The World’s Game Is Not Just A Game

Why soccer matters so much everywhere but here.

By Simon Kuper

Nearly 1994, Osama bin Laden spent three months in London, where he visited supporters and bankers and went to watch the famous soccer club Arsenal four times. Before returning to Sudan just a step ahead of being extradited to Saudi Arabia, he bought his sons gifts from the club’s souvenir shop. His affection for the game did not stop him from getting involved in a plot to massacre the American and British teams at the 1998 World Cup in France; still, bin Laden told friends he had never seen passion like that of soccer fans.

This seems to have been a common view inside Al Qaeda. On the videotape the Department of Defense released in December of bin Laden reminiscing with a foreign sheik about the Sept. 11 attacks, soccer crops up twice. The first time, bin Laden recalls a follower telling him a year earlier: “I saw in a dream, we were playing a soccer game against the Americans. When our team showed up in the field, they were all pilots!” In the dream, Al Qaeda won the game.

On the same videotape, another Qaeda member recounts watching a television broadcast of the World Trade Center attacks. “The scene was showing an Egyptian family sitting in their living room. They exploded with joy. Do you know when there is a soccer game and your team wins? It was the same expression of joy.”

Bin Laden and his henchmen had hit on a truth about soccer. The sport, which in the U.S. is chiefly a placid entertainment for children, arouses in the rest of the world collective passions that are matched by nothing short of war. And unlike any other sport — indeed, unlike almost any cultural phenomenon — soccer is distinguished by its political malleability. It is used by dictators and revolutionaries, a symbol of oligarchy and anarchy. It gets presidents elected or thrown out, and it defines the way people think, for good or ill, about their countries.

The World Cup, which begins on Friday in Japan and in South Korea, will be watched by billions. The spread of satellite dishes has taken the world’s best teams to the farthest-flung places. People in Shenyang or Khartoum, who have no idea that Manchester is a town in England, now support Manchester United. A statue of the team’s star, David Beckham, adorns a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. Osama bin Laden, if he is alive, will presumably be among those billions sitting in front of the television, and all of them, with the exception of most Americans, will appreciate the roiling political context in which the game is so often played.
In Italy, as in most countries that are not the United States, a soccer match is a combination of national holiday and call to arms.

Photographs by Lyle Ashton Harris

Leaders everywhere attach themselves to soccer. In 1986 Silvio Berlusconi, then an Italian media mogul, took over his favorite club, AC Milan, which was struggling to surmount a 1979 bribery scandal. By 1989 Milan was rich, organized and champion of Europe. Berlusconi then founded the political party Forza Italia (named after a soccer chant), called his candidates the Azzurri (“the Blues,” nickname of the national team) and in 1994 got himself elected prime minister. The far-right Austrian politician Jörg Haider has buffed up his image as a regular guy by presiding over the FC Kärnten soccer club; Brazilian politicians habitually campaign in shirts of favorite clubs; and in British local elections this month the town of Hartlepool, given its first chance to elect a mayor, rejected the ruling Labour Party candidate in favor of the local soccer team’s mascot, a man in a monkey suit.

But perhaps the best place to observe the interplay of soccer and politics today is Argentina, whose national team has won two World Cups and is the joint favorite with France to win this one, and whose economy is plunged into a depression deeper than that of the U.S. in the 1930’s.

On a gray English day last November, a mustachioed Argentine multimillionaire named Mauricio Macri visited Oxford University. Like Berlusconi in Italy, Macri took over a struggling soccer club — Boca Juniors from Buenos Aires, which became for a time the best in Latin America. Now, seven years later, Macri has decided to enter politics, and over a lunch of soggy chops, he explained that he would first try for governor of Buenos Aires, and after that, who knew?

A month after this conversation, the Argentine peso collapsed. The country’s middle class was ejected into the third world, four presidents fell in a fortnight and demonstrations erupted against Argentina’s politi-
occer, according to an old quasi-Marxist notion, is the opium of the people, used by rulers to manipulate the masses. Certainly rulers try. Benito Mussolini often posed with Italy’s soccer stars — world champions in 1934 and 1938 — and the balcony scene with the team has become a global ritual.

The Nazis never managed to use the game to their advantage, remaining forever flummoxed by soccer’s unpredictability. After Germany lost 2-1 to Switzerland on Hitler’s birthday in 1941, Goebbels ordered “that above all no sporting exchanges be made when the outcome is at all in doubt.” When Germany then lost at home to Sweden in 1942, he reportedly commented: “One hundred thousand have left the stadium depressed; and as a victory in this football match is closer to these people’s hearts than the conquest of some city in the East, such events should be prohibited in the interest of the internal mood.” Two months later Nazi Germany ceased playing internationals.

It is a rare dictator who ignores soccer. Various members of the Ceausescu family adopted their own Romanian clubs; Saddam Hussein’s son Uday has had Iraq’s players tortured after crucial defeats; Stalin’s secret police chief Lavrenti Beria, honorary chairman of Dynamo Moscow, had players of rival clubs sent to Siberia. Even Britain’s prime minister Harold Wilson partly blamed England’s surprise defeat in the World Cup for his surprise defeat in the general election of 1970 a few days later.

But rulers do not have soccer to themselves. Like the ball itself, the game is always being contested. It can just as easily be used by masses against rulers, particularly in places where the masses have few other means of expression — for instance, in the new American hunting grounds of the gulf and the Middle East. If the Bush administration wants to track the undercurrents in countries like Iran, Libya or Afghanistan, it must follow soccer.

“The last display of public discontent and resentment towards the [Libyan] government,” reported the U.S. State Department in 1999, “occurred when a riot broke out over a penalty called at a soccer match in Tripoli on July 9, 1996. The rare instance of public unrest began when a contentious goal was scored by a team that Qaddafi’s sons supported and the referee called the play in their favor.”

Fans started chanting anti-Qaddafi slogans, whereupon the ruler’s sons and their bodyguards began shooting (some say at each other), and the crowd stampeded out onto the streets. The government later admitted that eight people had died, while others spoke of up to 50 deaths.

The man who has given Libyan soccer its particular piquancy is Al Saadi Qaddafi, the colonel’s soccer-mad son. Al Saadi, who this year persuaded his father to buy a stake in the great Turin club Juventus, not only supports and finances the Libyan team Al Ahli but also has often played for it. This means that the only place in Libya where tens of thousands can gather to oppose a symbol of the regime is the stadium at Al Ahli matches. When a donkey wearing a team shirt with the No. 10 was kicked onto the pitch during one game last season, everyone understood that it represented Al Saadi.

The game probably matters even more in Iran, a state gripped in recent years by what has been called “a soccer revolution.” This began in 1997, when the Iranian team beat Australia to qualify for the ‘98 World Cup. Thousands of women broke into the stadium to join the celebrations, some removed their veils and, at street parties across the country, men and women danced and kissed, defying government warnings and clerical taboos.

Last fall, as Iran again looked as if it would qualify for the World Cup, the street parties resumed. Initially the fans just seemed to be expressing national pride, but in some towns the mood changed. Fans attacked state-owned banks and other public buildings, chanting, “Death to the Mullahs.” There were even chants in support of the exiled monarchy. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, were arrested over several nights.

Eventually Iran had only to beat tiny Bahrain, a team it should have dominated to qualify for the World Cup. The tournament would have brought weeks of street parties and demonstrations. So when Iran lost the game 3-1, rumors abounded in Tehran that the mullahs had pressured the players to lose, in what may be a unique case of a regime wanting its national team to fail. No one knows, but Iran’s forwards appeared so unwilling to try to score that at one point the Iranian television commentator exclaimed, “Why doesn’t someone shoot that ball?”

In November, in a playoff against Ireland, Iran failed in its last attempt to reach the World Cup. Nicola Byrne, an Irishwoman who was among the 40 or so women admitted to the Tehran stadium by special dispensation of the Iranian authorities, would later report in London’s Observer, “Under an enormous mural of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranians ripped out and set fire to seats, tore down banners depicting images of the country’s senior mullahs and trashed the wind screens of several hundred cars outside.”

In countries like Iran, soccer fandom is replacing cigarette smoking as the iconic image of Western youth culture. A British friend of mine was approached on the street in the Iranian town Isfahan last fall by a student who bombarded him with questions: “You are from England? After Israel and America, you are our biggest enemy. Don’t you think George Bush is the biggest terrorist of all for supporting Israel? Do you think Beckham should play on the right for Manchester United, or in the center?”

Simon Kuper writes for The Financial Times and The Observer and is the author of “Football Against the Enemy.”
When a donkey wearing a No. 10 shirt was kicked out onto the pitch during one game, everyone understood that it represented Qaddafi’s son.

Trying to answer at least the last two questions, my friend said: “Sure. On the right?”

“What?” said the flabbergasted student. “And Paul Scholes in the center?”

OF COURSE, THE POORER and more suppressed a country, the more the game matters. The coming World Cup will not revolutionize politics in Belgium, Sweden or the U.S., yet soccer has extra dimensions even in Western democracies. The national team is the nation made flesh. When people debate the style theirs should play — and in many countries this debate rages ceaselessly — they are often arguing about the kind of country theirs should be. Should Brazil play its traditional freelwheeling game and hang the rules, or should it adopt a more “machiavelic” European style? In England over the last 10 years, the soccer debate has strangely mirrored the political debate. While politicians argued over whether to ditch tradition in the shape of the pound and adopt the euro, in soccer the debate was about ditching the traditional muscular British game for a more cerebral European style.

The debate over the euro continues. But in soccer, the traditional English way failed. Its last exponent, Kevin Keegan, a great player of the 70’s, resigned as the national team’s manager after a home defeat to Germany in October 2000. He was succeeded by a studious-looking Swede, Sven Goran Eriksson, who got England playing thoughtful soccer that culminated in September in a 5–1 thrashing of Germany in Munich. (“Munich 1–5: Two World Wars and One World Cup,” say the T-shirts in English pubs.)

If Eriksson returns from the World Cup still a hero, he will have made a “yes” vote in any referendum on the euro that much more likely. This may sound absurd, but remember that when England plays a big World Cup match, half the population watches on television, while only a handful of economists even pretend to grasp the technicalities of the euro. For most people, the question of whether to join the currency boils down to gut feelings about the vague concept of “Europe.”

The U.S. would seem to be immune to the social resonances of soccer, given that the game struggles even to make the papers here. More than 15 million Americans play soccer, yet the average Major League Soccer match draws only 15,000 people, and no American player is a household name.

“Small” soccer thrives in the U.S. without “big” soccer. This looks like a paradox. Indeed, many proponents of the American game fear it is unsustainable, and that grass-roots soccer will die unless M.L.S. takes off. But the truth is that soccer has succeeded as a suburban kids’ game precisely because there is no big American pro league. It appeals to suburbanites because it is free of certain aspects of modern America: it is not violent, not drenched in money, not dominated by men and not very African-American. Instead of Shaquille O’Neal or Allen Iverson, American pro soccer features lots of white college boys drawing modest salaries.

The game in the U.S. has become shorthand for happy families. A typical ad, which once might have taken baseball as a symbol of upper-middle-class values, now features a smiling child kicking a ball, with a text that begins: “While Jessica takes an afternoon off to focus on scoring goals, her parents’ Financial Advisor at Merrill Lynch focuses on meeting her family’s goals.” The American game has come to be seen as a protective mother’s heaven: nonviolent, suitable for children and female-friendly. In no other country but the U.S. is the women’s national soccer team better known than the men’s.

Over the next five weeks, billions of people across the globe will be waking in the middle of the night to watch their teams play on TV. Business will close, televisions in cafes and bars will be constantly tuned to the games, whole nations will be focused on soccer above all else. Of the 32 countries represented, only one will largely ignore the World Cup: the United States. Indeed, Americans barely know their team is playing. For foreigners, meanwhile, the World Cup is the one time that they get to treat the U.S. like a lightweight.

Such is the anonymity of the American men’s team that few people know how close it came to tragedy at the previous World Cup, in France in 1998. European police have never said much about the terrorist plot they rolled up two weeks before the competition kicked off. The plot was revealed when seven members of an Algerian terrorist group were arrested in a raid on a house in Belgium on March 3, 1998. On May 26, the police launched raids on dozens of suspects’ homes. Nearly 100 people were taken in for questioning. “It was a matter of urgency,” said a French government spokesman later that day: “Now we can approach the World Cup more serenely.”

Many Algerian terrorists had served in Al Qaeda. Bin Laden, his biographer Adam Robinson said, funded and helped organize the plan when it was presented to him, and agreed to offer additional funding and arms, in addition to the Algerians sending key personnel for expert training in Al Qaeda camps.” Robinson says that the attack was to take place on June 15, when England was playing Tunisia in Marseille. The plan was to massacre English players on the pitch, then burst into the hotel where the American players would be watching the game and murder them.

Another bin Laden biographer, Yosief Bodansky, writes that the plan had reactivated “dormant terrorist networks.” He says one reason that Al Qaeda bombed the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, killing 224 people, was “the failure of the primary operation, an attack on the soccer World Cup.”

Bin Laden may have no profile in soccer today beyond a song heard occasionally earlier this season from the Arsenal stands — “He’s hiding near Kabul/He loves the Arsenal/Osama/Oh oh oh oh” — but he has already transformed the coming World Cup. He and other terrorists know that the World Cup is the place where they can make their biggest mark. Why, they will be powering up the generators and gathering behind the neighborhood’s one TV set to watch it themselves.

But it is more likely that the tournament will be what it always is: a carnival of peoples, the one place where Swedes, Russians, Tunisians and Ecuadorians will hug and kiss and swap shirts on neutral soil. Even Americans will be allowed to join the party. If the U.S. forward Clint Mathis scores a beautiful goal, Iranians, Iraqis and Libyans will rave about it. Soccer has many uses, and one of them, fleeting as it may be, is universal love.