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### Soccer vs. The Big Four

In sports culture it is apparent that the big four North American sports are very different from soccer. While the rules are obviously very different in these sports, the essence of soccer through its history and culture truly distinguish it from the other sports. The big four sports tend to have frequent pauses in the action, use a multitude of numbers and statistics and create a much more relaxed environment for fans. Soccer possesses precisely the opposite qualities: it has almost no interruptions, it is low scoring with few statistics, and the intense environment it creates for fans can lead to death and serious injuries. As a result of these differences, soccer will likely continue to struggle to make its way into the North American sports space because it lacks the qualities that Americans seem to enjoy in sports.

When watching or attending any one of the big four sports, one of the most noticeable qualities that they all share is frequent pauses in the action. Whether it's a television break, a timeout, between quarters or innings, fans have numerous opportunities to get up to use the restroom, grab food from the concession stand, or merely take their focus off of the game for awhile. These pauses significantly eliminate tension while watching these sports because even in intense moments at the end of games, there are opportunities for fans to take a breath and relax a little bit. This is not the case in soccer. Soccer is a sport with very few pauses and with the exception of pausing for an injury, the only real break comes at halftime. For ninety minutes, the ball never seems to stop moving, creating continuous play in the process. This forces fans to be on the edge of their seats for the duration of the game and keeps tensions high. David Goldblatt describes this effect in his book *The Ball is Round* when he states, "The sound of a big football crowd baying its delight and its outrage had no counterpart. It is the continuous flow of football



that excites this sustained crescendo. That flow is based on motion, on the continuous making and breaking of patterns and spaces that so dazzled the man from *The Times* under floodlights; no still photograph, no graphic, no painting can do justice to this” (Goldblatt 401)<sup>1</sup>. While soccer’s continuous flow with few pauses create a more tense atmosphere than what is found with each of the big four sports, its low scoring nature also contributes to this environment, increasing the amount of differences between soccer and the big four sports which tend to be high scoring.

In any given soccer game, one goal can be enough for a team to be victorious, and in some cases games will end in a draw with no goals being scored at all. While the big four North American sports could all be decided by one score, there are very few instances where there is only one scoring play in these sports. This adds to the tension that is already present during soccer games because goals are often scored in a surprising manner and simply aren’t predictable. In the big four sports, scoring is extremely high with an average of nearly 11 runs per game in baseball, 42 points in football and 190 points in basketball. Hockey, the lowest scoring of the four still averages 60 shots per game (Greener)<sup>2</sup>. With so many scoring plays in these sports, a home run, a touchdown, or a goal in hockey is usually not decisive because there could very easily be another score to change the outcome of the game. Since this is precisely the opposite in soccer it adds to the emotion and tension because once a goal is scored that team could very easily become the winner. With such little scoring, statistics are not prevalent in soccer. By comparison, the big four sports are so numerically based and full of statistics that are shown nearly all day on ESPN. This obsession with statistics “requires not literacy, which might

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<sup>1</sup> Goldblatt, David. "Chapter 11." *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Soccer*. New York: Riverhead, 2008. N. pag. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Greener, Richard. "Why Americans Don't Like Soccer." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 01 July 2010. Web. 08 Apr. 2013.



have limited its appeal; rather, it demands what Patricia Cline Cohen and other historians of science refer to as numeracy” (Guttmann 54)<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, this obsession has also led to the creation of fantasy sports, where fans create a league in which they are owners of teams and have the opportunity to draft players of their choosing. From there, in the most common variant, the statistical performance of each player on a team is converted into points for owners to compete against each other. This has become a significant part of American sports culture and has even led to shows that are completely dedicated to fantasy sports. While baseball, football, basketball and hockey are all popular forms of fantasy sports, soccer is not, because it lacks the scoring and statistics necessary to be exciting for someone to follow. The prolific scoring that takes place in the big four sports provides a highly numerical environment where no single scoring play is decisive. This leads to a cerebral game that is more intellectually challenging and complex than soccer. In talking about numbers and comparing them, the language of the big four sports is very different, and there is less emotion involved (Markovits 3 Apr). In soccer, the lack of scoring does in fact make goals decisive, which makes the game even more intense and leads to a higher emotional capital and a lower margin of error (Markovits 3 Apr). All of this tension, coupled with the history and rivalries behind soccer, create a more violent environment than what is found in the other sports.

Soccer is a significant source of nationalism in many countries because of its history, which heavily contributes to making it a violent sport. European soccer clubs arose from non-market entities, and are actually part of a pre-modern formation because they are clubs that were often started out of religious or political organizations (Markovits 3 Apr). Since soccer is embedded into religion, politics and ethnicities, it tends to be more violent than American sports,

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<sup>3</sup> Guttmann, Allen. *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988. Print.



which were started as franchises. Because of the racism and empathy that was exhibited in America in the 1960's, racism has become taboo to use in sports, while racism is alive and well in European soccer (Markovits 3 Apr). Bill Buford, an American journalist described the violence he saw at soccer games in England, stating "The English fans abroad had established that if a very large number of people simultaneously break the law and act out of order, no one is likely to challenge them or stop them. ...he correctly identified the essential xenophobia of those crowds, a rabid insular nationalism that was just a few notches more extreme than the foreign policy of the most Europhobic government since the Second World War" (Goldblatt 552)<sup>4</sup>. The intensity of soccer fans during games creates a dangerous environment in which fans can be injured or killed. In fact, deaths have in fact happened on a large scale at soccer games because of the high tension and nationalism that is present at games. In 1989 at Hillsborough Stadium in England, during the FA Cup semi-final, 96 people were killed as a result of poor police control and fans misbehaving (Markovits 20 Mar). This event is just one of many tragic instances of death that resulted from the behavior at soccer games. Another reason for the more violent nature of soccer is the rivalries. In all American sports there are still rivalries, but not even close to the rivalries that are present in soccer. While there are seven teams in London, most cities in the United States only have one team that competes in a given sport (Markovits 3 Apr). In Brazil, there are city leagues in which there are rivalries between all of the teams in that city. This close proximity leads to increased hatred there as well. Additionally, Americans invest their emotional capital into multiple sports, while most Europeans have all of their emotional capital invested into soccer. This leads to a situation where soccer's importance is insurmountable. "Some people say that football is a matter of life and death, but it is much more serious than that" (Markovits 3

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<sup>4</sup> Goldblatt, David. "Chapter 14." *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Soccer*. New York: Riverhead, 2008. N. pag. Print.



Apr). Thus, winning important soccer games is a momentous event for countries. “In July 1998 a million people, perhaps two million, gathered in exuberant carnival mood in the Champs-Élysées, Paris, to celebrate the French national team’s victory in the world cup final...Football had been elevated to such giddy heights of cultural significance that the leading contender for the most powerful political office in one of the biggest European economies appeared more concerned with (and more knowledgeable of) the tactics of the national team coach than the multiple intersecting fiscal, legal and political crises dragging the nation down” (Goldblatt 687-8)<sup>5</sup>. This is not the case with president or other forms of leadership in the United States, in part because there are four sports that people cheer for instead, which lessens the significance. Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman describe this by stating, “The magnitude of such celebration has become commonplace in the setting of the champions in The Big Three and hockey, it continues to remain unthinkable for soccer in North America (Markovits and Hellerman 215)<sup>6</sup>. While the World Cup is of great importance to these soccer countries, in the United States the World Cup and other national sporting events are not of much importance at all. During the World Baseball Classic, the sport referred to as America’s pastime, very few fans watched and most of the best players declined to even participate for the United States. This is also the case for the other big four sports where “what matters to fans are domestic events, games, and championships while the international dimensions are all but insignificant” (Markovits and Rensmann 124-5)<sup>7</sup>. Even though baseball doesn’t have the sense of nationalism that soccer has, “baseball as a culture still thrives by virtue of its long tradition and history...soccer, on the other

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<sup>5</sup> Goldblatt, David. "Chapter 17." *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Soccer*. New York: Riverhead, 2008. N. pag. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Markovits, Andrei S., and Steven L. Hellerman. *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Markovits, Andrei S., and Lars Rensmann. *Gaming the World: How Sports Are Reshaping Global Politics and Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. Print.



hand, lacks a similar cultural conduit. Though soccer's proliferation at the recreational level in the United States has been quite prolific, its deficiencies in this context prevent its full utilization for complete entry into the American hegemonic sports culture" (Markovits and Hellerman 174)<sup>8</sup>.

The big four North American sports and soccer having glaring differences from one another, both through their rules and their essence. Soccer's continuous play and low scoring nature differ greatly from the high scoring American sports that are full of statistics. Since soccer clubs arose from political and religious reasons, while American sports started as franchises, soccer is more violent and tense when compared to American sports. The lack of other sports in the sports space of these countries cause the emotional capital to be very significant in soccer, while it is spread out amongst the four sports in the United States. With the culture defined the way it is in both soccer and the big four sports, it is unlikely that we will ever see immense nationalism for the US men's soccer team in future World Cups, while it will continue to be the most important thing in the lives of people living in soccer countries. Simply put, "American soccer has a very narrow and treacherous cultural space to navigate" (Markovits and Remsmann 122)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Markovits, Andrei S., and Steven L. Hellerman. *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Markovits, Andrei S., and Lars Rensmann. *Gaming the World: How Sports Are Reshaping Global Politics and Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. Print.