brazilians have contracts with foreign teams. While pumping out the world's greatest players, Brazil's sport couldn't be in a sorer state. Only a handful of clubs operates anywhere in the vicinity of the black. Signs of decay are visible everywhere. Attending games in some of the country's most storied stadiums, buying their most expensive tickets, fans find themselves worrying about splinters and rusty nails protruding from the rotting wooden seats. Thousands more fans attend the average soccer game in Columbus, Ohio, and Dallas, Texas, than in the top flight of the Brazilian league.

Global capital was supposed to provide an easy fix. Foreign investors promised, implicitly at least, to wipe away the practices of corrupt elites who ran the Brazilian game and replace them with the ethic of professionalism, the science of modern marketing, and a concern for the balance sheet. In 1999, a Dallas-based investment fund called Hicks, Muse, Tate & Furst sunk tens of millions of dollars into the São Paulo club Corinthians and Cruzeiro of Belo Horizonte. ISL, a Swiss marketing company, acquired a share of the famed soccer club Flamengo in Rio de Janeiro. A few years earlier, the Italian food giant Parmalat took over Palmeiras of São Paulo. "Capitalism is winning out against the feudal attitudes that have prevailed in the sport for too long," crowed Juca Kfourri, Brazil's most venerable soccer journalist, at the height of the foreign influx. Kfourri predicted that soccer would generate 4 percent of Brazil's gross domestic product in just a few years.

Less than three years after the foreign investors arrived triumphantly in Brazil, they left in disgrace. At Corinthians, fans held demonstrations against Hicks Muse, protesting its failure to build a modern stadium. At Flamengo, ISL collapsed into bankruptcy. Foreign capital didn't turn Brazilian soccer into a commercial force like the National Basketball Association. In fact, by all objective measures, the game is now in worse shape than it was five years ago.

Why was the era of foreign investment such a debacle? The answer has to do with the men who ran the Brazilian game, perfect avatars of Latin American populism—corrupt, charismatic, and sly. When the foreign investors arrived in Brazil, they had no choice but to deal with these *cartolas*, or "top hats." But then the predictable happened. The *cartolas* siphoned funds into accounts in Bahamas and built themselves homes in Florida, expenditures documented in a congressional investigation. After they took the foreign investors' cash, the *cartolas* turned on their partners. When I visited Eurico

Miranda, the president of the Rio de Janeiro club Vasco da Gama, he complained how the foreign investors brought in guys “who barely speak Portuguese.” He condemned the foreign investors for selling star players to hated crosstown rivals—previously an unthinkable act. Miranda’s genius was that he made these antiglobalization arguments only after he allegedly robbed his foreign investors blind. A culture of corruption, as it turns out, is not any easier to remedy in soccer than it is elsewhere in the global economy. People have an attachment to their populist leaders and politicians, not just because of their cult of personality and their ability to deliver goods. They like them because the populists paint themselves as defenders of the community against the relentless onslaught of outsiders. It’s going to take more than Dallas-based pension funds and Wharton business school graduates to sweep them away.

Winning The Peace

Local hostilities, even outright racism, ought to be the easiest sort of legacy for global soccer to erase. When people have a self-interested reason for getting along, they are supposed to put aside their ancient grudges and do business. But there’s a massive hole in this argument: Glasgow, Scotland.

Glasgow has two teams, or rather, existential enemies. Celtic represents Irish Catholics. Its songs blame the British for the potato famine, and its games have historically provided fertile territory for Irish Republican Army (IRA) recruiters. Across town, there is Rangers, the club of Tory unionism. Banners in the stadium trumpet the Ulster Defense Forces and other Northern Irish protestant paramilitaries. Before games, fans—including respectable lawyers and businessmen—shout a song with the charming line, “We’re up to our knees in Fenian blood.” They sing about William of Orange, “King Billy,” and his masterminding of the Protestant triumph in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne. Until 1989, Rangers consciously forbade the hiring of Catholic players. Crosstown rivalries are, of course, a staple of sports, but the Celtic-Rangers rivalry represents something more than the enmity of proximity. It is the unfinished fight over the Protestant Reformation.

The Celtic and Rangers organizations desperately want to embrace the ethos of globalism, to convert themselves into mass entertainment conglomerates. They’ve done everything possible to move beyond the relatively small Scottish market—sending clothing catalogs to the Scottish and Irish diasporas in North America, and campaigning to join the bigger, better, wealthier English league.

But the Celtic and Rangers clubs don't try too hard to eliminate bigotry. Rangers, for example, continues to sell Orange jerseys. It plays songs on the stadium loudspeaker that it knows will provoke anti-Catholic lyrics. The club blares Tina Turner's "Simply the Best," which culminates in 40,000 fans screaming "Fuck the Pope!" Celtic, for its part, flies the Irish tricolor above its stadium. At Glasgow's Ibrox Park, I've watched Protestants celebrate a goal, egged on by former team captain Lorenzo Amoruso, a long-haired Italian with the look of a 1980s model. He applauds the fans. Flailing his arms, he urges them to sing their anti-Catholic songs louder. The irony is obvious: Amoruso is Catholic. Since the late 1990s, Rangers has routinely fielded more Catholics than Celtic. Its players have come from Georgia, Argentina, Germany, Norway, Portugal, and Holland, because money can buy no better ones. But ethnic hatred, it seems, makes good business sense. In fact, from the start of their rivalry, Celtic and Rangers have been nicknamed the "Old Firm," because they're seen as colluding to profit from their mutual hatreds. Even in the global market, they attract more fans because their supporters crave ethnic identification—to join a fight on behalf of their tribe.

There are plenty of economic causes for illiberal hatreds—unemployment, competition for scarce jobs, inadequate social safety nets—but none of those material conditions is especially widespread in Glasgow. Discrimination has faded. The city's unemployment problem is no better or worse than the rest of Britain. Glasgow has kept alive its tribalism, despite the logic of history, because it provides a kind of pornographic pleasure. Thousands of fans arrive each week from across the whole of Britain, in ferries from Belfast and buses from London, all aching to partake in a few hours of hate-filled tribalism. Once they release this bile from their system, they can return to their comfortable houses and good jobs.

If there were any place one would expect this sort of hostility to get messy, it would be Chelsea. During the 1980s, the club was the outfit most associated with English hooliganism. Its fans joined the xenophobic British National Party and merged with violent racist gangs like the notorious Combat 18. There are famous stories of Chelsea fans visiting Auschwitz, where they would walk around delivering *Sieg Heil* salutes to the tourists and try to climb inside the ovens. When the Holocaust denier David Irving went on trial for libel in 2001, the hooligan group Chelsea Headhunters provided security for his rallies.

Like a college alumni association, older, retired Chelsea hooligans make a point of sticking together. They stay in touch through an online message board, where they exchange war stories and debate the fortunes of their beloved club. The board makes a

Want to Know More?

Much of the literature on soccer veers from the vacuous to the absurdly academic. There are, however, some worthy exceptions. *Financial Times* columnist Simon Kuper charts the sport's intersection with politics through witty travelogue in *Football Against the Enemy* (London: Orion, 1994). Uruguayan novelist Eduardo H. Galeano provides a less journalistic, more poetic rendering of the same subject in *Soccer in the Sun and Shadow* (New York: Verso, 1998).

In addition to these tours through the global game, several excellent case studies are available. David Winner's *Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Football* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000) finds the aesthetic underpinnings for the national style in art, architecture, and politics. *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) by Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman explores why the United States has sat on the periphery of this most globalized phenomenon. Alex Bellos uses the game as an anthropological vehicle for understanding Brazilian race, class, and corruption in *Futebol: The Brazilian Way of Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002). And Bill Murray covers the history of the Celtic and Rangers clubs in *The Old Firm: Sectarianism, Sport, and Society in Scotland* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1984).

Several top journalists and leading publications examine the political economy of soccer. The London-based columnist Gabriele Marcotti writes the "Inside World Soccer" column for *Sports Illustrated* and contributes to various European publications. See Franklin Foer's "Glooooooooooooo-balism!" (*Slate*, February 12, 2001) for perspectives on soccer and globalization. Argentina's monthly *El Gráfico* remains one of Latin America's top soccer publications, while the lively English monthly *Four Four Two* usually contains at least one lengthy story on the social significance of a crosstown rivalry, a band of hooligans, or some other unexpected aspect of the beautiful game.

Foreign Policy coverage of the intersection of culture, politics, and economics includes Joshua Fishman's "The New Linguistic Order" (Winter 1998–99), Theodore C. Bestor's "How Sushi Went Global" (November/December 2000), Mario Vargas Llosa's "The Culture of Liberty" (January/February 2001), Alberto Fuguet's "Magical Neoliberalism" (July/August 2001), Douglas McGray's "Japan's Gross National Cool" (May/June 2002), and Kym Anderson's "Wine's New World" (May/June 2003).

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point of declaring, “WELCOME TO THE CHELSEA HOOLIGANS FORUM, FOR CHELSEA AND LOYAL FANS. PLEASE DON’T LEAVE RACIST MESSAGES AND DON’T USE THIS BOARD TO ARRANGE VIOLENCE.” The warning is intended to inoculate the site against any exceptionally offensive posts, but it doesn’t exactly deter the anti-Semitism. Almost immediately after oil baron Roman Abramovich, the second richest man in Russia, and a Jew, bought Chelsea, a guy calling himself West Ken Ken referred to Abramovich as a “yid,” and moaned, “I like the money but the star of David will be flying down the [Stamford] bridge soon. “

However, as the Abramovich era began and the new owner spent more than \$150 million stocking his new team, the complaints became less apparent. And then, when Chelsea jumped to the top of the English Premier League table, the anti-Semitism vanished altogether.

Chelsea, it seems, has discovered the only effective palliative for the vestiges of localism—not global cash or global talent, but victory.

Reading Comprehension—Points of Engagement

1. According to Foer, what should we *expect* the result of soccer’s globalization to be, in terms of nationalism and patriotism? What, according to him, is the *reality*? Why does he think this happened? Cite two passages of his essay to support your answers.
2. Consider the case of Brazilian soccer presented by Foer. How has the Brazilian soccer scene suffered under the globalization of soccer? Has it gained anything? What has changed? How does Foer feel about the situation with the Brazilian team? How do you know?
3. Consider the title of Franklin Foer’s essay, “Soccer vs. McWorld.” What do you think the “McWorld” part of his title means? What does it have to do with soccer?

Assignment Questions—Points of Departure

1. In “Soccer vs. McWorld” Franklin Foer explores the conflict between globalism and parochialism in soccer. In “Hate Your Policies, Love Your Institutions,” John Waterbury discusses the differences in world opinion about American foreign policy and American educational institutions. For this paper, your project is to consider the roles of *education* and of *sports* in drawing people together or pulling

them apart. Do you think education or sports are a more effective means of promoting communication and harmony amongst different nationalities? Why? How do sports and education function differently in these two essays? In what ways are they similar? What can one do that the other can't? Propose your own answers to these questions using the essays by Foer and Waterbury.

2. Is it a natural human response to divide ourselves up into small groups with clearly defined commonalities within the groups and oppositions between the groups? What incentives are there to resist forces of universalism and to seek power and autonomy through differentiating ourselves from other groups? *Is there power in it, or is it ultimately destructive?* Your project in this paper is to answer these questions using Franklin Foer and one or two of the following: David Brooks, Fenton Johnson, Michael Kamber, Lewis Lapham, Katha Pollitt, Francine Prose, V.S. Naipaul, or John Waterbury.
 3. Look up the words "xenophobia" and "parochialism" in your dictionary or online. Now consider the following quotation from Franklin Foer's essay: "Ethnic hatred makes good business sense . . . it provides a kind of pornographic pleasure" (100). How does this quotation strike you? Do you agree with it? Considering the observations of David Brooks, John Waterbury, or Lewis Lapham regarding American identity, what might be done to address the problems of xenophobia and parochialism? Write an essay where you discuss connections between Foer's theory of the backlash—via parochialism—against globalism in soccer, and the image of America, and Americans, which the other authors defend.
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