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The World Cup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The World Cup
JULY 13, 2006

Now that the World Cup has ended and the red and yellow cards have stopped dropping from the sky, I want to try and make some comments about this world event that seems only marginally relevant to most Americans. I should also preface my remarks by noting that I have not seen every game, have been on the road through much of the event and therefore been somewhat distracted, and most importantly I did not see the final game with its much discussed conclusion.

As an American with some interest and very limited knowledge of this form of football, I would say that for me one major disappointment was the performance of the American team. At best the performance was pathetic. First, the Americans didn't show up for the first game. They played with no energy and no enthusiasm, and any coach who cannot have a team ready to play at such an important event should not wait to be fired but should resign out of sheer embarrassment.

Whether the United States will ever produce a world class team is certainly in doubt. Despite the increased popularity of the game here, despite the sharp increase in the numbers of young people playing this game, the quality of play and players remains well below the world standard. I can't say I was surprised by the failure of the U.S. to advance in the tournament, but I was shocked by the sub-mediocre performance turned in by what was touted as the best American men's team ever.

Another thing that needs mentioning is that in the United States the television ratings for the World Cup were up significantly. I actually heard people talking about the World Cup with some enthusiasm.

It is always interesting to watch a major sporting event in which you have no significant emotional involvement or major interest. What is most striking at this level of detachment is the frenzy with which so many players and fans approach the games. The outcome becomes a matter of life and death, the raw emotion displayed by winners and losers is nearly unfathomable, and the public displays of celebration raise questions about the sanity of the participants. Surely, you are tempted to conclude,

a game could not be this important. These people have lost all perspective. They need to get a life.

Then you remember that in other sports and at other events you yourself can be transported to similar emotional highs and lows. NFL and major league baseball players can be reduced to a blubbering mass by both victory and defeat at the conclusion of a penultimate event. Total madness in the public celebrations can and does take place everywhere.

In fact sport is extremely important in our world. It still remains something well beyond a commercial transaction or a mere form of entertainment for both fans and players. The collective aspects of sport and identity still remain central and beyond the reach of commercialism. In international venues nationalism is added to the mix and, if nothing else, the World Cup displays the power of nationalism in our "globalized" world. The potency of the combination of identity drawn from both sport and nationalism is displayed in all its dubious glory. For anyone who thinks the age of the nation-state has passed, they only need to have watched the World Cup over the past month to be disabused of such a view.

As for the game of football, the World Cup displayed some of its best and worst. This is to be expected in a tournament of this length with so many games. Some of the games will be excellent, some will be good, some will be acceptable and some will not rise to any of these levels. At its best the football on display in the World Cup was a joy to watch. Italy, France, Brazil, Germany, Portugal, Spain and others put on wonderful displays of free flowing play illustrating why football fans call this "the beautiful game." Individuals within these teams similarly displayed levels of skill in dribbling, passing, and defense that could take your breath away, and did.

When it is poorly played, as is true with most sports, it is something ugly to watch. Teams moving up and down the field missing passes, shooting at who knows where, or just standing and staring, are not a pretty sight. For those who don't understand the finer points of a game, nothing can be as excruciating as a poorly played game. And there were more than enough of these, particularly during group play.

Another puzzling aspect of football for the uninitiated is the use of the penalty kick to decide a game. It seems foolish that after two hours of struggle any game of significance would be decided in this manner. I know this is done in Olympic hockey

and in some other situations, but it would seem much better to drop the overtime periods, move immediately to "sudden death" or the "golden goal," and if the game moves on too long to reopen substitution, perhaps allowing free substitution until a winner is decided.

In its playoff system the National Hockey League takes games to a decision by extending the game no matter how many overtimes it takes, even though the teams involved often must play again within less than forty-eight hours. FIFA needs to take a look at such a system. To end the game, especially the final game, in this manner is an insult to fans and players alike. Winning a penalty kicking contest has little to do with overall team quality and certainly is no way to crown a World Champion.

In the end I must say that I enjoyed this World Cup as much or more than any I have watched in the last two decades during which it has graced American television. I enjoyed seeing the great players display their skills individually and within their teams. I also thought it was refreshing the way in which the host nation welcomed the world and provided venues for the ordinary fans to watch the game in a mass setting. This was a celebration of the world's most popular game, and a refreshing departure from the violence that too often has spread a cloud over the World Cup.

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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