

Why Americans Just Won't Buy Into Soccer

by Joe Mulder

I've covered this topic before but it bears mentioning once again, as the World Cup gets underway and the national media – sports and otherwise – makes yet another futile attempt to shove soccer up the ass of the mainstream American public. The topic at hand is this: Americans don't, as a general rule, tend to care about soccer. I propose that it would be interesting to figure out why.

[Keep in mind that everything you are about to read will be poorly (if at all) researched, jingoistic, highly speculative and full of partisan bias. It will also probably all be correct]

First of all, just to get this out of the way, let's dispense with the notion that "the rest of the world" loves soccer. Indeed, in most of South America, Europe and Africa, soccer may well be the most popular sport. But take a quick glance at world population figures: the planet's four most populous countries – China, India, the United States and Indonesia – could more or less give a crap about soccer. That's a little over three billion people, or roughly 45% of the world.

So there's that.

My next point actually has to do with the topic of why Americans don't care for soccer. It's one I've made before but one that bears repeating: Americans don't care about soccer because America's best athletes don't play it. America's second, third and fourth-best athletes don't play it, either. Why would we really be all that interested in our sixth-stringers going against the best another country has to offer?

Imagine what America's World Cup team might possibly have looked like in, say, 1990 if every American boy grew up dreaming of World Cup glory the way they do in Italy or Brazil. Here's a fantasy roster I threw together, just for fun:

Randall Cunningham
Rickey Henderson
Barry Sanders
Kirby Puckett
Michael Jordan
Ken Griffey, Jr.
Deion Sanders
Ozzie Smith
Dominique Wilkins
Barry Bonds

I mean, on that team you could have thrown Ronald Reagan in as the goalie just for fun, and the U.S. still wins every match by at least ten. And that's if the other clubs even bother to come out for the second half. The "rest of the world" better *hope* the United States never really gets into soccer, or the World Cup will cease to be remotely

interesting or suspenseful.

[Honestly, who stops Kirby Puckett when he's barreling down the pitch, hell-bent for leather? Who out-jumps Dominique Wilkins on a corner kick? Nobody in Holland or South Korea, that's for damn sure]

What's more, the best athletes in the whole world tend to come from North America and the Caribbean, and those happen to be places where soccer isn't all that big (yes, I'm sure they play plenty of soccer the Caribbean. I say they worry more about track and field and baseball, but I don't feel like looking it up).

This one I can (quasi) prove: I don't know a ton about soccer but I imagine that raw speed and athleticism are very important traits in a player. So I went and took a look at the last five Summer Olympics to see where the gold, silver and bronze medalists in the 100, 200 and 400 meter races hailed from. As it turns out, of the 45 Olympic medals awarded in those events since 1992, a grand total of ten have gone to runners from outside of the U.S., Canada (another nation where soccer is a non-factor) and the Caribbean.

So when it comes down to it, most of the fastest guys in the world are from countries that don't really play soccer. Now, I'm not trying to convince anybody else *not* to like soccer; really, I'm not. But one reason that Americans aren't interested, perhaps, is that we like to see the best athletes compete, and perhaps we believe that the world's best athletes (most of whom, as it happens, belong to us) don't generally play soccer.

I suppose it's worth mentioning that soccer has experienced slight gains in popularity in the United States in recent decades. Tons of kids play soccer (though hardly any of them grow up to either play or watch it, so there goes that argument). Immigrants nowadays might like soccer more than native-born Americans (whereas, I suspect, a desire to assimilate used to prompt a lot of folks from generations past to learn to swing a baseball bat). Major League Soccer is expanding, and apparently healthier than ever (although, according to Wikipedia, only two of the sixteen teams turned a profit in 2009).

Fair enough. Soccer has made some inroads in the U.S. It's still nowhere near a major sport here, though. And do you want to know another big reason why some of us aren't interested? (and here's where it's going to get a little ugly...) You want to know why the typical mainstream American sports consumer won't get on board? Part of it might be because native-born Americans who *do* like soccer are generally pretentious douchebags.

Allow me a quick detour: during college a friend and I identified a phenomenon known as the "I Get That" Laugh. The "I Get That" Laugh is a conspicuously sharp, forced laugh that a member of an audience gives out not because he

thinks what he's just seen is funny, but because he's desperate to advertise to everybody else that he's clever enough to have understood and fully appreciated – probably more so than you did – the sophisticated bit of business he's just seen onscreen or onstage. And I went to film school, so believe me when I tell you that I'm a leading expert on the "I Get That" Laugh. Under oath, I may even be forced to admit that I have laughed an "I Get That" Laugh a time or two. Back in my late teens.

My point is this: for a native-born American, claiming that you're into soccer is the "I Get That" Laugh of sports fandom. And that's a turnoff.

I can't illustrate this any better than to point out a recent piece on Slate.com by one Daniel Gross, entitled "[The Loneliness of the American Soccer Fan](#)." Now, it's clear from his body of work that Daniel Gross knows much more about most things than I do (most especially finance, which seems to be his area of expertise. And I'll say this for him: at least he *has* an area of expertise. Some of us are still working on that). But in this one instance...

Put it this way: if one were assigned to put together a satirical parody of what the typical elitist left-wing American preppy hipster jerkoff would write about soccer, one could really just cut-and-paste Daniel Gross's Slate piece and call it a night.

[At this point, I should cheerfully acknowledge that it's entirely possible to be an elitist left-wing American preppy hipster and still *not* be a jerkoff at all. That describes some of my closest friends, in fact]

And like most American soccer "fans," Daniel Gross doesn't appear to be a fan of any other sport. Quite telling; do you know a lot of huge sports fans who only watch one sport, exclusively? Don't most of us keep tabs on at least two or three of the big ones, and then fill on the off-season gaps with whatever else is on? I mean, if you *really* like sports, that's what you do. Yet a glance at Daniel Gross's Twitter account and his Slate.com archive finds, in all of 2010, only two passing references to any other sport (one in which he mentions his son practicing Willie Mays-style catches, and one in which he mentions the Olympics. Which is the only sporting event more "rest of the world" than the World Cup, by the way). Seems like he's more of a soccer fan than a sports fan.

We Palin-approved Real Americans don't trust the whiff we get off of Daniel Gross, is what I'm saying. The whiff that suggests that if we all woke up tomorrow and somehow the vast majority of Americans were *really* into soccer, the Daniel Grosses among us would suddenly decide that they were really into cricket, or sumo wrestling.

We don't trust the guy who would imagine a one-way conversation with a soccer-clueless neighbor in which he

fantasizes, as Daniel Gross does, about saying:

"You know [Lionel Messi], the best player in the world? The mite from Argentina who moves faster with the ball than without it... who schools the opposition the way Michael Jordan used to... who plays for Barcelona, possibly the most awesome and elegant club in the world, a team that gives its shirt sponsorship to UNICEF *rather than selling it to some awful corporation?* You mean that guy?" [emphasis mine]

And that's the giveaway right there, isn't it? "A team that gives its shirt sponsorship to UNICEF rather than selling it to some awful corporation." See? By definition corporations are necessarily awful, no matter what.

That's who Daniel Gross is (at least in the conceit of this particular piece. Keep in mind that in real life I don't know Daniel Gross from Adam; I'm sure he's fine). He's That Guy. He's Corporations-Are-Evil Guy.

And the guy who really seems to believe that type of stuff? He magically turns out to be the guy who wants to sell you on soccer. This is the same guy who can't shut up about what a utopian paradise Canada is, although, curiously, when it's time to talk soccer (and only when it's time to talk soccer) his beloved Canada never seems to come up. *This* is the native-born American soccer fan. And if the rest of us sports fans in the USA are disinclined towards soccer to begin with, the fact that this type of guy embraces it in such a self-conscious and self-congratulatory manner only serves to reinforce our disinterest.

If you're a sports fan, the World Cup is too compelling to ignore. Much like swimming is, or gymnastics. For about a week, every four years. The World Cup is an athletic tournament unlike any other, and a sports fan would be somewhat foolish and petty to ignore it just because soccer happens to be less fun to watch than most of the other sports available to Americans. I'll watch the World Cup and enjoy it, or at least have it on in the background and enjoy it. But please, Mr. Lefty Hipster Jerkoff: stop selling soccer. We're not buying, and that's partly because of you.
