

The World Cup

7-14-2018

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The World Cup" (2018). *On Sport and Society*. 831.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/831>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE WORLD CUP
JULY 14, 2018

It has been a month since the start of the World Cup. When a champion is determined on Sunday, over thirty-five matches will have been played in twelve stadia spread across the Russian landscape. It has been an exhausting and impressive cavalcade of sport.

Over the past month, I have watched more football than I ever watch in any similar stretch of time. It has left me in awe of the skills on display, the excitement of many of the matches, and the sheer volume of energy expended by players and fans alike. Unlike the American World Series, the World Cup is actually a world championship.

There has been much to admire during the month of competition, with many highlights provided by individuals and by teams. At the team level, the performance of the Russians certainly was a surprise, and the people of Russia are rightly proud of their team. In the competition only because they are the hosts, the Russian team was the lowest ranked team of all the competitors. The fact that they reached the round of sixteen for the first time in decades is a tribute to their effort, and a reminder that the host team gets a little extra energy from the support of the home-fan base.

Panama, making its first World Cup appearance, offered a memorable moment. Trailing 6-0 to England in their second Group Stage game they scored their first World Cup goal ever. The celebration in the stadium and back in Panama was an emotional explosion. It was a landmark moment in Panama football history, and the scoreboard at that moment didn't matter. Winning isn't the only thing.

Also impressive was the early departure of Portugal and Argentina. These two teams are led by what is generally considered the two best football players in the world. Within a few minutes of both teams losing, a joke circulated in Russia. Messi and Renaldo were to meet in the World Cup, but instead they met at Domodevdovo. (One of Moscow's International Airports)

For me, the performances by the teams from Nigeria and Senegal were impressive and highly entertaining. The fact that neither moved on further than they did was a disappointment. Senegal was

tied with Japan on points earned with four each, but Senegal went home while Japan moved on, by virtue of a convoluted bizarre calculation of something called "the fair play rule." In the end, there was nothing that seemed "fair" about it.

Fortunately, there was only one blowout game in the Group Stage, and only a few meaningless games in which no one wanted to break a sweat or in which each side hoped to lose. In the Knockout Round there was nothing but hard fought tight matches; players gave all the energy they had; several games were decided in the last few minutes; others went to extra time. Five matches, three involving Croatia, were decided by penalty shots.

At the individual level, there were several eye-popping performances. At the top of that list were those by the goaltenders from Croatia, Russia, and England. These stand out because they came in the penalty-kick phase with everything at stake on each shot. Goaltenders across the board performed body contorting feats making what seemed like impossible saves.

Any number of other individuals offered standout performances. Two of the younger French players, Umtiti and Mbappe, were dazzling with their footwork and speed. The 19-year-old Mbappe startled the veteran announcers on FOX as well as most everyone watching, including the opposition. I have no expertise here, but I know amazing dexterity when I see it. Harry Kane of England, Luka Modric of Croatia, the amazing Renaldo, and Ahmed Musa of Nigeria, all left me amazed. I know there were many more marvelous plays and players, but I mention only these because I saw them in several games. I know, also, that I don't know enough about football to understand the finer points of passing and set pieces and, therefore, do not fully appreciate the methodical and essential performances of many excellent players.

At another level, there were some highly dramatic performances. There are any number of players who could be mentioned in this category, but the two who are without peer are Renaldo and Neymar. The category is acting, overacting, or best actor in a melodrama. Take your pick. When watching Renaldo doubled over in pain, or with severe pain written all over his face, it was surprising to see him a picture of health and fitness within less than thirty seconds of his career threatening injury. Even more surprising was seeing Neymar able to move at all after the beating he took from a slight brush with an opposing player. Do you believe in miracles?

This is nothing unusual in contact sports. If you watch the NHL or the NBA you see this sort of thing in every game. What is special with Renaldo, Neymar, and other World Cup dramatists is the extremes of their acting.

This brings up another point. What constitutes a foul in football? How does a referee know when to call or not call a foul for exactly the same offense? Or not to call a foul when one is obvious, and call one when there is none? The only answer I have to these troublesome questions is that they are trained by the same teachers as the NBA and NHL referees. The basic rule for all is "randomness," or rather a "studied randomness," and that may be the only rule.

Finally, I want to compliment FIFA on going to the use of replay. This has been an improvement long needed in the game. Now FIFA must turn its gaze to electronic technology. FIFA rulers seem to have missed the fact that the game clocks can be stopped when needed, that these clocks can be controlled by an on-field official, and that the beauty of this is that everyone in the game, at the game, or watching on their electronic device will know, at all times, exactly how much time remains in the game.

Is there anything sillier than to hear someone say there is six minutes left in the half, except for the time that will be added by the referee? This may be anything from one to six minutes, or more. The catch is that once you know how much time is added, you still don't know how much time remains because the time posted is only approximate. The real time is only known by the referee who keeps the time on his watch, and he is not revealing this information.

This sounds like a comedy skit. It is not. It is the way FIFA keeps time without keeping up with the times.

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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