

Soccer - what's not to like?



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Just as Jerry Seinfeld's TV mother used to ask about him, I wonder about soccer—what's not to like? As I write this, the 2006 FIFA World Cup tournament has but one game to go. I'll be rooting for Italy because I have a close friend whose parents emigrated to the United States from there, and he's my only friend who has played the game enough to understand its subtleties. Besides, who can root for France?

At 47, I'm too old to have learned the game as a kid. My high school gym teacher would make us try soccer for maybe two or three classes a year and even that limited exposure bored us. I remember the general attitude was we'd rather be stuck inside playing "bombardment" (a.k.a. dodgeball) than kick a ball around. What fun is it if you can't hit someone!

But these days I'm coaching youth soccer for my kids' teams, although for my daughter's U-5 team last spring "coaching" would be a gross misrepresentation of the word. "Babysitter/snack provider" would be more appropriate. I must have done something right though because by the end of the season, the girls were actually playing the game (OK, playing in spurts but at least they'd stopped asking for snack in the middle of a match).

Despite the huge numbers of kids who are exposed to soccer now, the game's popularity nationally doesn't seem to be making much headway. I think it's because Americans, unlike most of our fellow earth-travelers, have so many options. I doubt if there's a hockey rink in Ghana or a BMX bike park in Syria. There's also the old "low-scoring-means-boring" argument, which is bunkum. Tell me you have never thoroughly enjoyed an American football game that ended with a score like 10-7?

You can't watch the World Cup without seeing why the rest of the planet enjoys the game so much. At its best, it is athletic, powerful, and dramatic. What's not to like?

More on World Cup: Ohio State's Pam Sherratt reported on the university's website (hcs.osu.edu) that all 12 German host cities' fields were renovated before the tournament. She wrote, "The sod for each stadium was grown in the Netherlands and Germany and consists of a 75:25 Kentucky bluegrass/perennial ryegrass mix. Plant breeders from the Royal Barenbrug Group were involved in the cultivar selection process, which must meet certain criteria, such as ball performance, wear tolerance, and color. Although the sod had been grown for a year, the window for establishing the sod in each stadium was short, with the German Bundesliga not finishing until mid-May and the first World Cup games played June 9. Selection of grass species, turf maintenance, and even mowing patterns for the tournament were determined by FIFA's Turf Competence Team, the German Turfgrass Society, and groundsmen from each of the 12 host stadiums." Glad to see they asked the "groundsmen"!

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