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I Wish the Sport I Love – Soccer – Could Help Eliminate Injustice Around World

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I Wish the Sport I Love – Soccer – Could Help Eliminate Injustice Around World

By Erin O'Flaherty
UCF Forum columnist
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Every four years soccer fans around the globe focus on the FIFA World Cup, this year being held in Brazil. The national teams of countries compete to become World Cup champions in the name of patriotism and pride. I am a fan of almost all sports, but especially soccer – so I cannot contain my excitement for the upcoming matches beginning June 12.

In watching the pretournament coverage, however, I have noticed this year's games seem to be concerning many fans because social issues have stirred up worry and controversy. Four years ago I had planned to attend these games – until the controversies began to surround them.

Billions of dollars have been poured into building stadiums – rather than focusing on infrastructure development – and workers' lives have been lost in the process. Many citizens remain extremely poor and critics say the government is corrupt. Some Brazilians have protested, asking soccer fans from around the world to boycott the games, which they say would be supporting the government on this unnecessary spending.

I also was surprised to hear stories about the racism that still affects the world of soccer. This is still happening in 2014? I remain disappointed that we haven't seemed to push past such a huge social barrier, especially in sports.

Most racism in sports begins with fans, not the athletes. Just one example of racial discrimination affected Lilian Thuram, arguably one of the best soccer players of all time. Born in the French territory of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, he grew up in France. His main goal as a child was to convince the country that others not born in

France could be French as well. When taunted, he would say, “I’m not black. I’m French.”

While Thuram’s soccer skills set him apart from others at an early age, his own countrymen have still excluded him based on his skin tone. In recent years, Thuram has stated that the only time he has truly felt French was in 1998 when he led the French national team to the championship match in the World Cup. He once outwardly criticized fans for racist behaviors directed toward players at a soccer match. At the next match, the fans showed up with signs geared toward Thuram that read “Show us respect” – a bit ironic, considering these were the hooligans causing the problem.

People are not born racist, obviously. They acquire racist thoughts and behaviors by observing others. The world has to learn to be passionate about soccer in a positive way that doesn’t pit us against each other in hatred.

Thierry Henry, an international soccer superstar from France who plays in Major League Soccer, is one of the main activists in the fight against racism in soccer and is captain of the FIFA Fair Play program. Henry also founded an anti-racism program called Stand Up Speak Up. This program is responsible for TV commercials that have many soccer players holding signs speaking out against racism.

Nike has produced black-and-white armbands embroidered with “Stand Up Speak Up,” which are being sold around the world to raise money for anti-racism groups. Henry was voted one of TIME Europe’s heroes of 2005 because of his enormous success and will to fight racism.

If only more athletes and sports fans could have the attitude that Henry has. I would love to see the sport I grew up playing evolve out of this stage that is tinged with racism.

Soccer is a sport that can unite the world. Rude actions from any players, coaches, and fans should not take away from the pure enjoyment of the sport. The game has the ability to touch and change millions of people, yet it cannot do that while angry fans and players are pointing fingers at those from different cultures.

“This Beautiful Game,” as soccer is sometimes referred to, needs to advance down the field and eliminate that ugly feature of injustice.

Erin O'Flaherty graduated this spring with a bachelor's degree in accounting and is a former Miss University of Central Florida. She can be reached ateoflaherty@knights.ucf.edu.