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## Sports Are Different Here - An American in Europe during World Cup

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It's odd when you leave the United States and go off for a vacation and have very little contact with the sports scene for over three weeks. Baseball, which is a daily obsession nearly disappears from your life, with only an occasional glimpse at scores in the international Herald Tribune or USA Today, and a few highlights hear and there on CNN.

The all-star game came and went while I was in Russia and there was no news of it there. Perhaps the biggest surprise was to return to find the Atlanta Braves trailing the Montreal Expos in the National League East, and to realize that if the playoffs started today the American League East would be represented by only one team, the Yankees, and that neither of last year's World Series teams would qualify for post-season play under the expanded format.

Clearly the biggest sporting event taking place during the first half of July was the World Cup, and there was a great deal of interest in the Cup in Germany, Russia, and France. The quarterfinals took place while we were in Germany, and the semis took place while we were in Russia. In both places interest was very high even though both Germany and Russia had already been eliminated. When it became known that we were from the United States comments were always made about the fact that the U.S. was hosting the World Cup.

Those who promoted World Cup Orlando will be pleased to know that when people learned we were from Orlando, they mentioned the World Cup being here before they mentioned Disney World. There were also comments on the fact the United States had played well, as many around the world had anticipated a fiasco by the U.S. on the field.

In Russia the semi-final games came very late into the night, going on well after the 1:00 a.m. sunsets in St. Petersburg. Through the night you could hear the shouts from here and there as goals were scored and games won and lost.

For the final we were in a hotel in Frankfurt and by the end of the game it was well after 1:00 a.m. I fell asleep during the overtime, and woke up just as the shootout began. When Italy missed the shot that guaranteed the Brazilian victory there were shouts throughout the hotel as many people were obviously still up watching the big finish.

The final was a superbly played game by both teams, and despite the lack of scoring it was a pleasure to watch soccer played at such a high level. The passing and ball handling were exquisite, and it is easy to see why this game has captivated the world. Whether it will ever be able to crack into the overcrowded American sports scene is doubtful even though it was obvious that Americans were interested and excited by World Cup '94.

Another point of interest for an American is to open a sports page and see the dominant stories dealing with track and field, motorcross, kyacking, and of course cycling. Considerable newspaper space is given over to these events, as is the electronic media.

The other big event for European sports fans this month, after the World Cup was the Tour de France, the world's premier cycling event which takes place all around France during much of the month of July. Throughout Europe the Tour receives considerable television attention, but in France the coverage is massive both on TV and in print. Three full pages of coverage in a sports section of four to five pages was common. The Tour de France is clearly the premier sports event of the year for the French.

I must admit that a bunch of guys riding bikes has never really excited me much, and for the most part the Tour de France can come and go without distracting me. But to be in France, to see the obvious excitement building, and to see first hand the difficult terrain of the French Alps, is to realize what a tremendous sporting event this really is. Indeed it is much more than a bicycle race. It is a cultural tradition and experience as attendance at the race is an expression of French culture.

The better part of a day is spent preparing oneself for the race by getting into the proper position, enjoying the picnic lunch with the right wines, cheeses and pate. Then after some hours of preparation the field of cyclists fly by your vantage point in less than a minute, unless you are located in an uphill position on the mountainous part of the course. Then it might take as much as two minutes for the entire field to pass your position.

But this is not the important thing. The important thing is that you are there, that you partake in the rituals of food, drink, and friendship. If the object was to see the race it would be much better to stay at home and watch the tube. But it just wouldn't be French to do that.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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