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## World Cup but not a big deal in the U.S.

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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The frenzy has begun over the biggest sporting event in the world. It started this week in France and will continue over the next several weeks until its conclusion on July 12. This is the greatest tournament in the history of sport, the quest for the World Cup, the Coupe du Monde.

World Cup qualifying opened with 172 countries seeking the thirty places available; Brasil as the defending champion and France as the host got automatic placement into the tournament. By the time it is over 37 billion people will have watched the games on television, roughly two to three billion per match, or slightly more than saw the final episode of Seinfeld.

There are 193 national football associations that belong to FIFA, the International Federation of Football Associations, more than hold membership in the United Nations. 250 million people play futbol worldwide. It is the closest thing to a universal sport, or even a universal institution-the largest secular community in the world.

Even before the games began there was rioting on the streets of Paris, as futbol fans from around the world were warming up for more expressive statements later in the month of action. That same day the French put on a parade and pageant, which would rival any hyperbolic event that, could be staged by the folks at Disney. In fact one wonders if Euro-Disney has infected the French, or whether the French have always been capable of producing bourgeois banality on this scale and scope. After this tacky exhibition I hope never to hear another Frenchman denigrate Americans for lack of culture and taste.

Only one major country will be largely indifferent to this international sporting spectacle. Only one major country does not regard futbol as the most important sport in the world. That country, of course, is the United States.

In a society where sport is a dominant social activity, futbol is regarded as marginal; a game of monumental boredom played mainly with the feet, in which there is too little scoring. For most sports fans in the United States watching futbol is the moral equivalent of watching paint dry. It is not likely that futbol will ever capture the imagination of the American sports fan.

Why is this so? Why is it that futbol has never caught on in America, and probably never will?

One answer is that it did. However the form of futbol that Americans were attracted to was rugby, which Americans then took and modified into football. In the second half of the 19th century when Americans were most actively developing their sporting culture, and when young men were most actively developing masculine recreational and leisure activities, the American college student fell in love with this game that seemed to express masculinity as no other game could. The rest, as they say, is history.

Once that process took place football came to rival baseball as the favorite outdoor sport. Shortly thereafter James Naismith produced basketball which quickly became the favorite of the indoor sports. These were the games that happened to capture American youth at the critical point in the development of the sporting culture in the United States. It could have been others, but it wasn't.

Once football, baseball and basketball developed a strong national following it proved to be extremely difficult for other sports to break into the upper echelons of popularity. There was, after all, a limit to the number of sports that could occupy large masses of people in the course of a calendar year, especially a people whose leisure time was still limited.

In the second-half of the 20th century as the sporting public grew in size, in disposable income, and in leisure, the major sports simply grew with them, while a few of the minor sports expanded to fill some gaps. But the majors stood alone. Football, baseball and basketball dominated public interest. Hockey trailed behind the big three, and then behind hockey came tennis and golf. The older sport of horse racing held its own among a select population, while the newer sport auto racing brought in those captivated by this 20th century technology.

In the United States football was football, while futbol became soccer, and soccer existed at the margins. Few people played the game and fewer watched.

Nor would futbol be aided by the coming of television. Like baseball, futbol is not an ideal television sport. The expanse of its action can not be fully captured, and both the speed and intricacy of the game seem lost to the television camera. In addition futbol shares with hockey a lack of scoring which Americans have come to equate with a lack of action. The directors of the big three sports are constantly tampering with the rules to produce more scoring and

avoid a diminishing of fan interest.

Finally the futbol product that has been showcased in the U.S. has been decidedly inferior to the game that generates the hysteria of the world. The NASL, the MISL, and the MSL all pale in comparison to the world class game being played in World Cup '98, and have left Americans to wonder what all the excitement is about.

It is not likely then that Americans will soon be seen rioting in streets if their soccer team wins or loses at the World Cup. The American coach need not fear for his life if his team fails. Instead Americans will concentrate on the NBA and NHL finals this month, and then begin to take a serious look at baseball in July while anticipating the opening of the NFL training camps at the end of that month.

As for World Cup '98, some recent immigrants may get excited, but for the most part Americans will pay little attention to the biggest event in the World of Sport.

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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