Why Is Soccer Becoming Popular in the U.S.?

By Franklin Foer

Left: Players vie for the ball during the girl's high school soccer semifinals in Beckley, West Virginia. Soccer is as popular among U.S. girls as among boys. Over 40 percent of U.S. soccer players are women, and soccer is the most popular women's sport in college. *©AP Images/Bob Bird* Right: Boys compete for acceptance to the Chicago Fire Soccer Club's Youth Development Academy. Of the 18 million Americans who play soccer, 78 percent are under age 18. Youth soccer is played at school and in leagues run by volunteer organizations. *©AP Images/Mark Humphrey*

Almost every child in the United States now plays in youth soccer leagues.

Soccer is one of the great businesses of the world. Players are bought and sold at tremendous expense; television rights to games cost billions of dollars; every major global corporate brand wants to attach its name to this phenomenon. This is, in one view, an opportunity that the United States should greedily covet. Yet, where are the North Americans?

For several generations the United States has been the curious exception to the world's mania for the beautiful game. Sure, North Americans have momentarily thirsted for soccer, as when they imported Pele to play for the New York Cosmos. But even that experiment ended badly, with the North American Soccer League ingloriously folding in 1984.

And the North Americans weren't just passively resistant to the charms of the game. For a time, they were downright hostile. You could tune into sports radio and find the shock jocks heaping disdain on soccer, describing it as a communist incursion on our shores. Back in the

1990s, Representative Jack Kemp, who once ran for the Republican presidential nomination, took to the floor of Congress to denounce the game: "[A] distinction should be made that football is democratic, capitalist, whereas soccer is a European socialist [sport]." Or as one columnist for *USA Today* wrote: "Hating soccer is more American than apple pie, driving a pickup, or spending Saturday afternoon channel surfing with the remote control."

Why should there have been such widespread ill will towards the sport? To understand this story, we must jettison some of the conventional wisdom about the United States. In the traditional telling, the United States exports its culture to the world through the likes of Hollywood movies, "Baywatch" and McDonalds [see the Department of State publication Pop Culture versus Real America]. Those forces are simply irresistible, trampling every indigenous culture they encounter. There's obviously some truth in that version, but it's not the whole story.

Franklin Foer is the author of *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* and is editor-at-large of *The New Republic* magazine. *Courtesy of Franklin Foer*

With sports, the United States has its own customs and cultures, developed in isolation from the rest of the world. We play baseball and our own peculiar version of football. These games are very much part of the fabric of U.S. life, a vehicle for the transmission of values and heirlooms passed down through the generations. They are also threatened by soccer's arrival.

Almost every child in the United States now plays in youth soccer leagues, a boom that has come very clearly at baseball's expense. Television ratings for baseball have declined over time for many reasons — but, in no small measure, due to the toll that youth soccer has inflicted on Little League baseball, a critical gateway for new fans. These growing hordes of children chasing after balls on Saturday mornings has been accompanied by several decades of immigration from the soccer-playing world — a demographic combination that has made the United States the single most promising growth opportunity for soccer on the planet.

In short, we are witnessing the globalization of the United States — multinational corporations and big media are all pushing for soccer's success here, even if it comes at the expense of our national pastimes. These sorts of transitions are always painful and always provoke angry reactions.

But those reactions won't last long. Soccer may have already passed a cultural tipping point here. U.S. players have begun to flood the ranks of European teams. The Walt Disney Company — the owner of ABC and ESPN — is deeply invested in the promotion of the game. Its television networks broadcast the World Cup in spectacular fashion and now broadcast English Premier League games weekly. And U.S. billionaires have discovered the financial opportunity represented by the game. In recent years they have gobbled up shares of clubs like Manchester United, Arsenal, and Liverpool.

The United States is about to take its place in the global soccer community. The only question: Is the world ready?

Got a question about the U.S.?

Ask us using your phone.

Published July, 2011

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS