



FIFA

World Cup Analysis 2026: Mega events, media, and the politics of sport

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:

Dr. Mike Devlin, Dr. Alina Bernstein, Prof. Michael L. Butterworth
Prof. Younghan Cho, Dr. Danielle Sarver Coombs, Dr. Yoav Dubinsky
and Prof. Daniel Jackson

 The University of Texas at Austin
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Introduction

Dr. Mike Devlin

(PhD, University of Alabama) is a Regent's Teacher and Professor of Advertising at Texas State University.

Dr. Alina Bernstein

Senior lecturer at the School of Media Studies of the College of Management Academic Studies (COMAS) and the Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Prof. Michael L. Butterworth

Director of the Center for Sports Communication & Media, Governor Ann W. Richards Chair for the Texas Program in Sports and Media, and Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin.

Prof. Younghan Cho

Professor of Korean Studies in the Graduate School of International and Area Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies.

Dr. Yoav Dubinsky

Associate Teaching Professor in the Lundquist College of Business at the University of Oregon and the Operational Director of the University of Oregon Olympic Studies Hub.

Prof. Daniel Jackson

Professor of Media and Communications at Bournemouth

Events like the World Cup are more than just mega-sporting events – they reflect globalization, commercialization, access, identity, and politics. Nearly 100 scholars across the globe share this perspective, offering their thoughts and reflections in this report, revealing both the beauty of the world's game and the ugliness that mega-events like the World Cup can contain.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup was unlike any tournament before it. One word best encapsulates its legacy: more. More teams, more matches, more cities, more technology, and more commercial opportunity. Staged across Canada, Mexico, and the United States, it expanded not only in scale but also in its ambition to be the most memorable World Cup yet. The World Cup sought to transform a politically complicated continent into a shared sporting space where national differences could be celebrated and the beautiful game could unite fans and communities.

In many respects, it delivered on its ambition. We witnessed moments of joy, avid fandom, and long-held records broken. Fans were still the underpinning of the tournament's success. Supporters filled stadiums, streets, homes, public plazas, and social media feeds. Fans adopted unfamiliar teams (here's looking at you, Norway), rediscovered ancestral affiliations, and formed new allegiances. For several weeks, football provided encounters among strangers and celebrated a shared viewing space where millions were connected to the same event simultaneously.

Football is known as the world's beautiful game, yet the tournament's expansion also magnified the ugliness and contradictions associated with mega-events. A competition promoted through the language of universal access remained financially inaccessible to many communities asked to host it. A celebration of international mobility unfolded amid visa restrictions, border enforcement, and unequal freedom to travel. Claims of environmental responsibility and sustainability coexisted with continental distances, carbon-intensive transportation, and disposable merchandise.

As with many mega-events, tensions were especially visible in host cities, where the World Cup created opportunities for nation branding, tourism, diplomacy, and redevelopment. Yet it also raised questions and criticisms surrounding public expenditure, labor, accessibility, economic benefit, and debates over whether transportation and infrastructure investments created meaningful long-term benefits for host communities. Residents were forced to navigate changes in their daily commutes, and in some cases, faced financial burdens, some as seemingly minor as mandatory gratuities to reduce confusion for international visitors unfamiliar with U.S. tipping customs. While this may seem trivial in isolation, they call attention to the micro-level effects that mega-events can impose on host cities and their residents.

Beyond the structural and economic critiques, the tournament's political significance was equally evident beyond the field. The World Cup did not suspend global conflicts and unite the world; rather, it reorganized and represented conflicts in new ways, often through various frames fitting competing media agendas. War, immigration, nationalism, authoritarianism, and the political uses of mega-events were presented to audiences through athletes, supporters, news coverage, protest, and tournament organizers. The World Cup also provided governments with opportunities to pursue domestic and international political objectives through the World Cup.

The media environment was similarly complex. Broadcasters, journalists, governing bodies, creators, algorithms, and artificial-intelligence systems each competed to determine which version of the tournament became visible. Journalists documented its political, social, and economic contexts, while creators and influencers complicated traditional relationships among access, journalism, promotion, and audience engagement. Generative AI offered new ways to consume and discuss the tournament while simultaneously disrupting established models of sports journalism, even affecting predictions for every event. This no doubt presented an entirely new reason to watch the World Cup, by transforming the World Cup into a marketplace of bets, predictions, and financial propositions. Again, the core promise delivered was one of more – more branding, more digital commentary, more wagering, and an algorithmically mediated experience that provided more.

The tournament also revealed the limits of the World Cup's claims to inclusion. Without even addressing the inequity of who could afford to attend games versus those who could not, we witnessed other boundaries being challenged, blurred, and, at times, reinforced. For example, the visibility of women officials represented progress, yet the persistent language of the "first woman" showed how often equality is narrated as an individual exception rather than structural transformation. Even as the presence of women officials became increasingly normalized, gendered criticism and sexism continued to accompany their participation.

Identity continued to serve as a central point of discussion through the tournament. Athletes navigated contested ideas of national authenticity, while supporters moved among inherited, adopted, and shifting national identities. Disability access policies exposed the difference between symbolic inclusion and the material conditions that determine participation. In some instances, even caregivers faced financial penalties under policies ostensibly designed to facilitate inclusion. Succinctly stated, the World Cup celebrated representation, but visibility and equality were not always synonymous.

At the center of many of these contradictions stood FIFA. The organization transcends the roles of tournament organizer and rules enforcer. It is a commercial rights holder, a political actor, and global brand manager. Its rules shaped broadcasting, sponsorship, ticketing, merchandising, and stadium conduct—including the use of ticketing terms and stadium codes to protect sponsors and restrict ambush marketing. Its growth strategy generated unprecedented reach and revenue, leading critics to question FIFA's relationships among commercial interests, political power, and institutional governance. Betting markets, ambush-marketing protections, the environmental cost of apparel, and the continued concentration of presidential power demonstrate that the tournament's business structures help determine who benefits and which forms of participation remain possible.

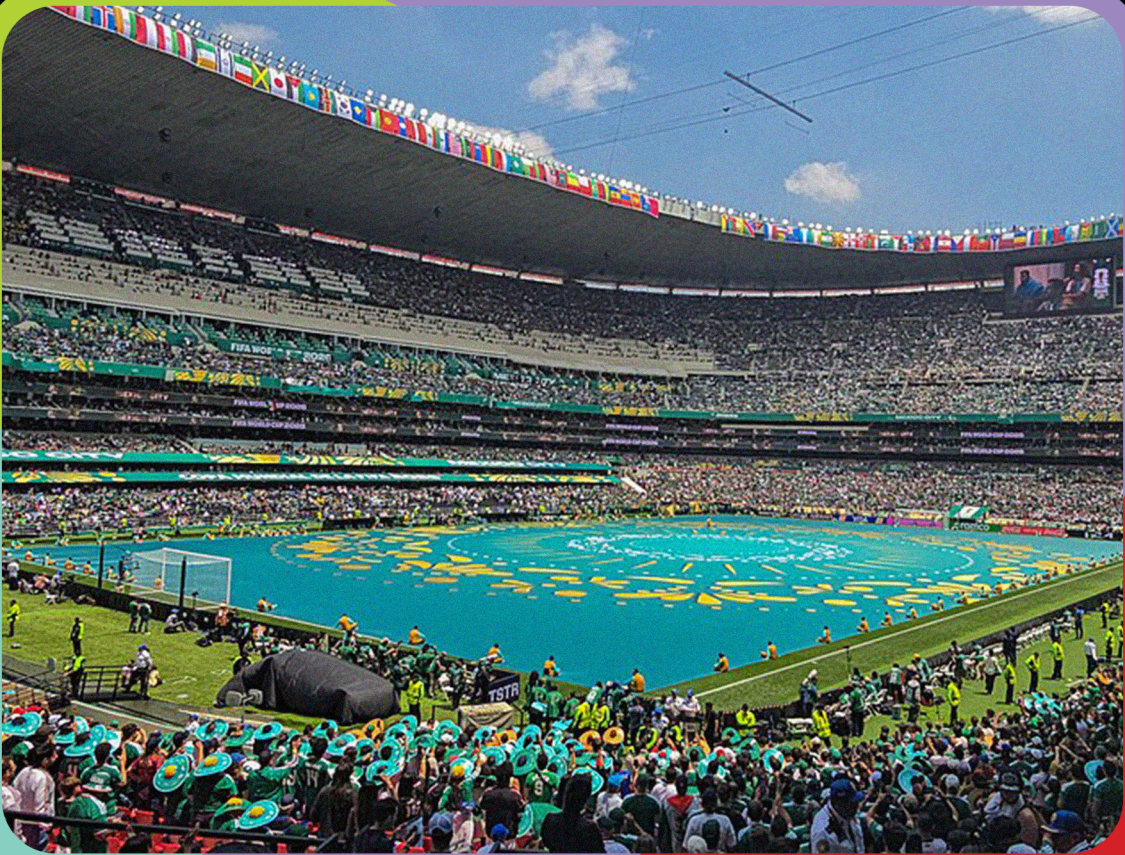
For many, the desire to set aside politics, inequality, and commercial excess is understandable. The World Cup as a celebration of global unity and an opportunity to watch the world's most beautiful game at the highest level, but scholars cannot dismiss questions of power, exclusion, equity, and access. After all, it is the world's beautiful game and should belong to us all.

How can these two identities coexist?

Contributors examining the politics of World Cup enjoyment and sportswashing suggest that neither position is sufficient in isolation. The joy was real. So were the exclusions. Collective celebrations mattered, even within a system structured to monetize them. The political uses of football did not erase the human connections the game produced, just as those connections did not absolve the institutions that profited from them.

This report examines these tensions through the immediate observations, research-informed reflections, and theoretical insights of scholars working across media and communication, sociology, marketing, political science, history, law, and policy. Its contributions move readers from host-city streets to television studios; from stadiums to social media platforms; and from expressions of national unity to acts of resistance. Together, they consider not only what happened during the 2026 FIFA World Cup but what the tournament made visible about sport, media, politics, commerce, and culture.

So yes, two identities can co-exist, and the authors of this report highlight the beauty of the world's game while honestly reflecting on all the ugliness that events like the World Cup reveal.



1

HOST CITY AND MEGA EVENTS

Nation branding, city diplomacy, and the 2026 FIFA World Cup: The missed opportunity

The 2026 FIFA World Cup in the United States, Mexico, and Canada is 180 degrees shift from the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup. From compact games in newly built stadiums that were within 1.5 hours of the capital Doha, to a competition spread across North and Central America, in 4 different time zones, where flying was needed between almost all games, and regularly crossing national borders that require visas. The legacy of Qatar 2022 is controversial and very much in the eyes of the beholders, reflecting a clash of cultures between the West and the Global South. Despite the sportswashing and greenwashing controversies of Qatar 2022, having competitions in close proximity made the tournament convenient to stakeholders. Yet, the USA, Canada, and Mexico, missed that lesson, leading to an extremely expensive FIFA World Cup that was also described as the most polluting one ever.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup was the biggest tournament to date, with 48 competing teams, spread across three countries in North and Central America. Mexico is a passionate football country, who hosted the FIFA World Cup in 1970 and 1986, and the Azteca Stadium is one of the most iconic venues to the sports brought authenticity to the game. Yet the coverage of the tournament also shed light on protests over social, economic, and political struggles. Brand America brought marketing and revenues into the tournament, leading to unprecedented revenue generations. Yet, the organization also faced criticism over dynamic pricing that priced out many fans, and commercialized hydration breaks that impacted the field of play and de-facto made the two halves into four quarters. The USA, who previously hosted the 1994 FIFA World Cup, was further criticized over immigration and visa policies, and the war with Iran that impacted the travel and preparations and potentially the performance of the Iranian team. Canada hosted Olympic Games and the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, but at least on the men's side, was considered a developing football country. Thus, at least from a branding perspective, the authenticity of Mexico, the financial orientation of the USA, and developing football in Canada, had a country image and nation branding narrative the 2026 FIFA World Cup could have built upon.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup took place during America 250, so there was a bigger story to tell through experiencing Middle and small-town America through the competition. Yet, the planning missed that opportunity. Due to the constant need to fly, even coast-to-coast or regional road trips have been looking for America and experiencing the U.S. though country roads were not feasible. Most of the experience beyond the big host cities were through the base camps of the competing teams. On the other hand, cities

had their own city diplomacy, marketing plans, and branding initiatives. Seattle, a progressive liberal city, who had the USA play Australia on Juneteenth, held the Pride Game which featured Iran and Egypt (two countries that discriminate against the LGBTQ community), emphasized sustainability, community outreach, and some connection to indigenous culture in the region. Yet, fans, delegations and media, needed to fly after each game, were rarely exposed to a larger American story, to the State of Washington or to the majestic Pacific Northwest. And that could be said amid most host cities.

The organization of the games were in high standards, and despite fears of extreme weather or gun violence, fans appreciated the modern stadiums and shared ample memes of experiencing American culture and food such as Waffle House, ranch sauce, or just large portions of soda cups or BBQ dishes. Most host cities had fan zones and areas with restaurants fans visited and enjoyed, yet despite the stadiums reaching capacity, there was also disappointment that due to the high-ticket prices and overall travel costs, fewer foreign or out-of-state visitors came. Beyond the host cities, the World Cup was not necessarily financially or culturally felt across America.

A more inclusive and sustainable hosting model would focus on hubs: dedicated cities or regions with at least two stadiums to host a group stage each, four hubs with larger stadiums will host 8 teams that compete between themselves in rounds 32, 16, and quarter finals knockout stages, and a last hub that hosts the final four. The USA alone has over 100 professional and collegiate stadiums in over a dozen cities or regions that meet FIFA's capacity regulations for the group stage (to name a few to pick from: Seattle, San Francisco, Phoenix, Houston, Detroit, Boston, Salt Lake City, Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Orlando, Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, New York/New Jersey, Washington DC/Maryland and New Orleans). Mexico and Canada would create their own hubs for the group stages. Rounds 32, 16 and the quarter finals could take place in four hubs with at least two large stadiums of 60,000 capacity such as Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, and Washington DC/Maryland, and the final four in New York/New Jersey. Just as an example.

Such a model does not require frequent travel and crossing national borders, reduces costs for the fans, make the competitions greener, give more countries opportunities to experience the games and enjoy a larger economic impact on the region. Such a sustainable model for future hosts could have been the legacy of the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Instead, the largest FIFA World Cup became a missed place branding opportunity.



Dr. Yoav Dubinsky

Associate Teaching Professor in the Lundquist College of Business at the University of Oregon and the Operational Director of the University of Oregon Olympic Studies Hub. His interdisciplinary research focuses on sports, nation branding and public diplomacy. Author of "Nation Branding and Sports Diplomacy: Country Image Games in Times of Change" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), and "A New Olympic Era: Navigating Socioeconomic, Geopolitical, and Environmental Complexities" (Routledge, 2026).

Email: yoavd@uoregon.edu

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yoavdubinsky/>

Looking for America at the 2026 FIFA men's World Cup



Prof. David Rowe

*Emeritus Professor of Cultural Research, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, with honorary positions at Bath, Beijing Foreign Studies and London Universities. An interdisciplinary social science and humanities scholar regularly contributing to (inter) national print, broadcast and online media, David's latest book (co-authored) is *Playing on the Edge: Sport, Society and Culture in Asia and Oceania* (2026, Peter Lang).*

Email: d.rowe@westernsydney.edu.au

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/david-rowe-7a090b15](https://www.linkedin.com/in/david-rowe-7a090b15)

Bluesky: [@davidroweics.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@davidroweics)

X/Twitter: [@rowe_david](https://twitter.com/rowe_david)

In 1968, when the Summer Olympics took place in Mexico City, the song 'America' was released by Simon & Garfunkel. It has been covered by many artists since, including once-Young American David Bowie at the famous sport and music venue Madison Square Garden during the post-September 11 Concert for New York City in 2001.

'America' is a haunting road song about searching for the soul of the USA, later co-host of the 2026 FIFA men's World Cup. The musical journey begins with a hitchhike from the de-industrializing city of Saginaw, Michigan, home of the Saginaw Township Soccer Association. It ends on a Greyhound bus that left Pittsburgh and passed along the New Jersey Turnpike, coincidentally towards New York New Jersey Stadium, venue of this World Cup final.

Songwriter Paul Simon's 'America' necessarily did not incorporate co-hosts Mexico and Canada. Although technically under the jurisdiction of the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF), the World Cup is exclusively a North American affair dominated by the USA, which contains 11 of its 16 venues.

To play a little mind game, what if a group of football fans of indeterminate national origin was on a Simonesque quest for the existential meaning of Trump's America during the World Cup? This land-based journey might have begun at Mexico City's Estadio Azteca as the home team played South Africa, hosts of the first Africa-based World Cup in 2010. Our mobile spectators could also travel to Guadalajara (a venue of previous World Cups in 1970 and 1986) and Monterrey (1986 only) for other Mexico-based matches.

Staying in that country might not have been a matter of choice if US border officials denied our sport tourists entry on grounds of living in one of dozens of banned or heavily restricted countries, including four taking part in the World Cup. Having non-White skin and/or an accent not routinely heard on USA news media networks would justifiably make them nervous about being accused of criminal intent in an environment hostile to migrants. Until a late apparent change of heart, they might even have been turned away if unflattering comments about current US President Donald J. Trump were discovered on their mobile phones.

Let's assume that our imaginary World Cup fan troupe overcome such obstacles and venture legally into the USA. They could head towards Dallas, Houston, Kansas City and Miami for games in 'red' states or in 'purple' state host city Atlanta. 'Blue' state Hotel California and Los Angeles was a safer option. Now inspired by the libertarian strain of late-20th century American culture, they applied *The Dice Man* decision-making logic, retracing Hunter S. Thompson's desert trip in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* only to find that, as in 1994, there was no World Cup game in Sin City.

Undeterred and under the bohemian influence of *On the Road* and *Easy Rider*, the football supporters re-grouped. Avoiding the heart of America, they travelled up the coast via the Big Sur of Jack Kerouac to take in World Cup games in San Francisco and Seattle en route to Vancouver. Escape to Canada would presumably be easier than the reverse, assuming that in the meantime it had not been annexed as the 51st State. In eschewing *The Call of the Wild* to the north, a long cross-continental ride to Toronto for a game followed. Our World Cup pilgrims then pushed their luck and sought re-entry to the USA for matches in 'blue' Boston and 'purple' Philadelphia, suppressing anxieties of being shadowed and intercepted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents.

Then, heading south to squander all their worldly possessions to witness the World Cup final in New Jersey, this peripatetic party paused to join the Fan Fest at the nearby American Dream shopping mall and entertainment complex. Perhaps their sojourn ended where 'America's' singer found himself, "lost" and "empty and aching" without "know[ing] why." Feeling *Lost in America* is a perennial cultural motif, not least when trying to find oneself during the world's biggest single sport event held in three countries jostling for position.

This World Cup travelogue is obviously a work of the imagination, but one based on the material reality that physical sport must always take place somewhere. For the vast preponderance of spectators – including the author – their experience of this tournament was systematically filtered by the screen media organizations paying FIFA enormous sums for the intellectual property rights to render it across time and space. Distant spectators were spared the pleasure and pain of the strictly rationed chance of 'being there', their audio-visually packaged World Cup action demanding noisy, inventive, colorful co-present football fans to make the spectacle. Sporting mega event economics requires fan-laborers to perform at their own (in this case exorbitant) expense for legions of unseen, unheard watchers dispersed across the globe.

Event-attending football fans voluntarily exploit themselves because they prize above all the unique mind-and-body experiences out of which narrative, myth, memory and fantasy are fashioned. When fictional and actual sojourners return to their everyday lives, there will be many travelers' tales of this North American World Cup. The usual football high/lowlights will be related, but of greater general interest will be their fine-grained intelligence regarding an America at war with itself and at odds with its fellow World Cup hosts, putative international allies, and declared enemies.

Reconsidering simplistic assessments of environmental harm

Headlines and expert commentary often describe the 2026 FIFA World Cup as highly environmentally damaging. With 48 teams, 104 matches, and 16 venues across three countries, the event's scale will produce more carbon emissions than previous tournaments, especially from travel. But that conclusion can be too blunt to capture the full complexity of how a global sporting event creates environmental impacts, or how those impacts can be reduced.

These claims are easy to make in an era of urgent climate concern. Still, they often flatten the realities of event design, operational choices, and the broader relationship between sport and the environment. The environmental footprint of any mega-event is significant and cannot be erased. Even so, a more careful view reveals real opportunities for mitigation that go beyond simple criticism. If the goal is improvement, the conversation should focus on practical, evidence-based solutions.

A key issue is how emissions are distributed. For events like the World Cup, much of the impact falls into Scope 3 categories: indirect emissions tied to spectator and team travel, accommodations, food systems, and consumption patterns. These are shaped not only by organizers, but also by market conditions, transportation networks, and the tournament's design. The long distances between host cities in 2026 will likely increase air travel and make the event especially carbon-intensive, but that does not mean nothing can be done. Smarter scheduling, regional match clustering, stronger public transit connections, and incentives for lower-carbon travel can reduce some of the burden.

North America's hosting model also deserves more careful evaluation than it often receives. Unlike tournaments that require entirely new stadiums or energy-intensive cooling systems, the 2026 World Cup will use many existing high-capacity venues, including NFL and MLS stadiums. Reusing infrastructure can reduce the need for new materials, lower construction-related emissions, and avoid waste associated with buildings that may be underused after the tournament ends. Relative impacts should therefore be assessed in context rather than through broad assumptions.

At the same time, these advantages do not make the event environmentally benign. Mega-events still strain resources and generate emissions in a world already facing severe climate pressure. Heat risks at certain venues, logistical complexity, and the scale of fan mobility all underscore the tension between global spectacle and ecological responsibility. FIFA and host organizations have committed to sustainability, but promises alone are rarely enough. Without rigorous accounting, especially for Scope 3 emissions, and without transparent, verifiable reduction targets, sustainability messaging can

become more symbolic than substantive. Offsets may help, but they are not a substitute for actual emissions reduction.

That is why data-driven planning matters. Genuine progress requires measurable goals, open reporting, and collaboration across stakeholders. Organizers, teams, broadcasters, cities, transit authorities, sponsors, and fans all influence the tournament's final footprint. When responsibility is shared, environmental management becomes part of the event's social contract. Large-scale sport events do not exist in isolation; they operate within infrastructure systems, political expectations, and public cultures that shape what is possible and what is prioritized.

These events can also function as platforms for innovation and awareness. If managed well, they can accelerate the adoption of renewable energy at stadiums, improve waste-diversion systems, strengthen sustainable procurement practices, and encourage fan engagement campaigns that last beyond the tournament itself. Sport has unusual visibility, and because it reaches such broad audiences, it can normalize pro-environmental behavior in ways that everyday policy messaging often cannot. Even if sport's direct contribution to global emissions is modest compared with transportation or energy production, its cultural influence can still be significant.

The challenge is to move beyond easy sound bites and toward pragmatic solutions. Environmental impacts are inherent to hosting a global spectacle of this scale. The responsible response is not blanket condemnation but targeted efforts to reduce what cannot be eliminated: refining travel policies, maximizing use of existing infrastructure, improving operational efficiency, advancing low-carbon technologies in facilities, and encouraging shared responsibility among all participants.

Critics are right to demand greater accountability from FIFA and its hosts. Yet academic and media commentary should also engage with complexity. That means contextualizing impacts, identifying trade-offs, and recognizing that better management can still produce meaningful improvements. Simplistic narratives may attract attention, but they risk obscuring the lessons future events could learn from this one.

The 2026 World Cup will carry a substantial environmental footprint, and future mega-events will do the same unless systemic changes are made. But that reality should motivate more responsible planning, not resignation. By taking sport ecology seriously and balancing cultural, economic, and social value with environmental limits, we can push international events toward more credible sustainability practices. The aim should be to replace performative commitments with strategic, evidence-based action that reduces harm where possible while acknowledging the limits of any single tournament in solving planetary problems.



Dr. Brian McCullough

is a Professor of Sport Management and Program Chair in the School of Kinesiology at the University of Michigan, where he also directs the Center for Sport & Sustainability. His research examines the bidirectional relationship between sport and the natural environment, with a particular focus on sport ecology, organizational sustainability strategies, and Scope 3 emissions in the sport sector. He has authored over 85 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, co-edited books on sport sustainability, and co-founded the Sport Ecology Group to advance research and education on these critical issues.

Email: brianpmc@umich.edu

X: [@mcculloughbrian](https://twitter.com/mcculloughbrian)

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/bpmcullough

Elevating the gritty city: Philadelphia and the World Cup politics of welcome



Zoe Tzanis

Zoe Tzanis is a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh and Graduate Research Fellow at the Communication Technology Research Lab (CTRL). They study how sports culture and industry adapts to emergent media technologies, and they have written extensively on media coverage of the 2022 World Cup and WNBA.

Email: zet21@pitt.edu

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/zoe-tzanis-105245222

Substack: [@zoetzanis](https://zoetzanis.substack.com)

A life-size cutout of a superhero called the #Phambassador greets you. Rocky Balboa and Gritty, the absurd Flyers mascot turned leftist icon, urge you to “keep punching” and herald Philadelphia for “it’s chaos.” Welcome to Philadelphia’s FIFA Fan Festival, an expansive outdoor venue built for watching and celebrating the World Cup. Surrounded by jumbotrons, music, and the smell of international cuisine, it feels like you could be anywhere. Except, as the banners remind you: here, you are a “phan,” smelling “philly phlavors” in a city where “making history” is “the usual.”

Philadelphia occupies a unique position in US political and cultural life. In 1776, the city hosted the signing of the Declaration of Independence and, subsequently, the dwelling of the country’s first president. As of 2026, however, Philadelphia is known as the city with the most belligerent sports fans, where, per US President Donald Trump, “bad things happen.” At the same time, Philadelphia is also a stronghold for left-of-center politics and a sanctuary city.

In 2026, Philadelphia was set to host significant portions of both the FIFA World Cup (WC) and the US’s 250th Anniversary (America250). Amid the celebrations, however, the city was embroiled in controversy. In January, Trump ordered the removal of all references to slavery at the memorial to Washington’s Philadelphia residence. City leadership sued, condemning the attempt to “whitewash American history.” Weeks before July 4th, a court denied Philadelphia’s suit, clearing the way for the federal government to publicly rewrite the city’s past, omitting its history of slavery.

This essay considers how Philadelphia, its WC host committee (PS26), and tourism industry portrayed the city at this juncture, and what values these portrayals championed. Named Philadelphia Soccer 2026 (PS26), the official WC committee included 14 Pennsylvania state, sports, and tourism leaders. Two members and tourism leaders were interviewed as part of this research. The combined WC and America250 promotion, I argue, praised Philadelphia’s fan culture in a way that simultaneously rejected and accepted Trump’s attacks on the city’s reputation and history. Philadelphia embraced its position as the birthplace of US nationhood while also championing itself as an international city committed to the diversity, pride, and inclusion underlying both WC and Philadelphia culture.

Pre-cup, PS26 ran “How Do You Phan?” a media campaign featuring soccer “phans,” such as a young player, convenience store shoppers, a barber, sports bar patrons, and chefs. Each scene welcomed people of different ethnicities, sketching out a city defined by working-class Black communities, Steven Starr kitchens, and fanaticism above all else. When the Cup began, PS26 highlighted Philly’s diverse immigrant communities in “Philly Welcomes the World,” a special campaign, where first- and second-generation Philadelphians sat for short interviews about their football fandom and immigration story from WC participant countries,

such as Ecuador, Brazil, and Haiti.

PS26’s promotional strategy embraced Philadelphia’s most demonized attributes (poverty, rowdiness, fanaticism) alongside its most celebrated ones (passion and cultural vibrancy). Rather than deflecting negative stereotypes, these ads reframed them, casting the city’s roughness and raucousness as the very source of its distinctive enthusiasm. This sentiment was confirmed by PS26 member and CEO of Visit Philadelphia Angela Val, who said the committee’s primary goal was to “elevate the City’s national and international brand, improve civic pride, community inclusion and investment.” PS26 did not intend to rebrand Philadelphia but, rather, embrace and raise its existing recognition to underscore the city as a site worthy of hosting Cup games. This effort continued as international fan bases took over city streets and dressed the Rocky statue in their team jersey. Again and again, PS26 celebrated their enthusiasm, reposting and welcoming each fanbase.

While PS26’s #phan branding answered Trump’s attacks on the city’s reputation, the committee’s other project was reclaiming Philadelphia’s founding history and linking the WC atmosphere to the American Revolution. In promotional material, PS26 routinely described the city as, per Gov Josh Shapiro, “where it all began,” the birthplace of America and the Declaration of Independence. It routinely interwove promotion for World Cup games and America250 festivities, seeing the events as reinforcing experiences reflective of what Philadelphia stands for: grit and passion. As many Philadelphians approached the 250th anniversary with frustration, unhappy with the country’s anti-immigration policies and drift toward authoritarianism, PS26 pitched the WC as a vessel for celebrating Philadelphia and imagining what America could still be at 250. As residents and visitors gathered for the France-Paraguay game at Lincoln Financial Field—drinking, watching, singing together—they celebrated a vision of America as a welcoming, immigrant-built nation, proud of its diversity and passion.

We could read PS26’s efforts as merely a financially driven response to two tourism opportunities, but that reading undersells the stakes. Although the Presidents House itself remained absent from PS26 promotion, the larger controversy over who gets to define Philadelphia’s history continued to surround and provoke the committee’s narrative. “Philadelphia’s historic landscape reflects both the ideals the country was founded upon and the contradictions within that history,” explained PS26 member and PA Deputy Secretary of Tourism Anne Ryan. “We don’t see that as something to avoid but as what makes the city meaningful and relevant.” PS26 made deliberate choices to place Philadelphia’s history beside joyful Black, Brown, and immigrant bodies and stories. It opened that history up to its most infamous residents, transplants, and first-time visitors alike, welcoming them into its vibrancy and complexities together.

The hidden price of welcome: Tipping, inequality, and mega-event hospitality

Perhaps the most revealing culture shock of the 2026 World Cup arrived after the meal for many international visitors to the U.S. The price displayed on the menu was not necessarily the amount ultimately paid, causing frustration and confusion among fans.

For many visitors, a tip is a small, discretionary reward because service is already reflected in both the advertised price and the worker's wage. In the United States, by contrast, a restaurant tip is formally voluntary but frequently operates as expected compensation. Digital payment screens have made this contradiction more visible. The same request can appear after full table service, at a coffee counter, or when a customer simply collects a stadium beer. Even Americans disagree about which prompts should be honored.

For example, Kansas City restaurant operators were already preparing for this point of friction. Several restaurants adopted or considered automatic gratuities or service charges of approximately 18 to 20 percent regardless of the number of people, seeking to protect workers' earnings from differences in international tipping practices. One business explained to the local media channel that the policy would cover every bill, avoiding the questionable task of identifying diners presumed to be foreign. Applying the rule generally was more defensible, although it transferred rather than resolved the misunderstanding. For guests who regarded the menu price as the total cost, discovering the additional charge only when paying could feel like punishment for violating a convention that had never been made explicit.

Moreover, mandatory service charges intended to accommodate a temporary influx of international visitors did not distinguish between tourists with substantial travel budgets and low-wage workers, students, or families who regularly relied on affordable local restaurants. Therefore, restaurants that adopted mandatory service charges placed an additional financial burden on local residents, especially those already living on limited incomes. The policy therefore shifted the burden of protecting workers' wages onto consumers, including marginalized residents who had played no role in creating the confusion surrounding international tipping practices. More broadly, it exposed a structural problem: when employers rely on customer payments (i.e., tipping) to provide adequate compensation, both workers and economically vulnerable diners absorb the costs of an unclear and unequal system.

Previous research highlights that tipping culture can also be a means for race and gender discrimination by both customers and waiters. However, there remains a scarcity of research examining how sport mega-events may influence discriminatory practices within tipping culture.

Although mandatory service charges are not equivalent to the forced evictions or housing displacement that occurred during this World

Cup in the U.S. and Canada – and are commonly associated with sport mega-events – they may represent a less visible form of everyday economic exclusion.

Research shows that mega-event development frequently concentrates benefits among businesses, investors, and affluent visitors while transferring social and financial costs to low-income residents, migrants, women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups. Reporting by the Associated Press found that most of the sixteen host cities are addressing homelessness through existing programs, with little or no new funding tied specifically to the World Cup. Additionally, in the context of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, tipping policies may reproduce this unequal pattern within ordinary spaces of consumption: restaurants protect revenue and workers' earnings by increasing customers' bills, while financially vulnerable residents face higher costs in their own communities.

Examining tipping during sport mega-events therefore extends the concept of displacement beyond physical removal to include economic and cultural displacement, whereby local residents may feel increasingly unable to afford, access, or comfortably participate in everyday hospitality spaces transformed to accommodate global visitors.

Preparing for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics

The better host-city response would be transparency in the future. Restaurants could explain before ordering that tax would be added to the listed price, identify any service charge, describe how it supported staff wages, and state clearly whether an additional tip was optional. Multilingual notices and a single policy for all diners would reduce confusion without turning perceived nationality into a pricing category.

Timing is especially important during a mega-event. Restaurants cannot expect repeat customers to learn local norms gradually. A visitor may eat only once in a particular establishment, order through a translated menu, and leave the city days later. A worker, meanwhile, may depend on the tournament's brief surge in business to offset slower periods. The familiar American workaround, explaining the system verbally, also falters in noisy rooms and across languages.

As global sporting attention turns from the 2026 World Cup to the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games, the more significant legacy question is not whether international visitors learned when and how much to tip. It is whether host cities learned to make the economics of hospitality intelligible to the global public they invited. A genuinely international welcome should not require guests to discover the true price of service only at the bottom of the bill.



Dr. Umer Hussain

Assistant Professor at Missouri State University's College of Business. His research explores the intersection of race, religion, and gender in sports.

Email: UmerHussain@MissouriState.edu



Dr. Steve Bien-Aimé

Associate Professor at the University of Kansas's William Allen White School of Mass Communications and Journalism.

Email: bienaime@ku.edu



Prof. Patricia Weems Gaston

Lacy C. Haynes Professor of Journalism at the University of Kansas's William Allen White School of Mass Communications and Journalism.

Email: patricia.gaston@ku.edu



Hanbo Liu

Doctoral Student at the University of Kansas's William Allen White School of Mass Communications and Journalism.

Email: liuh2@ku.edu

A Transit Hat Trick? Short-Lived Sustainability at the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup



Dr. Courtney M. Cox

*Associate Professor at the University of Oregon in the Department of Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies. Her work examines labor, identity, and technology through sport. She is the author of *Double Crossover: Gender, Media, and Politics in Global Basketball* (2025).*

Email: cmcox@uoregon.edu



Analise Pugh

PhD student in Indigenous, Race and Ethnic Studies at the University of Oregon. Her work examines migration, citizenship, and empire through soccer.

Email: apugh@uoregon.edu

In a country notorious for its suburban sprawl and car dependency, the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup represents an important site of public transportation possibility for not only the thousands of tourists flocking to stadiums across the United States but for everyday commuters maneuvering across their respective cities. FIFA requires host cities to provide public transportation but doesn't pick up the bill. Media outlets reported on these sudden public transit capabilities, with one Vox headline declaring, "The Most Surprising Winner of the World Cup was American Public Transit" with a subheading suggesting that, "America is having a soccer awakening. Can it have a transit one too?"

While it is perhaps unsurprising that getting to matches via trains and buses in cities with established public transportation cultures (such as New Jersey and Boston) remained relatively easy, other sites required significantly more effort. Atlanta's "Let MARTA Drive You" campaign urged riders away from traffic and parking fees. Fans heading to Dallas Stadium (in Arlington, Texas) could take free shuttles from the existing bus lines to the stadium from downtown Dallas and Arlington. Kansas City built an entirely new public transportation system, ConnectKC26, solely for the World Cup. Like other transportation expansions and heightened service schedules, Kansas City's emphasis on public transportation was geared towards easy travel for tourists, not a broader investment in public infrastructure for locals. In fact, after FIFA head Gianni Infantino rolls his mega-sport event out of the city, Kansas City will lose the ConnectKC26 system while the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority will cut over 25% of its weekday routes and restrict hours due to a lack of funding. In a zine published by Sunrise Movement Kansas City, they write, "For 33 days this summer, KC's public transit will bloom; granting more routes and greater frequency to tourists and visitors, all things that Kansas Citians deserve everyday. Long-term investments in our city's transit should not be sacrificed to accommodate any single event – no matter how 'monumental.'"

Los Angeles and LA Metro, as a practice run for the 2028 Summer Olympics, have taken the World Cup tournament as an opportunity to permanently expand bus and train routes with new stations and increased service frequency. The LA Metro has used the World Cup as a moment to rebrand public transit, from their cheeky "Ride the D" campaign to their vivid "This is how LA moves" PSA. Through their role as host city for several upcoming mega-sport events (including the 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and LA28), the LA Metro expansion attempts to cement Los Angeles as a global city with public infrastructure akin to New York or London. LA Metro's expansion included the opening of three new stations, a tap-to-pay payment system, an increase in security

measures, and public transit representatives at stations to guide fans with and increased hours of service and buses in service.

TikTok and Instagram influencers have highlighted the ease of getting to Inglewood's SoFi Stadium using LA Metro, emphasizing the speed of the commute and easy navigation. This seemingly points to how the city could imagine something different for Angelenos permanently, not just under the clock and pressure of FIFA's tournament. Instead, Los Angeles ultimately also represents the limits to this terminable focus on accessible transit. After the Iran vs. New Zealand match at SoFi, Inglewood residents found their movement restricted to allow for easier movement of the buses in and out of the area. In a video posted online, Samhyra Sosa records an interaction with a police officer who tells her to turn her car around, to which she responds, "but we live here." She pleads as the officer repeatedly tells her to turn around, explaining how she's followed previous traffic enforcement directions to enter her street, and her home which she points to from the car. The entire interaction demonstrates how claims to space, and contestations to place, are amplified through global sporting events like the World Cup. It also reflects larger questions of gentrification in Inglewood, a historically Black neighborhood in the south of Los Angeles, where residents initially worried that the building of the stadium would displace locals through evictions, rent increases, and higher property taxes. The scene between Sosa and the sheriff represents the impacts of SoFi on Inglewood: prioritizing the massive sporting event over those living in its shadows. After explaining that they couldn't park and walk home due to her mother's disability, the officer responds, "I don't care," and tells them to turn back once again. Here, we can see how the car-free vision of public transportation to the World Cup both mobilizes and restricts access. As local activists feared, mega-sport events like the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup bring an increased police presence to ostensibly promote public safety, but also allow for the continued legacy of policing and restriction of movement of Black and Brown residents in LA. While the LA Metro website boasts a "hat trick" for the World Cup in the form of "enhanced service," "affordable parking," and a "celebratory customer experience," many might feel closer to Samhyra Sosa, where the temporary transit investment failed to accommodate those who remain long after the final goal is scored.

Place and Art: Communicating Local and Global Soccer Community

Amidst the major North American cities hosting World Cup games sits Kansas City, Missouri. Arrowhead Stadium, home of the NFL's Chiefs, hosted group stage and knockout matches. Despite the Chiefs' looming relocation to the Kansas side of Kansas City—a separate conversation in its own right—Arrowhead Stadium is one of the most iconic professional stadiums in the U.S. Particularly interesting is the nexus between place and soccer that was on full display during this summer's World Cup.

Branding themselves as the "Soccer Capital of America" on the windows of their downtown convention center during the Cup, in addition to serving as base camp for the Argentinian team during the Cup, Kansas City has a rich lineage of soccer history, culture, and identity. They are home to Sporting KC, one of the original ten charter clubs of Major League Soccer (MLS), with their original name, the Kansas City Wiz.

Soccer is the most popular sport in the world in terms of total participation, and may also be the most expressive. As this collection of essays makes clear, soccer is rooted in local and national identity. Kansas City does not connote expressiveness to a global audience, or leverage the sport media spectacle, in the same way as other World Cup host cities Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Miami, Boston, Mexico City, Toronto, or Vancouver.

Similarly, the language sports broadcasters use when talking about soccer can evoke an awe one may experience when experiencing art. One instance of this during the 2026 World Cup was after Spain's semi-final win over France. American FOX studio analyst and former U.S. Men's National Team member Alexi Lalas called Spain's victory "a work of art. A beautiful thing to see unfold...not just the result, not just who the opponent was, but the manner in which Spain went out and got this victory. It was...something to see."

Calling attention to the expressive nature of soccer, journalist Andy Brassell chronicles notable football murals that have been painted throughout the world. Of the over 120 murals documented, only seven are located in the U.S. While not exhaustive of every football mural painted, it is not surprising that most of them are located outside of the U.S. in soccer hotbeds Europe, Africa, South America, and England.

In the Crossroads Art District in downtown Kansas City, *Ecuador* in KC founder Paulina Tabares worked with Los Angeles artist MisterAlek to paint a mural of Lionel Messi and Ecuador's William Pachó. Ecuador and Argentina both played group stage matches at Arrowhead, while the Argentine team also played a quarterfinal match there as well. Several minutes from this mural is the West Bottoms, where local grassroots organization SpraySeeMO painted several more murals.

At the KC Convention Center, an installation was located outside featuring a small soccer field titled "Tejiendo Redes," or Weaving Nets in English. As the placard of the project explains, the exhibit represents how soccer and migration are weaved into the social fabric of communities. The placard goes on to describe how the exhibit was inspired by the fans who represent the Hispanicizing of the 2026 World Cup and how the Anglo-Saxon sport was brought to the U.S. and Canada for the world to enjoy. The goals were made of lattice to highlight ancient and contemporary Mesoamerican football players and were intertwined with nets made by migrant communities from Mexico City to Canada. This installation represents the symbiotic relationship between place and soccer. Additionally, the murals pay homage to Mesoamerican culture and its role in facilitating the growth of soccer within the U.S. and Canada.

Perhaps more than any other sport, especially within the U.S., place and soccer are also symbolic of local, regional, and global communities. The KC murals illustrate how place relies on soccer, and vice versa, in how fans identify with each other, their clubs, cities, neighborhoods, and country. Most importantly, the KC World Cup murals articulate a global Kansas City identity that not only local citizens experience, but the Argentine, Ecuadorian, and other country's fans who visit KC interact with and experience. The murals communicate a unity not through sameness and conformity, but through difference, similar to World Cup exhibits in Miami and Seattle, among other cities. They capture an essence of the World Cup experience which moves beyond commercialism and commodification through its invitation to experience the physical places and spaces of Kansas City. While news media indeed reported on these murals, one must physically visit each place to have a sense of its expressiveness and affect. Like World Cup exhibits in other cities, the KC murals are informed by their local identities as much as their intercultural ones.

As Pachó's teammate, midfielder Alan Franco said after he heard about the mural, "I believe we [he and Pachó] have also shared the affection we hold—on a global level, in every location, in every unit and in everything we do. That love for one's country, that love for the association." Recognizing the contributions soccer makes to our notions of sport and place may help us realize how differences are strengths, not something to be feared. After all, the best way to experience something is to go visit it.



Dr. Anthony Cavaiani

is an associate professor of communication at William Woods University in Fulton, MO. His research examines the intersection of rhetoric, sport, and space/place.

Infection control amid weakened public health infrastructure at World Cup 2026



Dr. Kathleen Bachynski

is an Associate Professor of Public Health at Muhlenberg College. Her research focuses on sports safety and youth health, with recent projects addressing traumatic brain injuries in sports, overuse injuries, the #MeToo movement and protecting young athletes from sexual abuse.

Email:
kathleenbachynski@
muhlenberg.edu

Mass sports gatherings pose substantial potential for infectious disease spread. With 48 national teams competing in matches scheduled across three countries, the 2026 World Cup presented heightened public health risks as the biggest soccer tournament ever organized. Yet, the United States, the largest of the three host countries, found itself facing this complex infection control challenge with a greatly weakened public health infrastructure. Nearly 20 percent of the CDC's staff were either fired or resigned in the year since Elon Musk's DOGE began carrying out mass terminations in January 2025. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., at the helm of the Department of Health and Human Services, has sown doubt in vaccines and proposed focusing limited federal resources on chronic diseases rather than infectious diseases. Cooperation with global health authorities has also been hobbled. Notably, in January 2026, the Trump administration announced that the United States had completed its withdrawal from the World Health Organization. American World Cup host city officials reported receiving federal dollars for security needs, but not for public health.

In this context, non-governmental and civil society organizations sought innovative ways to fill the gaps. In May 2026, Dr. Rebecca Katz at Georgetown University launched the Health Security Operations Center (HSOC) to monitor possible infectious disease threats. Such an operations center for a mass event would typically be sponsored by a government entity. But Katz and other collaborators developed the idea for an independent operation in fall 2025 when they observed the limitations of official efforts. According to Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, "The CDC has that expertise, but the CDC is a shell of what it once was... The CDC is not as equipped as it could be to handle any kind of role they might have in terms of mass gathering-related outbreaks."

HSOC, then, was established as a novel effort to leverage non-governmental public health expertise and support an overstretched government public health workforce. HSOC is relying on the University of Hawaii's Pacific Disaster Center's DisasterAWARE platform to integrate a variety of data sources, from electronic health records to wastewater surveillance. In addition to academic institutions, the HSOC coalition includes various technology and communication organizations, such as Samsung Electronics America, Verily Health and Your Local Epidemiologist.

Even prior to the first kick off in June 2026, this collaborative approach to disease surveillance delivered an encouraging proof of concept. Your Local Epidemiologist created a research listening arm, Project Stethoscope, which was activated for the World Cup. Discussion of gastrointestinal symptoms on a Reddit thread proved to be an early signal of an uptick in adenovirus F40/41 in

the Seattle area about 30 minutes away from a World Cup stadium. Although this is a relatively mild virus and not a reportable condition, the early detection highlighted the potential benefits of incorporating social media data, wastewater testing, weekly surveys and other forms of disease surveillance.

HSOC and other independent surveillance initiatives are showing promise as stopgap measures amid a dearth of federal support for addressing infectious diseases. Yet these efforts can also be seen as a microcosm of a broader shift in the United States toward private models to address public health threats. As physician and scientist Siddhartha Mukherjee has observed, this trend was accelerated by the U.S. response to Covid-19. In 2020, as the CDC failed to develop reliable laboratory tests for Covid-19 and underfunded government health agencies struggled to marshal resources, private enterprise and decision making increasingly ascended.

So far, the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States has been a systematic dismantling of federal public health institutions. Enterprising and talented individuals and private institutions are stepping into this breach, as illustrated by HSOC and other initiatives to protect public health during the World Cup. Their efforts are commendable, but they also raise profound questions about the future of public health in the United States. In what ways can private actors support public health, and what are the dangers of increasingly depending on private entities to manage public health threats?

Mukherjee warns that "just when we should be demanding more public accountability and reliability, we seem to be turning away from the idea that health is a collective endeavor, a public good at all." Individual experts and private organizations can certainly play a role in protecting public health, as the World Cup has demonstrated so far. But the mission of public health is ultimately a public one. Public health data must be safeguarded as a public good, particularly given that the commitments of private sector actors to stakeholders and other private interests can sometimes conflict with the ethical commitments of public health.

Consequently, we ultimately need to strengthen our public institutions, with a priority on improving mechanisms of accountability, transparency and trustworthiness. Well-managed public-private partnerships have great public health potential. But careful public stewardship is crucial to mitigate the pitfalls, particularly when it comes to the confidentiality and uses of sensitive health data. Ideally, HSOC and other such initiatives harnessing the talents of private actors would be doing so with the support and oversight of a well-resourced, transparent government infrastructure, rather than responding to dangerous gaps left by hollowed-out federal health agencies.

What separated winners from losers in the 2026 World Cup knockouts

Knockout football is often explained through sensitive moments: a deflection, a penalty, or one defensive mistake. While those moments matter, across the 2026 World Cup knockout stage, the teams that advanced did not simply run more, keep the ball longer, or press more often. Instead, they created better chances, put more shots on target, and made their defensive pressure count.

I analyzed the official FIFA post-match summaries for every knockout match, comparing the winner and loser within the same game. This approach matters because the two teams shared the same opponent, venue, match duration, and competitive context. The main analysis included 31 matches from the round of 32 through the final. I excluded the bronze final because it did not determine advancement or the championship.

The analysis covered performance indicators coming from the FIFA post-match reports, including chance creation, shooting, possession, progression, defensive disruption, and physical output. The process was standardized per 90 minutes so that matches decided in regulation and extra time could be compared fairly. Goals and other measures were not used as explanatory indicators because they define the result itself. Statistical tests were also adjusted for the large number of comparisons, reducing the risk of highlighting a chance finding. I focused on the size and consistency of the differences, not merely whether a significant value crossed a conventional cutoff.

The clearest separator was expected goals per attempt, which captures the average quality of a team's shots. Winners recorded a median of 0.113 expected goals per attempt, compared with 0.072 for losers. Put differently, the winner produced the higher-quality shot profile in 28 of the 31 matches. That result was stronger and more consistent than any measure of possession, passing, pressing volume, or running distance.

The pattern was not limited to shot quality. Winners generated 1.75 expected goals per 90 minutes, while losers generated 0.74. They also produced 5.74 shots on target per 90 minutes, compared with 2.62 for losing teams. Shooting accuracy showed the same direction, at 42.6% for winners and 26.6% for losers. Goal conversion was also higher. Winners also attempted more shots, namely 13.8 per 90 minutes compared with 9.23 for losers. The winning pattern involved both greater attacking performance and a better shot profile, with more attempts converted into accurate and higher-value chances.

These findings extend earlier World Cup research showing that shots on target and attacking efficiency are closely related to match success. They also help explain why raw attempt totals can be misleading. Winners generally attempted more shots, but shot volume alone did not survive the stricter statistical threshold. What distinguished

them was the combination of better locations, more accurate execution, and greater on-target production.

The defensive results were more surprising. Winners applied fewer defensive pressures, averaging 229.7 per 90 minutes compared with 286.0 for losers. Yet they forced more turnovers relative to the amount of pressure they used, with 17.73 forced turnovers per 100 pressures compared with 13.82. The absolute number of forced turnovers did not differ clearly between groups, so the main distinction concerned pressure efficiency rather than turnover volume. This should not be read as evidence that pressing less causes teams to win. A team may pressure frequently because it is chasing the game, defending for longer periods, or reacting to poor positioning. The winning teams showed more forced turnovers from each defensive pressure.

Possession, passing, and territorial progression also differentiated winners from losers, although generally less strongly than chance creation and finishing. Winners held 50.7% possession compared with 41.0% for losers. They attempted and completed more passes, achieved higher pass completion, completed more line breaks and defensive-line breaks, and received the ball in the final third more often. Ball progressions per 90 minutes were higher descriptively but not significantly. The phase-of-play indicators told a different story since winners showed some descriptive differences, including less long-ball and low-block involvement and more final-third and defensive-transition involvement, but none of the phase measures were statistically significant. This tournament therefore does not support a single phase-of-play formula for winning.

Physical output offered even less separation. Total distance, distance covered in Zone 4, and second-ball activity were approximately similar between winners and losers. This does not mean physical performance was unimportant. Every team needed sufficient fitness to compete. It means that, once teams reached the knockout stage, running more was not a consistent marker of who advanced.

The results describe associations, not independent causal effects. For coaches, analysts, and viewers, the central lesson is to separate activity from effectiveness. Greater possession was part of the winning profile, but possession alone is not control. More pressure is not automatically better defending, and more running is not automatically superiority. In the 2026 World Cup knockouts, the strongest winning profile combined greater and higher-quality chance creation, more accurate shooting, stronger possession and territorial progression, and a higher rate of forced turnovers relative to defensive pressure.



Dr. Filipe Manuel Clemente

Auxiliary Researcher with Habilitation in the Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra, Portugal.

His research focuses on sports performance and sports training, with particular focus on team sports.

Email: flipe.clemente5@gmail.com

The role of individual sports diplomats at the 2026 FIFA World Cup



Prof. J. Simon Rofo

Professor of Sports Diplomacy and Management in the Carnegie School of Sport at Leeds Beckett University; Associate Programme Director at Wilton Park; Senior Research Fellow and Assistant Programme Director at the Institute for Sport Humanities. His work embraces practitioner engagement and he has worked with numerous stakeholders from across the sporting and diplomatic realms and is author or editor of numerous books and articles.

As the World Cup was lifted by Spain's captain Rhodri after his team's victory over Argentina in the FIFA Men's World Cup final, he was on the stage with three individuals who had been on a similar stage in the same stadium—New York/New Jersey's MetLife stadium—at the conclusion of FIFA's first World Club Championship twelve months previously. One was the player Marc Cucurella, known for his vexatious spirit on the pitch as a member of both winning teams; the other two more prominent off the field of play, perhaps equally vexatious. They were Gianni Infantino as the President of FIFA, and Donald Trump as the President of the United States. These two individuals and the role they played leading up to and through the tournament itself has received much attention, and will continue to do so, not least in the contributions to this report.

The analysis that this piece focuses upon, is on United 2026 – the name of the bid led by the United States Soccer Federation together with the Canadian Soccer Federation and Mexican Football Federation—as a World Cup of individuals and individualism—in contrast to the victorious Spain team. It does so by drawing on the concept of sports diplomats, phrased as “ambassadors in tracksuits” by Gavin Price and Lindsay S. Krasnoff, amongst others), and as a function of wider Sports Diplomacy discourses. This article sees Sports Diplomacy as “an enabler for nations, federations, regions, teams, and individuals to demonstrate values, capabilities and opportunity, including commercial dimensions. It does so by harnessing the powers of sport to ‘Communicate, Represent and Negotiate’ across sporting and diplomatic landscapes.”

Often the most-high profile of sports diplomats is the athlete. United 26 was no exception. Despite the simple fact that football is a team sport of 11 vs 11, individuals dominated World Cup narratives and provide points of tension for understanding sports diplomats. The most noticeable, both implicitly and explicitly, were two players in the dotage of their careers: Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. Their rivalry has been a consistent, often dominant narrative in men's football for 15 years, stemming from their prowess on the pitch, to the explicit rivalries during their La Liga days, to their competition for Ballon D'Ors, and to their commercial contests between headline sponsors Nike and Adidas. Their individual imagery superseded their teams' identities, leading to particular sporting outcomes. Both teams' coaches Lionel Scaloni and Roberto Martinez made significant tactical decisions to accommodate their respective star individuals, potentially at the expense of their team's development and performance – and in Martinez's case his job. Indeed, the narrative of “individual vs. team” was a clear feature of much of the coverage with a heightened focus on race for the Golden Boot (the competition's highest goal scorer) and overall top

scorer across World Cups, both of which pitted Messi against Kylian Mbappé, France's talisman.

The individualization was neither reserved for players with impressive track records, nor those with significant prior marketing presence. The progress of Cape Verde's team from their group where they held Spain to a 0-0 draw, to lose to Argentina in extra time, was shared in individual terms with a focus on their 40-year-old goalkeeper, Vozinha. With a focus on his social media presence and his mother, Cape Verde's goalkeeper became the representative of the small island nation; even appearing—individually, of course—on CBS Mornings sharing with the audience the impact of the World Cup performance on his nation. In short, he was an ambassador for Cape Verde.

The hyper-individualism of United 26, made more possible by a technological-commercial nexus, was seen not just on the pitch and should not have been a surprise when individual enterprise has long-been cherished in U.S. society. In the stadiums, coverage of every match featured shots of high-profile individuals—often from other sports or celebrities. In marketing terms, in the stadia and beyond, individuals were highly prominent. None more so than former England Captain, and Inter-Miami President and Co-owner, David Beckham. Beckham, a marketer's dream since his early playing days, was seemingly a highly optimized one man-marketing machine. It was possible to watch an entire “game break”—as the U.S. host broadcasters FOX and NBC framed FIFA's newly constituted hydration breaks—of Beckham adverts back-to-back for a wide variety of companies. The multiple roles Beckham played as salesman, England fan, investor in U.S. soccer infrastructure, and others – and his wife and family – allowed for many messages to be shared simultaneously with a multitude of audiences.

The individual challenge to sports diplomacy was clear in governance terms, most obviously with Infantino and Trump. Their bromance tripping over from the award of the Peace Medal at the World Cup draw in December 2025, to Trump's intervention with Infantino in overturning Balogun's red card, to Trump's paucity of attendance—he only attended one match: the final—was particular to them. The scrutiny the pair received stood in contrast to many of the dignitaries and heads of state who were present during the tournament not least cohosts, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and Canadian Prime Minister, Marc Carney.

The tension between the hyper-individualism on display at United 2026 and Spain's ultimate triumph with a team absent of dominant individuals, speaks to representing something larger than themselves. If success as a sports diplomat is being ready for the next fixture and an opponent ready to play—*négociation continue*—the sports diplomat must surely be a team player.

The United States men's national team has always had a problem with home

Unlike most national teams in world soccer, there is no official national stadium for the team - a place where history, memory, belonging, and tradition have stood the test of time - places like Wembley Stadium in England, the Azteca in Mexico, or Cairo International in Egypt. Throughout its history, and especially in the last 30 years, a combination of factors have made it difficult for the USMNT to establish a home field advantage at a singular location - outside of, perhaps, Columbus, Ohio.

With no home, no repository of memory in a physical form, no place to go as a pilgrimage ritual, the USMNT has struggled to gain traction with a broader spectrum of American fans. With no Lambeau Field or Fenway Park, American men's soccer has been starved recently of culturally-pervasive myths that bring fans together - or what communication scholars would call constitutive rhetoric. That is, communication that hails and interpellates an audience into a collective group.

The most common culprit for this starvation is that sellout crowds at USMNT home matches are peppered with intense fans from the opposing teams. In a NYT article from 2013 explaining why the USMNT had not solidified a particular home stadium, Sunil Gulati, then-president of the United States Soccer Federation, explained that one of the biggest obstacles is, "ensuring a crowd that is pro-United States."

An additional factor is that there are a dozen or so cities that seem to want to crown themselves as the spiritual home of American soccer. This debate usually simmers between Major League Soccer cities in non-World Cup years, but the hosting of the World Cup brought further introspection. Portland has long claimed its place as Soccer City, USA, but nearby rival Seattle has also laid claim to that title, while Kansas City owns the trademark, "Soccer Capital of America." Meanwhile, US Soccer has recently opened a new training and administrative facility outside of Atlanta even though the National Soccer Hall of Fame sits in suburban Dallas. Historical claims to the home of US men's soccer have also been claimed by St. Louis, due to the production of local talent that has represented the national team, but the same claim has been made by Kearny, New Jersey, which *The Gothamist* recently labeled "the Cradle of American soccer."

As a result of this, it has been almost impossible for the USMNT to develop a sense of home, with all of the symbolism of place and mythmaking central to it. We're too disjointed, too contentious, and too divided. A regrettably familiar refrain.

And unlike Mexico, whose national team was slated to play in the Azteca Stadium during the World Cup, the USMNT elected to base its World Cup matches on America's west coast in Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Francisco. These cities were not chosen in order to join the debate

as America's soccer capital, however. FIFA had decided the USMNT's opening game would take place in Los Angeles, and the other locations were strategically chosen to minimize travel distance, avoid changes in time zones, and take advantage of temperate summer weather.

So, with a decades-long problem with home, and a decision to prioritize expedience, the USMNT entered the tournament as hosts with an emotional distance from its fans and the American populace - to say nothing of problems with ticket prices or dissonance between political leadership and patriotism. What could bring unify US fans - what could interpellate, or hail them - into a collective?

Naturally, a 1971 folk pop hit performed by a New Mexico-born Coloradan who co-wrote the song with a couple of songwriters inspired by a road in Maryland and whose lyrics mention places in nearby Virginia - and not its western counterpart. Somewhat incredulously, John Denver's "Country Roads," became the USMNT's interpellating rhetorical artifact - plucked from a FIFA playlist given to every stadium in the entire tournament (the song was played at games in Mexico and Canada as well).

Moments after their overwhelming defeat of Paraguay, the players' faces glowed in appreciation, and maybe a bit of awe when the speakers in Seattle Stadium blared out a sing-a-long favorite and the crowd spontaneously joined in unison.

Soon, it seemed, the entire stadium was swaying and belting out, "Take me home, country roads." The episode, more akin to the jubilant scenes in college sports, was a first for US soccer, which spent weeks ahead of the World Cup defending its fans' well-intentioned but, at times, cringe-worthy chants on social media. And the players took notice.

"It just gives you chills," star forward Christian Pulisic said.

"It was incredible," defender Tim Ream added, "I had to ask myself, 'Is this real life?'"

The phenomenon drew quite a good deal of media coverage. Clips went viral on social media.

The song's generic feeling of American-ness "does not require much," *The Washington Post* noted. Perfect for a team with an Argentinian coach, players born and/or raised abroad, and without a single player from the Mountain State. As defender Chris Richards clearly explained, "All of us know that part of being American is knowing 'Country Roads,' so we're all singing it together."

So a song about home, memory, and belonging - rather than a place - became the perfect unifying call for an American soccer fanbase that was lacking the mythology needed to coalesce support around the team at its home World Cup.

For the first time in the history of the USMNT, and for a few weeks at least, any place in the US could be home.



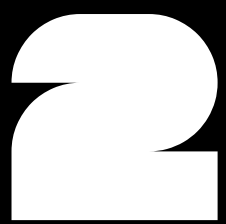
Dr. Stephen P. Andon

*Associate Professor
Department of Journalism
and Sports Media College
of Communication and
Media Montclair State
University*

A native of rural Maryland, Stephen P. Andon received his Ph.D. from the College of Communication and Information at Florida State University in 2011 after writing a dissertation on sports memorabilia. His undergraduate career at Boston College consisted of work in television, radio, and digital film production - with stints at WBAL-TV, WHFC-FM, and at ESPN covering the 2002 World Cup.

Playing on the dynamic between popular culture and the rhetorical theories of place and memory, his research interests include the role of history and myth among sports fan cultures, constitutive rhetoric in sport, nostalgic influences in sport, and the rhetoric of stadium narratives.

*Email:
andons@montclair.edu*



GLOBAL MEDIA COVERAGE

The Brazilian national team call-up: A shadow theater

Transforming a procedural act into something extraordinary. That was the goal of the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) when it created a major media event to announce the 26 Brazilian players selected for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The announcement of which athletes make up a national team in a sporting competition is always surrounded by expectations from fans, and in a country such as Brazil, where the popular saying claims that every citizen is a potential football coach, such a choice takes on epic proportions.

After five World Cups without a title and four years marked by a cycle of decline, including changes of coaches and, above all, administrators, the CBF made a media gamble by turning the announcement of the players who would represent Brazil into a major event held on May 18. The chosen venue was the Museum of Tomorrow in Rio de Janeiro—a modern cultural space inaugurated shortly before the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

Fausto Neto (2002) points out that the ecosystem of sports communication originally had three axes: the producers of the spectacle (clubs and confederations), the disseminators (media organizations), and the public. However, in the current model, producers have also become disseminators and now compete directly with traditional media through their own channels. The official broadcast was carried out by CBFTV, the confederation's YouTube channel. Major Brazilian radio and television networks replicated the transmission using images supplied by the CBF, which therefore maintained complete control over what was or was not shown—an issue that recalls the discussion of image monopoly by Rubio, Veloso e Almeida (2025). Even the third axis, the public, deserves to be questioned. The event audience was composed of invited former players, artists, and even a group of “supporters,” a term used here deliberately because those selected belong to a movement supported by the CBF to follow the Brazilian national team.

With total control from production to content distribution, the CBF created a script that seemed designed not for football fans already interested in the sport, but rather to expand its base of “fans.” The event opened with a short theatrical performance recounting the history of Brazil's World Cup victories. Starting with the 1958 tournament, the reenactment overlooked Brazil's earlier World Cup appearances—such as the runner-up finish in 1950, when the country hosted the event. In a caricatured style, the actors portrayed the reactions of Brazilian fans during the finals of the tournaments Brazil won, while ignoring the other World Cups. Afterward, the CBF president was called to the stage for an interview featuring pre-arranged questions, during which he praised his own work; he had assumed the position a year earlier after his predecessor stepped down due to legal issues.

Even when addressing relevant topics, such as the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup in Brazil and tributes to deceased former athletes, the event was marked by such an intense promotional tone that it became entirely artificial. Fans expecting information about the national team's preparation for the World Cup may have felt confused or frustrated. Sponsors, however, benefited from the transformation of a procedural act into a large-scale event, seeing their brands displayed for hours across the country's major media outlets, giving them plenty to celebrate even before the tournament began.

After more than an hour of staging, coach Carlo Ancelotti finally took the stage to announce the list of selected players. Despite being Italian, he attempted to embrace the atmosphere of the moment and joked by pausing before naming the forwards and saying, “now comes the beautiful part.” The main question surrounding the announcement was whether Neymar Jr. would be included, and he ultimately was. The traditional press conference, during which journalists questioned the coach about his selections, took place afterward in a separate venue, lasted 25 minutes, and was also broadcast on CBFTV.

It should be noted that other national teams, including the Czech Republic, England, and Senegal, also adopted the strategy of publishing videos that reinforced local identity and ties to football when announcing the players selected for the World Cup. The use of proprietary channels and social media has become commonplace. While in other teams' videos the athletes were the protagonists, the Brazilian announcement reduced the players to mere pieces within a larger spectacle.

Sports coverage has long extended far beyond what takes place inside stadiums and well beyond the 90 minutes of a match. The event staged to announce Brazil's 2026 squad marks a further shift: the organization being covered had become the producer, the broadcaster, and even the audience of its own coverage. What was presented as a celebration of the national team was, above all, an exercise in deciding who gets to tell its story and what is left outside the frame.



Dr. William Douglas de Almeida

PhD in Physical Education and Sports from the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil. Journalist and member of the Olympic Studies Group (USP).

Email:

jornalismo_william@yahoo.com.br



Luiz Caraciolo Teles

PhD student in Communication Studies at the Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB), Brazil. Journalist and member of the Olympic Studies Group (USP).

Email: luiz.teles@gmail.com

X (Twitter) and Instagram: @lulateles

Images over the match: the 2026 World Cup as spectacle



Dr. Shuhua Zhou

Chair Professor at the City University of Hong Kong and a Fellow of the International Communication Association. He studies television news and the human cognition of mediated messages, and earlier anchored and directed the English news program at GDTV.

Email: shuhzhou@cityu.edu.hk

When Henry Kissinger called soccer “the embodiment of human experience,” he meant a game in which national character showed itself on the grass. In his 1986 essay “Soccer Imitates Life,” he read West German soccer as the General Staff at work, Brazil as a samba band that could not abide joyless virtue, and England as muscular nostalgia. What strikes me, rereading him in 2026, is that his subject was reality itself—human beings improvising solutions no script anticipated. The spectacle asks how much of that reality has since been packaged and sold.

The spectacle theory of mega sporting events rests on three ideas. First, images over reality: live experience and raw competition give way to packaged images and corporate narratives. Second, the sport-media complex: events are staged to sell commodities and manufacture enthusiasm. Third, cultural ritual: the mega-event reinforces national identities and political values under the guise of entertainment. The 2026 tournament—hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico yet modeled on American sport—is a near-perfect specimen.

Consider images over reality. As Fortune reported, FIFA imposed a mandatory three-minute “hydration break” midway through each half, splitting the ninety-minute flow into basketball’s quarters. Ian Wright, on ITV, called it another way of getting American-style advertising into the game; ESPN found the breaks widely read as commercially driven, not mere player welfare; Fox alone reportedly earned over \$250 million from these windows. The match—Kissinger’s reality—becomes the interval between images.

Then the sport-media complex. Expansion from 32 to 48 teams pushed FIFA’s projected revenue from \$7.6 billion to \$13 billion, and Infantino was floating a 64-team edition before the knockouts had ended. A Super Bowl-style halftime show stretched the final’s interval to twenty-seven minutes; championship rings, dynamic pricing, and turf sold by the square followed. FIFA said openly it was bringing “an iconic American sports tradition” to football. The commodity, not the contest, sets the calendar.

And cultural ritual—here the spectacle turns political. The Balogun affair, in which a red-card suspension was deferred for a year after President Trump personally telephoned Infantino, became the defining controversy; Trump thanked FIFA for reversing a “great injustice,” while UEFA warned that the integrity of the game was “at stake.” Iran’s team was admitted for barely a day; Argentine players unfurled a Malvinas banner after beating England in the semifinal. The bid’s watchwords—Unity, Certainty, Opportunity—curdled into arrogance and prejudice; the ritual told us plainly whose values these were.

Yet the human experience Kissinger loved refuses to vanish. The most compelling stories of

2026 belonged not to the giants but to the small nations: Cape Verde surviving a group with Spain and Uruguay behind a forty-year-old goalkeeper; Curaçao, the smallest country ever to qualify, taking a point from Ecuador. As the Financial Times observed, expansion’s real gift may be that more nations now own a World Cup story of their own. Côte d’Ivoire’s fate—the near-miss of a gifted African side—reminds us that style still carries meaning marketing cannot manufacture.

The old national styles endure too, refracted through the new machinery. Argentina still plays with Maradona’s improvisational genius; Spain passes as though possession were a philosophy; France remains, as Kissinger predicted, the most elegant of the European powers; England labors under a faintly pedantic nostalgia; Brazil attacks in waves of yellow. The United States, which Kissinger hoped would embrace the game, has instead absorbed the World Cup into its own commercial grammar—the host reshaping the guest.

I do not come to this as a detached critic. I have loved the game since boyhood; I played in college, even for the college staff team. And I brushed against its governing world exactly once. In 1991, when China hosted the first Women’s World Cup, I was a news anchor at Guangdong Television, and I caught FIFA president João Havelange and his secretary general, Sepp Blatter, after a press conference at the White Swan Hotel in Guangzhou. I had a little French then, so I asked—in French—for an exclusive interview. Our French proved equally halting, and Blatter himself ended up interpreting between my English and Havelange’s Portuguese. The two men who would preside over FIFA’s great commercial ascent were, that day, within reach—close enough to catch in a hotel lobby, patient enough to fumble through three languages. Whatever the game has since become, the human encounter was then the whole of it.

My own view is that spectacle and human experience are not opposites but layers: the images sit atop the reality, the sport-media complex feeds on genuine passion, the ritual works only because the competition beneath it is real. Kissinger saw soccer as a mirror of national character; the 2026 World Cup is one too—but a mirror that now reflects an age that would rather sell the game’s image than let us watch it. What we risk losing is the two hours Kissinger’s father never understood: standing in the cold, watching human beings play.

Beyond the backlash: Online conversations surrounding the 2026 World Cup

Social media platforms are often accused of rewarding divisive content or controversies through algorithms that prioritize emotional reactions. In other words, social media can seem designed to elevate scandals, disputes, and polarization. Yet, the 2026 FIFA World Cup told a different story.

The Atlas Lab used Talkwalker to track World-Cup-related public social media posts and digital media stories between June 1st and July 20th, 2026. A search query with 42 terms across 12 languages identified 31.2 million mentions, most of them from X (25.8 million), followed by Reddit (1.5 million), online news (1.5 million), YouTube (512,500), public Facebook pages (406,900), blogs (389,400), online forums (308,900), public Instagram pages (258,800), and Bluesky (237,100). Other online media and social sources accounted for an additional 300,000 mentions.

When taken together, these posts and stories generated 3.6 billion engagements (likes, reactions, comments, shares) and had the collective capacity to generate 11 trillion impressions. The scale of these conversations reinforces why social media have become such an important lens through which to understand modern mega-events. Online platforms function as a virtual stadium where celebrations, frustrations, debates, and memories are shared in real time across national and linguistic boundaries.

Interestingly, despite social media's tendency to amplify controversy, the overall tone of that discussion remained remarkably positive. Net sentiment approached neutrality on a handful of days (e.g., on July 1 following tragic deaths in Mexico after the country won its first World Cup knockout game in 40 years), but it remained positive every day except on July 6th. Overall, only 12.5% of mentions expressed negative emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness, while nearly three times as many (36.6%) expressed positive emotions including joy, excitement, and happiness.

Net sentiment dipped into the negative on July 6th mostly because of the overturning of US player Folarin Balogun's one-game ban after US President Donald Trump called FIFA President Gianni Infantino, which prompted a lot of anger. On the same day, Portugal's loss to Spain and Ronaldo's farewell to World Cup competition also led many to express disappointment or sadness, but that was balanced out by others who celebrated Spain's victory. Thus, the Balogun controversy appears to be the primary driver of the negative sentiment observed on July 6th. However, the conversation moved on quickly, returning to celebrating matches, players, national teams, and/or shared experiences.

Later, other controversies emerged, but overall sentiment remained positive. For instance, Argentine players held up a fan-made banner about the disputed Falkland Islands after beating England in the semi-finals. The incident reignited a long-standing geopolitical dispute between Argentina and the UK, and it sparked calls for an investigation because FIFA prohibits political

messaging. This incident is a reminder that national identity remains central to international soccer. Yet, discussions again shifted to less contentious and more positive themes quickly.

Though other controversies emerged throughout the tournament, the last one happened at the very end. Following Spain's victory in the final, Donald Trump extended his presence on the presentation podium as Spanish players lifted the trophy, which generated a wave of online criticism. The resulting conversation produced one of the tournament's most visible declines in sentiment, and a word cloud of posts mentioning the US president was dominated by negatively associated terms.

Yet even this controversy proved short-lived. Much of the broader conversation quickly returned to Spain's achievement on the field, the performances that led to the title, and celebrations among players and supporters. The Spanish Federation's later decision to crop Trump out of the photographs used in its celebratory posts generated additional discussion (and mockery, which prompted the White House to respond), but the incident became another example of a recurring pattern throughout the tournament: moments of controversy attracted attention (journalists reported them, algorithms amplified them, users debated them), but they did not overshadow the sporting spectacle itself. The conversations that shaped the tournament were far more likely to center on goals, victories, players, and national teams.

This distinction highlights an important difference between visibility and significance. Controversies often generate dramatic spikes in attention, but they do not necessarily become the defining story of an event. Politics, governance disputes, and social controversies are increasingly intertwined with international sport, and this year's World Cup was hardly spared, notably with visa issues affecting officials, players, and fans from multiple countries. Yet, fans overwhelmingly used social media to celebrate athletic achievement, share emotional experiences, express national pride, and participate in a global conversation about the world's most popular sport. In that sense, though Jules Rimet, often considered the father of the World Cup, never knew the internet, the 2026 tournament reflected his belief that soccer could connect people across national borders even amid political differences.

Though future mega-events will likely face increasing challenges as calls for transparency grow and technology continues to multiply communication methods, the 2026 FIFA World Cup demonstrates that sport retains a remarkable ability to generate joy, community, and collective celebration on a global scale—even in digital environments often criticized for rewarding outrage. Beyond the backlash, the dominant story remained soccer itself.



Dr. Roxane Coche

Associate Professor and Department Chair in the University of Florida, College of Journalism and Communications. She covered one FIFA World Cup and three Olympic games as a journalist, publishes on sports communication and sports sociology, and teaches sports media.

Email: rcoche@ufl.edu

Instagram: [@cjc.drc](https://www.instagram.com/cjc.drc)

Website: <http://linkedin.com/in/roxanecoche>



Dr. Nathan Carpenter

Director of the Atlas Social Media Listening Lab in the University of Florida, College of Journalism and Communications. He analyzes social media for academia and industry and is co-author of the textbook Social Media Research Methods (2023, Cognella Academic Publishing).

Email: nathancarpenter@ufl.edu

Bluesky: [@n8carp.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/n8carp.bsky.social)

Instagram: [@ufatlaslab](https://www.instagram.com/ufatlaslab)

Website: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nathan-carpenter-phd-654140a/>

Figure 1: A comparison of total mentions (“Results over time”) and net sentiment for public social media and online news sources discussing the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Source: Lumen/Talkwalker

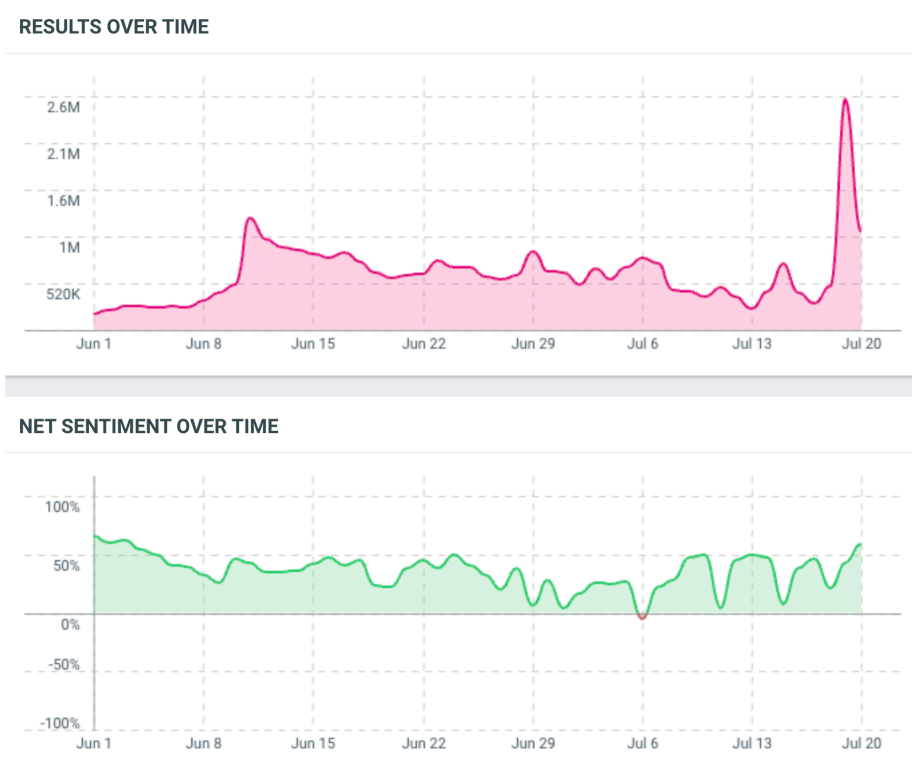
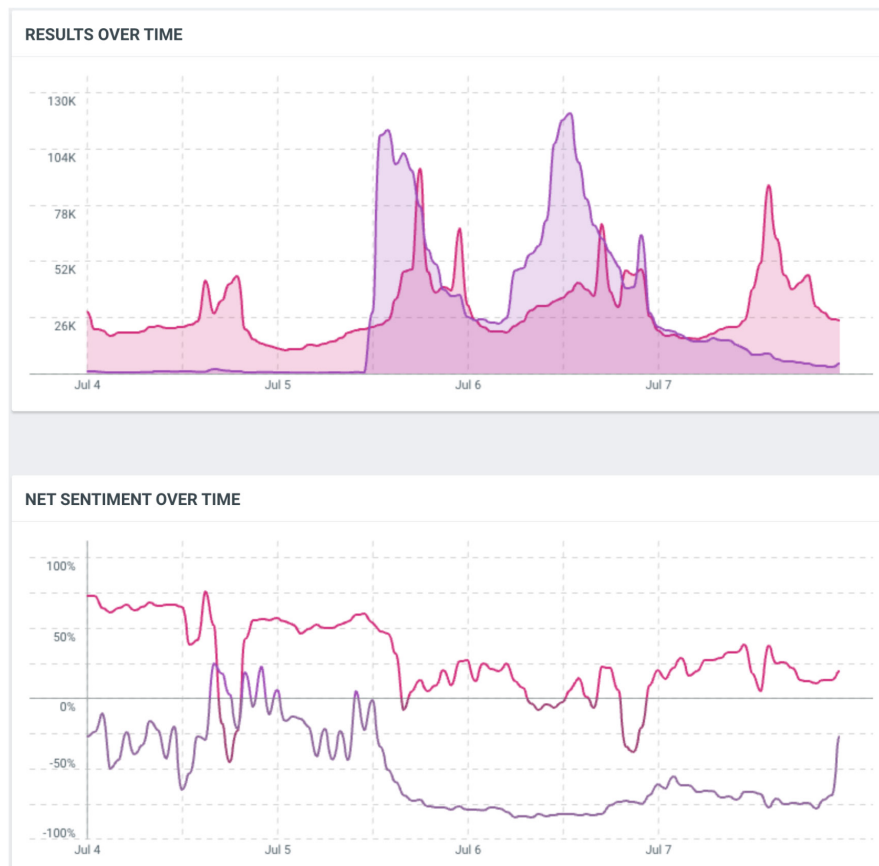


Figure 2: A comparison of the total mentions and net sentiment of the 2026 FIFA World Cup (red) and Folarin Balogun (purple). The dip in net sentiment for the overall World Cup conversations corresponds with the increase in mentions about Balogun. Source: Lumen/Talkwalker



RESULTS OVER TIME

This line chart displays two data series over a 24-hour period. The y-axis represents values in thousands, ranging from 14.8K to 74K. The x-axis shows time from July 15, 02:00 to 22:00. Both series show a significant peak around 17:00, with the purple series reaching approximately 74K and the red series reaching approximately 44.4K. The purple series is generally higher than the red series throughout the day.

Time	Purple Series (K)	Red Series (K)
02:00	15.0	14.8
04:00	15.0	14.8
06:00	15.0	14.8
08:00	15.0	14.8
10:00	15.0	14.8
12:00	15.0	14.8
14:00	15.0	14.8
16:00	15.0	14.8
17:00	74.0	44.4
18:00	30.0	20.0
20:00	15.0	14.8
22:00	15.0	14.8

NET SENTIMENT OVER TIME

This line chart displays two data series representing net sentiment over a 24-hour period. The y-axis represents sentiment percentage, ranging from -100% to 100%. The x-axis shows time from July 15, 02:00 to 22:00. The red series is generally positive, fluctuating between 25% and 50%. The purple series is generally negative, fluctuating between -25% and -50%. Both series show a sharp drop around 15:00, with the purple series reaching approximately -50% and the red series reaching approximately 25%.

Time	Purple Series (%)	Red Series (%)
02:00	-25	50
04:00	-25	50
06:00	-25	50
08:00	-25	50
10:00	-25	50
12:00	-25	50
14:00	-25	50
15:00	-50	25
16:00	-25	50
18:00	-25	50
20:00	-25	50
22:00	-25	50

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The world's coaches and the social media blame game



Dr. Peter English

Senior Lecturer at the University of the Sunshine Coast. PhD, University of the Sunshine Coast, 2014. Peter's research focuses on sports journalism, with an emphasis on its journalists, content, and social media. Peter has worked as a sports journalist for more than two decades and is the author of Olympic Outliers: Brisbane 2032 and the Future of the Olympic Games.

Email: penglish@usc.edu.au

There is no joy in being in the manager's seat when a nation is booted from the World Cup. No matter what the players did – or did not do – the finger of blame instantly points towards the sideline. From Sabri Lamouchi being sacked after Tunisia's first-game loss to Sweden, to Senegal and Czechia looking for replacements after going out in the group stage, there was little online or media sympathy for the bosses when the final whistle blew.

At times, even those who were successful were heavily criticized. Thomas Tuchel quickly shapeshifted from "swooning" sex symbol to under-performing German taking the blame for England's loss to Argentina in the semi-finals. The third-placed finish was the team's best result since winning way, way, way back in 1966.

The furious reactions highlight the ongoing problems of fandom, trolling and online incivility in media and sport. Previously, the sports media were the main medium for apportioning blame and directing it to supporters, but in the modern environment the journalists' hot takes are often well behind the wave of rage already posted and shared on social media.

By the journalists' World Cup deadlines, many of the lasting judgments had already been made. Whether it was the description of Australia manager Tony Popovic and his "disaster class" in Dallas, including allowing 18-year-old Lucas Herrington to take an ultimately missed penalty against Argentina, or the "Sack Tuchel now" X posts for his conservative tactical switch when leading against Lionel Messi's men, to whatever substitution backfired when the team you support left the tournament.

With the World Cup over by a week at the time of writing, it will take some time to sift through the more than 500,000 social media messages we collected across the event. But an initial exploration reflects pockets of anger and incivility during a tournament that ratchets up the levels of supporter passion – or obsession.

Social media trolling is not new, of course, and there are many examples of criticism and hate speech occurring, including content analysis and interview research in women's football. There has been less focus on the coaches, although male managers at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup were targeted more by female fans on social media. The US manager Vlatko Andonovski was one focus of complaint, with his team losing to Sweden in the Round of 16.

The comments are an indication of how the people in these positions have overall responsibility for the team – and the results. In the men's World Cup numerous coaches resigned after poor tournaments, with Scotland's Steve Clarke a notable example, stepping down just weeks after signing a four-year contract extension.

One of the advantages of the managers at these events is they are usually much older than the players, and therefore more mature. (Julian Nagelsmann was the youngest in charge this time, aged 38 when Germany lost to Paraguay in the Round of 32.) They have dealt with abuse from crowds over the years, and are better prepared to withstand the shouting from the media and the echoes from social media rage sphere.

Or they might not be on the socials at all, like Marcelo Bielsa, the 71-year-old Chilean who this time managed Uruguay to a group-stage exit. He missed the extensive online commentary about how his hiring had been a mistake.

However, Carlo Ancelotti, the 67-year-old Italian in charge of Brazil, posted on Instagram to his 18.7 million followers about how the "pain is deep" after the Round-of-16 exit, receiving more than 45,000 comments. There were positive replies among those messages, with people saying they were looking forward to him being back in 2030, but many others told him in varying degrees of intensity to go back to Italy, that he was not wanted, and a Brazilian should be in the dugout who understands the country.

Lionel Scaloni, the Argentina manager, managed to escape most of the criticism at home, especially in the online media, despite his team struggling throughout the final and not having a shot at goal until extra time. But he had the extra capital of winning in Qatar in 2022.

It wasn't just the football coaches who received torrents of social media criticism. The "manager" of FIFA, Gianni Infantino, was often a target for his extensive travel, the decision to install drinks breaks in each half, the price of tickets and the decision to overturn the red card for Folarin Balogun following a call from Donald Trump. "F*** Trump" and "F*** Infantino" posts appeared over these on-the-run rule shifts, and there was considerable satisfaction in non-US spaces of the internet when Belgium beat the USA 4-1.

More criticism followed as the tournament trophy was presented to Spain in New York, with Infantino failing to stop Trump from photo-bombing the on-stage celebration. Despite the widespread online shouting, both of these leaders kept their jobs.

Better than being where? The fragmented audience

We typically think of television as being a domestic medium. Sport is the exception. Screen sport invites and enables a wide range of practices of consumption. No-one goes to a local bar to watch a soap opera or a crime series or a documentary – that is why there are no “soap opera” bars. The appeal of sport, its gender specificities, its basis in the communal idea of the crowd, its live immediacy, its spectacular nature – ideal on a big screen – all these elements combined together to produce the sports bar. Nowadays, of course with the ubiquity of public large screens, in airports, hotels, shopping malls, city squares, opportunities to view top level live sport are numerous and diverse.

This ubiquity, in turn, combines with the typical nature of modern urban life – busy, rushed, full of movement and saturated with information. Consequently, if one is a sports fan, but also has a life outside sports viewing, viewing moments can become fragmentary. People may catch bits of football matches in shop windows, motorway service stations, whilst waiting for a train, killing time at an airport, or a shopping centre.

There are arguably two poles of viewing experience. The first typified by the sports bar or similar public space, can involve committed fans of one side gathering together, the need to arrive early to guarantee a seat, watching with passionate intensity, from build-up to post-mortem. This intensity of experience has given rise to the “watch party” where a group of people gather in a space, public or private, where the key ingredients are a very large screen and big speakers; a source of alcoholic drink, nibbles, and adequate space to celebrate.

The second is harder to sketch precisely because it tends to be smaller scale, more individual. It consists precisely of all the brief, fleeting, and fragmented moments when bits of a match may be observed. I have heard many people recount, in regard to the World Cup 2026, that there were far too many games to watch them all, so they have chosen a few key ones. Yet, consistently, they experience brief glimpses of others (I saw the first half hour, the second half; I turned off when it went into extra time; I turned on when it went to extra time; I only saw the highlights; I was home in time for the last 10 minutes).

In the UK, this was particularly striking. The major sport event viewing experience – live multiple cameras, action replay, slow motion, viewed on large screens, is customarily referred to as better than being there, and indeed, in many ways, so it is. However, watching a tournament staged across three countries (one, the USA, almost the size of Europe), and four time zones, relayed by two broadcasters one with a live studio in Brooklyn, NY and the other based in Salford, Lancashire, it is pertinent to respond, “better than being where?”

The matches were dispersed across space and time. In British Summer Time, games were mostly broadcast at start times between 17:00 and 02:00 the next day. BBC under budgetary pressure, elected to have its main studio in Salford, Lancashire, where the BBC Sports Department is based. ITV hired premises in Brooklyn with a New York skyline. The ITV setup signified “being there”, but as it was not actually attached to any of the venues, was it really any more or less “there” than Salford?

There was ample chance to experience the World Cup in immersive and complete forms – many venues set up big screens and beer gardens to facilitate this; indeed Prime Minister Keir Starmer even decreed that pubs could stay open till 5:00am, for the night that England’s game against Mexico kicked off in the Azteca Stadium, at 01:00am British Summer Time.

I am guessing, though, that those who saw every minute of all 104 games, were very much in the minority, and that the majority of viewers had a fragmentary mode of consuming the World Cup – seeing the whole of some games, significant parts (the second half, extra time) of others, while glimpsing short bits of yet others. A number of people have reported to me that after deciding NOT to watch England v Mexico (01:00BST) they mysteriously woke at some point between 01:00 and 04:00. Some watched the rest, some watched just a bit, some glanced at the score and then returned to bed and sleep. Some were confused at the schedule – the match was delayed by around 55 minutes by a storm. Waking and needing the toilet, I picked up my phone to read in quick succession, about a foul, a VAR consultation, an England red card, and a third England goal. Calculating that with 30 minutes to go, and a two goal margin, England could probably hold on. I went back to sleep.

My point is that to understand major television sport spectacle, we need new models of audience behaviour that takes into account these diverse and fragmentary modes of consuming the spectacle. Even in the case of the final, supposedly the culminatory moment when, in hyberbolic terms, “the whole world is watching”, I know several people who turned off and went to bed long before the end.



Prof. Garry Whannel

*Emeritus Professor
of Media Cultures,
University of
Bedfordshire, UK*

Garry Whannel is a writer, and researcher, specialising in media sport, culture and politics. He has written or co-written several books including Understanding the Olympics, 2013, 2016, 2020) Culture Politics and Sport: Blowing The Whistle Revisited, (2008); Media Sport Stars, Masculinities and Moralities (2002); and Fields in Vision: Television Sport and Cultural Transformation (1992). He has lived in central London for many years, cooks, writes plays, and plays piano, clarinet and guitar, all badly.

Email: garry.whannel@me.com

Blog: Garry Whannel Works and Plans (WordPress)

The World Cup's newest disruption for sports journalism is generative AI



Dr. Fahad Humayun

Assistant Professor in the Ball State University College of Communication, Information and Media. He teaches and conducts research on disruption in journalism, particularly sports journalism. His research has been published in prestigious journals such as Digital Journalism and Journalism Studies, and he is a recipient of research awards from the International Communication Association (ICA) and the Association for Education in Mass Communication and Journalism (AEJMC).

BlueSky: @fahadhumayun.com

Email: fahad.humayun@bsu.edu

The FIFA World Cup has long served as a site where new media technologies become part of everyday sports consumption. Television transformed the tournament into a global live event. The internet facilitated continuous news coverage, while social media enabled audiences to participate directly in public discourse that had previously been mediated primarily by journalists. Following this tradition, for the 2026 World Cup, FIFA expanded its digital strategy further by partnering with TikTok to introduce 'Creator Correspondents' producing platform-specific coverage alongside traditional broadcast journalism.

On the face of it, generative artificial intelligence seems to represent another stage in this evolution. OpenAI introduced a dedicated World Cup experience within ChatGPT that enables users to access fixtures, standings, knockout brackets and match information through a conversational interface. The platform does not produce original sports reporting; it represents a change in how audiences access journalistic content. Instead of consuming sports news through sports news' own platforms for tournament coverage, audiences can interact with generative AI to obtain sports news produced by the sports journalists. This is another step in a series of attempts to swing the point of interaction from news organizations to AI platforms, weakening the direct relationship between audiences and the journalists whose reporting underpins much of the information users consume.

As AI platforms make their entry in mediating sports information, the central challenge for journalism is preserving its institutional visibility. This challenge is two-dimensional. First is the visibility at the institutional level: for example, the introduction of ChatGPT's World Cup interface has generated attention primarily within the technology press rather than the sports media. OpenAI announced the feature through its product release notes as one of several enhancements to the ChatGPT application, alongside pronunciation tools and interface improvements. Subsequent coverage appeared largely in technology publications that evaluated the feature as part of ChatGPT's expanding capabilities rather than as a development in sports journalism. OpenAI even partnered with Lionel Messi as part of their FIFA World Cup and represented the company's largest consumer marketing campaign to date; but the announcement received relatively little attention from mainstream U.S. news organizations.

The second challenge is at the level of the platform: news organizations have spent two decades adapting to platforms that mediated audience attention while continuing to depend on referral traffic to sustain advertising revenue and audience loyalty. Generative AI introduces a different economic logic. Rather than encouraging users to continue their information journey on

publishers' websites, AI systems increasingly complete that journey within the platform itself. Researchers note that news publishers are increasingly concerned that AI assistants will satisfy users' informational needs without generating corresponding traffic to sources, accelerating the decline in search referrals that many news organizations have already experienced.

The implications are both editorial and economic. Over the past two decades, news organizations have adapted to successive changes in digital distribution, including search engines and social media platforms. Generative AI introduces another intermediary between producers and audiences. When audiences obtain summaries and explanations without visiting news websites, producers lose the opportunities to develop audience loyalty and advertising revenue. Match reports, tactical analysis and tournament explainers are the visible products of sports journalism, but they depend upon reporting practices such as attending press conferences, interviewing athletes and coaches, cultivating sources and verifying information. Generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT do not perform these journalistic functions. But they are simply reorganizing information that has largely been produced elsewhere. If generative AI platforms become a routine entry point for sports information, they may weaken the visibility of the journalistic labor on which they depend.

Generative AI use of the FIFA World Cup to make its entry as a digital intermediary shifts the interpretation of media innovation from sports journalism to technology journalism while simultaneously redefining the relationship between publishers and audiences by making AI platforms, rather than news organizations, the primary point of access to sports information. This development also raises concerns about attribution and informational authority. Research on the "AI turn" in journalism suggests that generative systems alter journalism's relationship with audiences by relocating interpretation and distribution within platform infrastructures. Evidence supports this concern: users are less likely to visit original sources when summaries appear, reducing publishers' visibility and weakening the connection between reporting and authorship.

The emergence of generative AI in World Cup coverage should therefore be understood as an institutional development rather than merely a technological one. This shift raises fundamental questions about the future visibility of sports journalism, the recognition of journalistic labor and the institutional authority of news organizations. As generative AI becomes more deeply integrated into global sporting events, the challenge for sports journalism will extend beyond technological adaptation to preserving its role as the primary producer, interpreter and verifier of sports knowledge.

Ten days on Fox TV's planet FIFA

Before most games at the World Cup, Fox's pregame broadcasts would linger in the tunnel prior to the teams walking out for national anthems. As the Iran team gathered at Los Angeles' SoFi Stadium on June 15th for its opening match, the chatter on the broadcast turned to the players. "It doesn't matter what happens outside the pitch. The (players') focus is on the game. The pitch is immaculate; the weather is beautiful," said Obi John Mikel, the Nigeria legend doing studio work for Fox in the United States. "Enjoy football. Football is what unites us and brings us together."

This was as close to as Fox's pregame came to fully describing the surreality of Iran's presence in the World Cup. Its team was walking into a stadium on the soil of a country that had been bombing its territory for more than three months. Unmentioned in an hour of pregame also was Iran's sudden change of training location from Tucson to Tijuana and demands by the U.S. government that Iran's players and staff spend as little time as possible on American soil. Those were realities from Planet Earth.

After coding ten days of Fox TV's pre-match programming, those broadcasts seemed to be emanating from Planet FIFA.

The buildup to every mega-event starts with the political overhang of the host country. There was Putin's consolidation of power in 2018, Qatar's labor practices and LGBTQ+ policies in 2022, and the United States' violence toward immigrants in 2026. It is a cliché to say that once the matches begin concerns about the political situations recede into the background. Attention goes where people direct it. Rightsholders exercise agenda-setting power over the mega-event. Once the games started on Planet FIFA, Fox made an affirmative choice to never look away from the pitch.

Sporting mega-events are elaborate television shows. FIFA's contractors provide game images internationally, and each national rightsholder provides their own commentary and storytelling. But games are only part of the show. Shoulder programming – pre-games, post-games, late night shows – is where the production builds the stakes and introduces characters to the broader audience. Even Americans who have club allegiances during the 47 months between World Cups were meeting players and encountering stories they might not have known.

Rightsholders at megaevents can maroon us on Planet FIFA (or Planet Super Bowl or Planet Olympics). In the United States, where soccer's national media footprint is relatively small, the agenda-setting power may be immense. The exertion of narrative control holds immense commercial value for FIFA. And providing that creates a financial windfall for broadcasters. On Planet FIFA, soccer "brings the world together" but leaves unsaid why we might be separated.

The point here is not to complain about journalistic malpractice but rather to contextualize the types of journalism in this coverage. Independent sports media is in decline, and the ability of smaller outlets to get our attention relies on the whims of algorithms. Fox did have a crew of reporters traversing the continent doing stand-up reports, but their reports only really focused on what people said in the match-day-minus-one press conferences. Who would be healthy? What tactical approach would teams take? This is what in-house reporters for team sites prioritize as well. When Fox left the pitch or the press conference it was to display fan culture like the Netherlands' fan bus or else to reach back into history for some of the perennial contenders. Even an attempt to take on a real historical wrong, Canadian soccer's exclusion of members of the First Nations, was in service of the local organizing committee's narrative of inclusion. That is worth something, and it had a space in Fox's first day of coverage.

But for the most part, stories about the exclusion of a Somali referee to the demands placed on the Iran team to the struggles that Cape Verde goalkeeper Vozinha had getting a visa for his mother to attend matches, would come from elsewhere. In Vozinha's case, Fox's telecast most focused on his spike in Instagram followers. While an ESPN news alert told us Ghana's Thomas Partey was banned from entering Canada due to rape charges the Fox studio hosts merely referred to "his absence" in a tactical discussion.

Planet FIFA is not hermetically sealed despite the best efforts. Missives from Planet Earth occasionally sneak through, such as when DR Congo star Joane Wissa's gave a postmatch interview in which he said, "Back home in the east there's a war. We know we have to fight and compete for them." I am entirely unclear how much the average American knows about what is happening Congo right now.

I do know that the atmosphere on Planet FIFA filtered that out. Wissa's statement went unaddressed any further and discussion moved on to international megastar Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal.

Planet FIFA continued to spin on its preferred axis.



Dr. Michael Mirer

Associate Professor in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Department of Communication. He researches the shifting boundaries of journalism in the digital age with an emphasis on sports media.

Bluesky: @michaelmirer.bsky.social

Email: mirer@uwm.edu

Beyond the pitch: How The Athletic addressed the larger framework of the World Cup



Dr. Xavier Ramon

Associate Professor
at the Department of
Communication of
Universitat Pompeu Fabra.
His research focuses on
sports communication and
media accountability. Serves
as co-chair of the IAMCR
Media, Communication
& Sport section and the
ECREA Communication and
Sport Temporary Working
Group.

Email: xavier.ramon@upf.edu



Dr. Christopher D. Tulloch

Associate Professor
at the Department of
Communication of
Universitat Pompeu Fabra.
His research focuses on
sports communication,
sportswashing and
sports media innovation.
Member of POLCOM-GRP
Research Group-UPF.
Course module leader in
Sports Communication
Management at the
Barcelona School of
Management.

Email: christopher.tulloch@upf.edu

The Athletic has established itself as “a dynamic force in the sports media marketplace” through comprehensive coverage and high-quality editorial practices. Before the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the outlet announced its multi-platform coverage featuring daily podcasts, reporting from 16 host cities and the launch of “The Athletic FC: Daily Cup” show. Considering that sport can only “be understood in the light of the historical, social, technical, political and economic contexts that run through it”, we set off to examine how *The Athletic* engaged with these dimensions. During the competition timeframe, the outlet published over 150 articles evaluating the tournament’s larger framework through a focus on five core areas.

The on-going sport/politics nexus

On July 5th, *The Athletic*’s Dan Sheldon and Adam Crafton revealed the overturn of USMNT player Polarin Balogun’s red card following Donald Trump’s intervention. Articles relating to this “were featured on the front pages of over 35 nationally-distributed newspapers globally”. Despite FIFA claiming the independence of its judicial bodies, *The Athletic* did not refrain from mentioning that “the Trump administration and lawyers it recruited were part of a coordinated lobbying effort that put pressure on FIFA to rule in Balogun’s favor” and highlighted UEFA’s subsequent criticism alongside demands from European lawmakers and FairSquare to investigate Infantino’s role.

Beyond this controversy, the publication reflected on the travel bans imposed by the U.S. State Department on fans from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Iran and Haiti while updating readers about Omar Artan, a Somali referee denied entry to the U.S. Prominently, the outlet highlighted Iran’s challenging circumstances due to travel restrictions and also referred to FIFA’s ban on pre-revolutionary flags. Addressing the Falkland Islands dispute, *The Athletic* provided context on Argentina’s chants and scrutinized both Argentina’s celebration with a banner in the semi-final and subsequent White House support.

The increasing commercialization of global sport

Following concerns over overpriced tickets, *The Athletic* highlighted empty seats visible around hospitality areas. During the competition, the outlet monitored the rise of ticket prices on resale sites, which reached unprecedented levels for the final. *The Athletic* also revealed that the Attorney General of New Jersey intended to continue investigating ticketing practices including “FIFA’s use of variable pricing, the perception of scarcity in available tickets, as well as FIFA’s invention of a higher-tiered and higher-priced ‘front’ row category after millions of tickets had already been sold.” Additional financial scrutiny appeared in “The BookKeeper – Exploring FIFA’s finances” and articles exposing FIFA’s plan to sell MetLife Stadium grass for \$11.2M.

Weather challenges

The Athletic’s meteorological coverage transcended discussions regarding hydration breaks. Meteorologist Aaron Mentkowski delivered daily updates on what has been “the warmest edition since the previous World Cup in North America”, offering insights into

the impact of extreme heat and humidity, the logistical challenges occasioned by thunderstorms and heat mitigation measures to assist fans. Furthermore, leading sports scientists were consulted to analyze what happens to players’ bodies under extreme heat conditions.

Social challenges: protests, security and deprivation

The publication noted that the tournament “kicked off with co-hosts Mexico meeting South Africa in Mexico City against a backdrop of significant civil unrest and anti-government protests”. Jacob Whitehead’s special report, titled “Searching for Mexico’s disappeared in the shadow of the World Cup”, illustrated the grief of families of disappeared people to whom “the presence of the World Cup is unwelcome while their sons and daughters remain unfound”. Focusing on the U.S., the outlet examined the SoFI union’s “concerns about the role of ICE at the World Cup” and scrutinized firearm regulations in host states. The Athletic also investigated about social deprivation and the fentanyl crisis in Vancouver and Seattle, signaling that “as cash sloshes around this tournament, the gap between Little Saigon, Downtown Eastside and the world beyond is only getting bigger”.

Sexual violence and discrimination issues

Sexual violence was recognized as “the story of the biggest World Cup in history that nobody wants to talk about”. Cases involving Ryan Mendes, Achraf Hakimi and Thomas Partey served as a springboard to discuss violence against women and the absence of consistent and clear protocols. Journalists also analyzed football-related domestic violence and the launch of the ‘Support is a team sport’ campaign in England.

Discrimination debates featured prominently

throughout the coverage. In June, the outlet reported on a VAR referee accused of making ‘White power’ gesture and discussed the inclusivity of the tournament in the light of the World Cup Pride Match. It also critiqued Rafael van der Vaart’s remarks towards Japanese players, Bastian Schweinsteiger’s description of African football and Abigail Velez’s comments about Bosnia. By July, debates followed on Paraguayan senator Celeste Amarilla’s racist remarks towards Kylian Mbappe and former Spanish PM Mariano Rajoy’s comments about the France national team.

Concluding remarks

Traditionally, critical media discourses in the run-up to major tournaments are quickly eclipsed once the sporting competition begins. By contrast, *The Athletic*’s coverage of the 2026 FIFA World Cup offers a prime example of a sustained engagement with complex issues beyond the field. Through the depth and diversity of its reporting, the outlet demonstrated its ability to transcend the ‘stick to sports’ mandate that has historically constrained sports journalism. Going forward, *The Athletic* should continue scrutinizing the larger framework during the World Cup’s aftermath and ahead of future mega-events like the Los Angeles 2028 Summer Olympics.

The revival of newsletters in the coverage of sports mega-events

To address the decline in web traffic caused by the disruption of generative AI search engines, news organizations have been forced to rethink their editorial strategies across the platforms and channels on which they operate. Several studies show that Google AI Overviews have led fewer users to click through to read the content behind news stories, as the automatically generated summaries provided by search engines are often sufficient for their needs.

In the era of algorithms, where clickbait and page-view volume seem to lose relevance, news organizations are increasingly investing in journalistic content that cannot easily be summarized or replicated by AI, either because it is extremely recent or, more importantly, because it is unique and authentic. Such content includes local coverage, scoops, investigative journalism, first-person on-the-ground reporting, and breaking news.

As part of this necessary editorial shift, legacy media brands have strengthened their production of email newsletters, an old medium that has transformed into a core publishing strategy, a curated product delivered on a person's inbox without interference from AI-powered algorithms, social media noise and non-stop push notifications. These newsletters, which allow news publishers to strengthen ties with their audiences and build communities around them, have proliferated to delve into highly specialized and niche content, such sports.

Newsletters emerged again during the 2026 men's FIFA World Cup as an opportunity for sports media outlets to create added value to their coverage by providing exclusive insights, curiosities and behind-the-scenes of the tournament reflecting the personal perspective either of a special correspondent at the event or a prominent journalist in the newsroom specialized in international football.

In this case, email turns out to be the place where fans/subscribers receive and expect to find more information from those personal brands they know and trust, and also some extra content about the mega-event they are already hooked on—and about which they need to know more—so they can enjoy it up when watching the matches live.

Most major sports media outlets and the sports sections of general-interest media sent out a free-subscription newsletter during the nearly forty days of competition. These email publications were used by sports media outlets not only to highlight and redistribute their own reports, analyses, and features by their special correspondents—already available on their websites—but also to curate original data, tips and updates thereby creating a unique, distinctive product within the platform.

The Athletic, for instance, launched 'The World Cup Briefing', a new daily pop-up which was added to their flagship soccer newsletter, 'The Athletic FC'. This newsletter, self-defined as "a quick rundown of updates and insights for every fan", was part of a

broad strategy to develop a multiplatform coverage in which dozens of journalists participated to take readers inside the action. The world's largest sports newsroom showed its own editorial muscle having reporters inside the stadium for each of the 104 matches of the tournament.

The Athletic's World Cup newsletter demonstrated a clear strategy for engaging football fans through a combination of daily match recaps, data-driven analysis, and explanatory graphics that identified the key factors influencing each game. It also presented tournament predictions from experts and reporters associated with different teams, offering a more pluralistic and impartial overview of the competition. Furthermore, the newsletter fostered audience engagement through interactive features such as polls and prediction games centred on upcoming matches.

Reporting beyond the pitch

Geopolitical storylines inevitably intersected with this World Cup and took center stage, demonstrating once again how sports journalism is not confined solely to match recaps any more.

These issues around the 'beautiful game' played a central role in 'The World Behind' the Cup, a newsletter that *The Guardian* dedicated to World Cup history which ran for eight issues before the tournament began. This publication, led by the football writer Jonathan Wilson, served to provide sufficient broad context for the mega-event and to offer the reader key insights for better understanding the participating national teams.

Another newsletter that broadened the thematic scope of the sporting event was 'Reuters Inside Track', an email product delivered three times a week. Edited by the sports correspondent Aadi Nair, Reuters highlighted stories from the stadiums but also around them, such as business impact and environmental sustainability controversies around the sporting event. Apart from results, previews and analysis, the newsletter was enhanced by the use of Reuters' own photo service and some outstanding data visualizations from their graphics department.

'Mundial 2026' newsletter launched by *El País* exemplified the most typical structure of an email publication on a mega-event: welcome commentary section, main stories the day before, feature opinion pieces, agenda outlook and the display of some collaborative windows for the community of readers to share their memories and experiences about FIFA World Cup.

At the same time, newsletters helped bring journalists a little closer to their readers, showing them not only how and why they took some editorial decisions, but also letting them know what it was like in the newsroom during the competition's most thrilling moments. That is how *El País* described their feelings the day after Spain became men's football world champions for the second time.



Dr. José Luis Rojas Torrijos

*Associate Professor,
Department of Journalism
II, Universidad de Sevilla,
Spain. His research
focuses on sports
journalism, ethics and
stylebooks.*

Email: jlrojas@us.es

Twitter: [@rojasstorrijos](https://twitter.com/rojasstorrijos)

'All eyes on us': World Cup framing in Mexican and Canadian mainstream news



Dr. Cecilia Arregui Olivera

Assistant Professor at the Media and Journalism Studies Department, Aarhus University. Her research centers on conflict, news production, and media audiences in sports mega-events.

Email: ca@cc.au.dk

Website: <https://www.au.dk/en/ca@cc.au.dk/>



Dr. Vitaly Kazakov

AUFF and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions European Postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University. His research interests include politics and mediation of sport in multilingual, cross-cultural, comparative settings.

Email: vitaly.kazakov@cc.au.dk

Website: <https://www.au.dk/en/vitaly.kazakov@cc.au.dk/>



Dr. Kirsten Frandsen

Professor at the Media and Journalism Studies Department, Aarhus University. Published extensively on media and sport. PI on the project Soft 'power play' at the FIFA World Cup.

Email: imvkf@cc.au.dk

Website: <https://www.au.dk/imvkf@cc.au.dk/>

While the United States has taken center stage in international media as the primary host of the FIFA World Cup 2026, we focus here on mainstream media coverage in Canada and Mexico, the less visible co-hosts. A decade ago, the United Bid emphasized “global unity” and the historic ties between the three North American nations. Since then, President Donald Trump suggested Canada becomes the 51st state and threatened military intervention against Mexican drug cartels, manifesting alternative visions of continental political relationships. Against this geopolitically charged backdrop, we observed how collective identification and national identity were expressed in Mexican and Canadian media during the ten weeks leading up to the tournament.

Mainstream Mexican outlets published numerous daily World Cup articles, though many were brief and sparsely sourced. Legacy newspaper *El Universal* featured some in-depth analyses and opinion pieces. Broadcaster *Televisa*'s news division, *N+*, offered less frequent coverage, including commemorative content on coins or license plates, while *TV Azteca* led the charge on sports reporting, highlighting star players, injuries, and coaching decisions. Altogether, Mexican outlets primarily focused on the country's role as a host. There were constant references to Mexico's tournament hosting history in 1970 and 1986, with an overall tone of excitement and anticipation tempered by criticism of infrastructural challenges, delays, and security concerns. Political reporting primarily covered national and regional developments, including statements from officials and much focus on the multiple protests leading up to the opening match. Several unions and civil groups threatened boycotts to advance their political demands. In comparison, international politics received limited attention, but articles did highlight, for example, tensions between the U.S. and Iran and Gianni Infantino's remarks.

In Canada, outlets like CBC, CTV, and *The Globe and Mail* published fewer but lengthier and more in-depth World Cup-related stories, focusing less on the sporting side of the event and more on the political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. While Canada has recently hosted the women's and men's under-20 FIFA World Cups and the Olympics, this tournament naturally prompted articles about its historic and flagship nature and its significance to the country. Stories about the iconic World Cup trophy touring across major Canadian cities, or a chance to showcase Canada's growing interest and popularity of football emphasized the framing that Canadians can and should “be proud that this sport is ours.”

Outside the sports-focused reporting, pre-tournament media build-up delved into Canadian views on geopolitical tensions with the U.S. One story, featured by all three outlets, articulated concerns from local politicians, academics, and activists about the presence of ICE agents in

Canadian cities ahead of the World Cup and fears this may cause among guests of the tournament, framing it as a threat to Canadian sovereignty. Even ostensibly apolitical topics like Canadian artists' contributions to the tournament's cultural program included references to political tension between and within co-hosting countries as manifested in the cultural sphere. Debates over Canadian identity and integrity featured on the news as the tournament progressed, addressing internal threats like Alberta's separatist movement and external ones like U.S. annexation rhetoric while simultaneously framing the FIFA World Cup 2026 as a unifying event for Canada and its relations with its neighbors.

These overall differences in reporting stem from Mexico and Canada's distinct media and sports systems. Canada boasts a state-supported, highly autonomous, and professionalized media, yet facing disruption from digital media and content creators. In Mexico, according to the 2025 Digital News Report, media remains highly commercial and dominated by a few major players, with journalists facing precarity and threats to their integrity. While football has long been central to Mexican national identity, bolstered by hosting the FIFA World Cup on two previous occasions, Canada's football culture is more modest but has grown steadily, further spurred by the hosting of the Women's World Cup in 2015.

However, important cornerstones of both countries' national identities historically feature contrasting themselves vis-a-vis their dominant neighbor, the United States. In 2001, Dennis Sumara, Brent Davis, and Linda Laidlaw noted that “[w]hile Canadians can't seem to agree on what they are, they have no trouble at all agreeing” they are not U.S. Americans. Claudio Lomnitz argues in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* that external forces certainly play a role in identity formation. This dynamic is evident in World Cup-related coverage, where both Canada and Mexico adopt an ‘us vs. them’ narrative with the U.S. as the ‘other.’ For example, an article from *TV Azteca* referred to Mexico as the “ideal host,” highlighting the historic feat as the first country to host the tournament three times. Anthropologist Roger Magazine echoed this sentiment in a February 2026 episode of *The FootPol Podcast*, noting Mexican “envy,” “resentment,” and “discontent” over the U.S. taking center stage, while Mexicans view their country as a more fitting host given its deep football culture. Decisions, he noted, are often driven by “world power” rather than passion for the sport. In Canada, an article from CTV emphasized how they do not “accept co-operation with ICE” and do not want Canada “following in their [American] footsteps.” In sum, even with their editorial focus set on different issues, both Canadian and Mexican media seemed to have struck a balance between celebratory and a more serious, critical tone.

Roblox and the mediatization of soccer: the case of FIFA Super Soccer

FIFA has become active on the digital gaming platform Roblox over the past few years. The organization took over a soccer game on the platform called Super League Soccer during the 2025 Club World Cup, where professional soccer teams compete against one another. User engagement was high: over a two-month period, the game drew 20 million gameplay sessions and 61% of surveyed players reported that the game made them plan to watch the Club World Cup. By the following year, when national teams began competing in the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the game had been rebranded FIFA Super Soccer, accumulated over 1.1 billion visits, and averaged 1.5 million gameplay sessions a day.

FIFA's presence on Roblox is part of its broader expansion into gaming and its attempt to grow a youth following, particularly among Gen Z and Alpha audiences who, as one industry insider put it, "aren't just watching but actively engaging in sports." FIFA Super Soccer exposes users to recognizable features of the World Cup: they compete for official national teams and sponsor logos appear on jerseys and arena sideboards. We argue that Roblox influences the game in meaningful ways, and that FIFA has adapted to accommodate its unique commercialized logics.

In making this argument, we treat FIFA's involvement with Roblox as a case study of the mediatization of soccer in the digital realm. Mediatization posits that sport and media are not simply interrelated. Rather, sport becomes embedded in media and communication practices to such a degree that those practices transform the act of playing and consuming sport. Applied to FIFA Super Soccer, this concept illustrates that global soccer is not simply being extended into digital games. Instead, the way youth audiences engage with World Cup soccer is being reshaped by platforms like Roblox.

Scholar Natalie Coulter argues that Roblox is not easily defined. It functions simultaneously as a game, social media, space for content creation and consumption, marketplace, metaverse, and platform. This conceptualization of Roblox is essential to understanding how it is shaping FIFA's efforts to gamify soccer for youth audiences. Specifically, it incorporates user engagement and peer-to-peer exchange through an interface that promotes and sells branded products and commodifies user labor.

This dynamic of capitalizing on user-generated content was evident in the development of FIFA Super Soccer as a game, even before FIFA became involved. A student at King's College London originally built a basic soccer game on Roblox, which the gaming studio Gamefam later acquired and turned into Super Soccer League (Bernstein, 2025, Dec. 22). After FIFA ended its long-term partnership with Electronic Arts in 2022, it began

working with Gamefam and eventually re-branded the game.

The reliance on user-generated content extends beyond the Roblox platform itself, into recorded FIFA Super Soccer gameplay posted on YouTube. Here, the act of playing the game becomes a product consumed on a second digital platform, generating user-created content across multiple sites. Players not only engage with the game using Roblox's interface but also post edited videos of their gameplay on YouTube, splicing in memes and other entertaining material. Throughout, their narration conforms to some existing broadcast standards and deviates from others. It is part live-sport color commentator and part self-narration typical of content-creator videos.

One such video opens with a voiceover in which the player describes his attempt to climb the game's "pro server" ranking system. In doing so, he demonstrates the kind of sustained engagement Roblox rewards. He has accumulated enough points to access a pro server, which offers a superior experience. For instance, he gains access to a 7-on-7 match rather than a 4-on-4 one that may include AI-controlled players, a badge marketing his achievement, and the chance to play alongside, and against, others who have invested comparable time and skill.

This example demonstrates the distinct logic of Roblox at work. It produces an immersive digital environment in which users are simultaneously creators, consumers, and commentators. Within this context, World Cup soccer becomes a digitized product both created and consumed by youth audiences. This practice, in turn, influences the relationship between Roblox players and the FIFA World Cup. For some, enjoyment of live broadcasts of the tournament may be enhanced by digital gameplay. Others may be motivated to watch the tournament for the first time. Still others may limit their engagement to the digital realm. In every case, the World Cup is mediated through digital engagement with a gamified version of the sport.

By using the Roblox game FIFA Super Soccer as a case study to examine the mediatization of soccer in the digital realm, we have shown that sport is no longer simply a platform for advertising and branding. Rather, sport accommodates new ways of commercializing sport in the digital realm through user-generated content and engagement.



Dr. Estée Fresco

Associate Professor of Communication & Media Studies, York University (Canada). In 2025/2026, she was a Visiting Scholar hosted by the Center for Sports Communication and Media, Communication Studies, University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of the award-winning book, Red Mitten Nationalism: Sport, Communication and Settler Colonialism in Canada.

Email: efresco@yorku.ca



Dr. Natalie Coulter

Associate Professor in Communication and Media Studies at York University. She is currently leading a SSHRC funded grant on Roblox, and is author of Kids, KidTech and Digital Capitalism: The Fight for our Digital Futures (2026), and co-author of Media and Communication in Canada.

Email: ncoulter@yorku.ca

Political framing of the World Cup in distinct media systems: the case for comparative, interdisciplinary research



Dr. Kirsten Frandsen

Professor at the Media and Journalism Studies Department, Aarhus University. Published extensively on media and sport. PI on the project Soft 'power play' at the FIFA World Cup.

Email: imvkf@cc.au.dk

Website: <https://www.au.dk/imvkf@cc.au.dk/>



Dr. Cecilia Arregui Olivera

Assistant Professor at the Media and Journalism Studies Department, Aarhus University. Her research centers on conflict, news production, and media audiences in sports mega-events.

Email: ca@cc.au.dk

Website: <https://www.au.dk/en/ca@cc.au.dk/>



Dr. Vitaly Kazakov

AUFF and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions European Postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University. His research interests include politics and mediation of sport in multilingual, cross-cultural, comparative settings.

Email: vitaly.kazakov@cc.au.dk

Website: <https://www.au.dk/en/vitaly.kazakov@cc.au.dk/>

In the lead-up and early days of the FIFA World Cup 2026, agenda-setting Danish public service media predicted the event would become “the most intense and political, ever.” This interpretation—or framing—of the event, along with a hybrid coverage style that interwove narratives on sporting performances, implicit or explicit economic considerations and, to a lesser extent, geopolitical issues, mirrored the approach Danish media had adopted during the Qatar World Cup in 2022. This continuity underlines how journalistic practices, interpretations, and shifting balance between critical and performative perspectives are shaped by broader contextual structures. The strategic choices, practices, and behaviors of individual journalists and media organizations are rooted in their specific professional, social, and cultural contexts, which in turn reflect widely shared societal values—among politicians, audiences, and institutions—about the roles and obligations of media, the role of the state, and its relationship to society at large.

These values and contexts certainly differ across regions. They are grounded in historical trajectories, relate to political cultures and, over time, have solidified diverse media and sport systems across the world. While globalization has, arguably, made certain dimensions in those systems more uniform, some regions continue to have distinctive characteristics in both media and sport systems. For instance, the Nordic region maintains a media system with features of its own that differentiate it from others, boasting a strong public service media tradition that keeps adapting to new technologies, a high level of professionalism and institutional self-regulation, frequent state subsidies, and support and general high trust in the media. Additionally, recent research has indicated that sports events create liminal spaces that temporarily put journalistic norms aside, while others reveal that journalistic role performances in sports news are less diverse across the globe compared to other beats. In this context, a comparative study of media and audience interpretations of the FIFA World Cup 2026 in culturally and politically different contexts can deepen our understanding of how such structural and cultural forces co-shape popular interpretations of global sports mega-events today. Accordingly, we have centered on Mexico and Canada, two of the World Cup co-hosts with distinct media and sport systems of their own, as our other article in this collection illustrates.

The FIFA World Cup 2026 was a mega-event with global reach, much like its predecessors. It engaged, and was co-constructed by, a wide array of actors with diverse economic agendas and, arguably, more conflicting political interests than ever before. As such, it has become a prime example of how populist politics operate and illustrating the pivotal role of media—its dynamics, formats, and narratives—in shaping political discourse. The mediatization of politics had already reached a new

level in Donald Trump’s U.S., but it now intertwines with a highly mediatized, commercialized, and emotionally charged global sporting event for political gains. For instance, the largely successful spectacle, coming after eighteen months of a highly polarizing administration, could influence the midterm elections approaching later in the year.

To date, research on the mediatization of sport has tended to downplay significant political dynamics increasingly present in elite sports and big events. Similarly, studies on the mediatization of politics have rarely addressed the important role of entertaining media formats, emotional engagement, and audience participation, reflecting a restricted understanding of politics as rational. These complexities converge in the case of the FIFA World Cup 2026, offering a rich opportunity for interdisciplinary research. This includes examining broader patterns, themes, and nuances in how media and journalism framed the event, as well as exploring how media audiences’ cognitive interpretations, emotional investments and communal, ritual engagement with such a commercialized global spectacle are informed by today’s highly polarized political and media landscapes.

The complex organization of the FIFA World Cup 2026, with the U.S. dominating and politically pressuring its co-hosts, Canada and Mexico, while also being at war with another participant nation, Iran, added further layers of interest. Firstly, because the event was embedded in significant differences in contextual political, media, and sporting cultures. This clearly prompts interpretations of the World Cup and its symbolic power in relation to cultural and political identity formation processes in different directions—both by media actors and audiences—not the least in the hosting contexts where the event has called for intense political and economic investment. Moreover, political tensions among the three host nations and the unequal distribution of power and mutual dependencies underscore clear inequalities, positioning the U.S. at the center and Canada and Mexico on the periphery. Yet, culturally, the dynamic is less straightforward, as Canadian and Mexican mainstream media, political figures, and other actors were able to leverage the mega-event’s symbolic power to assert their national identities. For example, Mexican narratives celebrated football as a cornerstone of their cultural identity, highlighting their role as exceptional hosts, while Canadian narratives linked football to ice hockey and multiculturalism as defining features of their national character. Perspectives from these two co-host nations add critical nuance and complexity to the overarching framing and interpretation of the FIFA World Cup 2026. These nuances would have got lost should we have only focused our analysis on global media outlets. This is why we call for deeper comparative, interdisciplinary perspectives to better interpret such events in different contexts.

From heroes to villains: how the media shaped the image of the Czech national team at the World Cup

The media coverage of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, such with any other major sporting event, creates stories that often culminate in triumph or end in disappointment. This broader mechanism may also be evident in Czech sports journalism, where media coverage appears to generate high expectations surrounding the national team's success and, following disappointing performances, shifts attention toward assigning responsibility to individual actors.

The qualitative analysis of more than 300 articles published by Sport.cz, iSport.cz, and iDnes.cz revealed five distinct stages in the media framing of the Czech national football team during the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The examples presented below serve as illustrations of the dominant narratives identified in each stage.

During the opening phase of the tournament, before the first match of their national team, the three Czech online news outlets predominantly centered their content on expectations, optimism, and hope, in light of their first appearance at the World Cup since 2006. The Czech national team qualified after a dramatic play-off run, where they won two penalty shoot-outs against Ireland and Denmark. As a result, the players, together with the head coach Miroslav Koubek, were portrayed as national heroes.

The articles framed them as capable of progressing further in the tournament, considering the competition between South Korea, South Africa and Mexico and the fact that three of four teams in the group qualified for the knockout stage. For example, they highlighted the strengths of the Czech team and suggested that the opponents viewed them as a serious threat.

The second stage was labelled as still largely supportive, although increasingly critical. Explicit support for the Czech national team before the second game and then before the decisive group-stage match was present mainly in interviews (for example, with the captain Ladislav Krejčí) or in stories about young players that presented their potential and emphasized the importance of the upcoming fixture. On the other hand, some journalists in their own analysis or commentaries pointed out the weaknesses and advised: "Stop living in an illusion. The players must admit their mistakes."

The third stage can be characterized as criticism and disappointment, reflecting the immediate media reaction following the Czech Republic's elimination from the tournament. Already on the day of the decisive defeat, headlines included similar expressions such as "Czech Misery", or even much harsher: "Adiós, World Cup! The National Team Exits the Tournament Humiliated After a Debacle, Finishing Bottom of the Group". The latter one illustrates the use of highly emotional language. Similar texts described

the tournament as a disaster, a source of despair, or sad reality, framing the Czech participation as a significant failure rather than simply an unsuccessful sporting performance.

The fourth stage, blame, illustrates a further shift in media framing. During the five days following the Czech Republic's elimination, coverage moved away from evaluating individual matches and increasingly focused on identifying those responsible for the disappointing outcome. Headlines such as "Nothing but Shame Remains! The 'Glorious' World Cup Qualification Ended in Complete Failure" illustrated this shift. The dominant frame no longer concerned sporting performance itself but rather responsibility and the causes of failure, with particular attention directed towards head coach Miroslav Koubek, accused of being responsible for the "toxic atmosphere", and the leadership of the Football Association of the Czech Republic.

The final stage can be labelled as accountability and change. At this point, media attention shifted towards discussing potential solutions and the future direction of Czech football. Coverage increasingly focused on questions of who should replace head coach Miroslav Koubek, what structural reforms were needed, and how Czech football could become more competitive at the international level. Rather than analyzing individual performances on the pitch, journalists framed the tournament as evidence of broader systemic shortcomings, using the World Cup as a catalyst for debates about the future of Czech football.

This transition from initial hope to slowly growing criticism and disappointment ending with the stages of blame and change during only the twenty-day period analyzed might seem so abrupt that the tone of coverage changed almost instantly from one extreme to the other, from the optimistic framing to a narrative of failure. On the one hand, some critical tendencies were visible in some articles between three Czech matches. On the other hand, the media expressed hope until the last game, so the narrative transformed rapidly after the elimination.

The final evaluation corresponded to poor performances that resulted in the last place in the group having collected only one point. Moreover, the journalists after the elimination of the Czech team remained consistent in their criticism towards the head coach, while the national football association supported him at first, but he stepped down after all.

The analysis confirmed that journalistic narratives reflected sporting outcomes. Considering countless different scenarios that participation in such a great tournament can offer, this story of the Czech national football team with dramatic downfall could hardly end with any conclusion other than: from heroes to villains.



Dr. Veronika Macková

Researcher and Associate Lecturer at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Her areas of research interest include sports journalism and artificial intelligence journalism. In her academic publications, she focuses mainly on Paralympic sport. She is a former TV sports journalist.

Email: veronika.mackova@fsv.cuni.cz



Dr. Ondřej Trunečka

Researcher and Associate Lecturer at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. He focuses his research on sports journalism. He is a former editor-in-chief of one of the biggest sports websites in the Czech Republic.

Email: ondrej.trunecka@fsv.cuni.cz

FIFA's creator correspondents – the beginning of the end of sports journalism?



Dr. Matheus Simões Mello

Full-time professor at the Federal University of South and Southeast of Pará (Brazil), Department of Communication. He teaches and conducts research on Sports Journalism, Radio Journalism and Podcasting.

Email: matheusenso@unifesspa.edu.br



Dr. Thomas Horky

Professor for Sports Communication at Macromedia University of applied Sciences in Hamburg, Germany. He was visiting professor at Indiana University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and International Fellow of the University of Iowa.

Email: t.horky@macromedia.de

Bluesky: [@thomashorky.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@thomashorky.bsky.social)

For an audience of 1.5 million followers, the video by Argentine Fede Racchi (aka @federacchi) shows the walk through the players' tunnel and out into a World Cup stadium, where sports photographers are waiting for the match. Another video offers an up-close look—very, very close—at the Brazilian and Japanese players, filmed from areas inside the mixed zone, where sports journalists are not permitted. Accompanying the footage is commentary from Axel Panameno (aka @axel.footy) from Florida for his roughly 250,000 followers: “This is what you don't see on TV, behind the scenes...”

These two TikTok videos demonstrate that sports journalism at major sporting events is undergoing a dynamic shift. For organizers and leagues, so-called “content creators” or “stadium vloggers” are becoming increasingly important, as they are able – through (live) coverage on social media – to engage primarily younger audiences with the event. For the Olympic Games, NBC enlisted the rapper Snoop Dogg as an influencer; for the 2026 World Cup, FIFA – in cooperation with TikTok – has now, for the first time, selected and accredited 30 so-called “Creator Correspondents”. This unconventional and journalistic-driven naming alone underscores the apparently high media significance that FIFA attaches to these influencers – who are from four continents, 11 countries, and 22 cities – and who are tasked with “capturing behind-the-scenes moments that bring the competition to life, including bus arrivals, gameday access, training sessions, press conferences, warm-ups, and more.” This inevitably creates a competitive dynamic with traditional sports journalists, who face significant hurdles imposed by FIFA in the form of strict access regulations and exclusive licensing rights.

TikTok and FIFA announced a big success story right after the final: “Together, Creator Correspondents shared thousands of posts and generated millions of views, bringing fans closer to the people, traditions, celebrations, and culture that surrounded the FIFA World Cup™”. Natalie Jarvey also says on Substack: “The 2026 World Cup's First Winner: the Creator Economy” (July 15th).

To understand the dynamics of this development, ten sports journalists and live streamers in Germany and Brazil – two nations with a rich footballing tradition, winning several tournaments – were interviewed before the World Cup regarding the significance of this shift and the (potential) erosion of traditional sports journalism. The results are very mixed.

Both sports journalists and the content creator highlight journalistic values as core elements of their work. Younger journalists and the content creator tend to place greater importance on social media. Sports journalists draw distinctions between themselves and content creators.

However, they note that whether someone can be considered a “sports journalist” depends on the specific case. They acknowledge that some content creators do perform journalistic work. The content creator (who seems to see himself as a journalist) actually draws a sharper distinction between the two categories than the sports journalists.

Sports journalists believe that journalistic norms remain extremely important. Terms such as ethics and credibility were mentioned. They also argue that journalistic norms can help content creators professionalize their work.

Most sports journalists agree that content creators can be granted accreditation, depending on the relevance of each applicant, and the number of available accreditations. In situations with limited accreditation slots, sports journalists feel they should have priority for these privileged spaces. For sports journalists, accreditation for content creators on the one hand, can make an event more attractive. On the other hand, it may lead to ethical transgressions.

Sports journalists believe that digitalization has brought significant changes to the profession, especially regarding production speed and the need to create content for multiple platforms. Sports journalists state that the new scenario affects their work, but not necessarily their job security. Some pointed out that the profession has become more plural. One journalist (and the content creator) also noted that, from an economic standpoint, content creation and independent channels on platforms such as YouTube are more attractive.

Regarding whether content creators represent a threat to traditional sports media, half of the sports journalists agreed, while the other half did not. The argument presented by the second group aligns with studies showing that traditional sports media has increasingly incorporated content creators into their programs and coverage.

These initial findings demonstrate a mix of competition and cooperation within sports journalism—making it difficult to draw a definitive conclusion. Yes, journalistic coverage of the World Cup will continue. FIFA will go on generating billions of dollars from the sale of broadcasting rights. However, there will be far fewer independent, thoroughly researched journalistic stories—such as reports on the manufacture of soccer balls in low-wage countries (the World Cup ball comes from Sialkot, Pakistan) or the sport's significance for participating nations like Curaçao or Cape Verde. The developments described here are pushing sports journalism to the fringes of the public sphere. The debate will no longer center on the blurring of boundaries within the journalism system; instead, sports journalism itself risks becoming a “peripheral actor” within the media landscape.

The creator World Cup: How FIFA expanded engagement while controlling access

It's the day before the 2026 FIFA World Cup final and fans are being taken on an inside look of the venue, walking through the Spanish change-room, a close-up with the trophy, heading out on the pitch.

But it's not a broadcaster taking us through Met-Life Stadium, it's Belgian YouTuber Celine Dept – who bounces through each frame in her trademark upbeat style. While this is access normally reserved for rights-holding broadcasters who have paid for the privilege, Dept is with the FIFA creator program.

While this World Cup is not the first to foray into the creator space, it was significant in how much access it afforded them – as Dept's behind the scenes videos showed. As digital becomes a central part of sports' media strategy though, this World Cup still showed though that this access is not afforded to all.

Sport and media have always shared a symbiotic relationship. Media used sport to gain audiences and subscribers, and sport turned professional from the money that flowed through broadcast rights deals.

But the digital era has threatened to disrupt this relationship. More than 15 years ago, media sport scholars Brett Hutchins and David Rowe argued that the model of sport content production was moving from one of scarcity to that of digital plenitude, where digital technology meant the creation and consumption of sport content was suddenly available outside of traditional media spaces.

Unsurprisingly, this caused conflict, largely as sports organisations and media organisations tried to hold onto control of where their product appeared. Hutchins and Rowe detailed multiple cases that ended up in court in Australia, including a failed attempt to stop illegal streamers, a sports organisation trying to limit the use of video highlights on newly multi-platform newspaper websites, and an athlete testing image rights. At one point the IOC also attempted to ban its athletes using blogging platforms at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Managing access to sport on digital platforms was becoming messy, and this was before the widespread use of social media.

Flash forward to now, and digital has become a central fixture of any major sport event. But this 2026 FIFA World Cup showed how FIFA has managed to both leverage digital to their advantage, but also ensure they were in control.

The digital imprint of the FIFA World Cup was hard to miss. At the end of the round of 32, video numbers were up 485%, and overall digital impressions already at 30 billion. TikTok content posted by the World Cup account generated 24 billion views. YouTube said it recorded 1.7 billion unique viewers globally, and videos led by its hand-picked creators like Celine Dept and IShow

Speed clocked over 2.5 billion views.

Part of the hesitation in initially allowing creators into sport spaces has also been about protecting rights-holding broadcasters, who pay for that access, and those funds then make up a significant part of sport revenue. FIFA's 2025 finance snapshot noted that the governing body's total revenue was USD 2,661 million, and USD 1,044 million came from broadcasting rights.

But FIFA did not prioritise creators over rights-holders. The expanded tournament added more valuable match content and hydration breaks provided new commercial opportunities, and television ratings saw records globally, but broadcasters also had a digital boost. As well as activating streaming platforms, a FIFA and TikTok deal allowed up to 10 minutes of live game footage shown on broadcaster accounts, which delivered more than 465 million views.

It also became apparent that creators, at least at this event, were not really trying to perform the same functions as media, they weren't necessarily discussing tactics, or injuries, or direct game-content, instead the chosen creators from YouTube and TikTok focused on entertainment, challenges, personalities and fan experiences. A natural difference in content did show that there is a path for creators and rights-holding broadcasters to co-exist.

But behind the scenes, the growth delivered to official channels was also only possible through restricting others. In one example reported in The Sydney Morning Herald, a smaller Australian creator with 10,000 Instagram followers had his account flagged and then completely deleted after he said he accidentally shared rights-holding footage, losing the potential for \$25,000 worth of brand deals. FIFA's takedown program was vast, and quick, ensuring that rights-holders footage and preferred creators were protected.

In the end, FIFA found a way to have it both ways: embracing creators to maximise engagement while maintaining strict control over access and content. Even in an era of participatory media, FIFA was firmly in control of who gets access, what gets shared, and who ultimately gets to tell the story of the world's biggest sporting event.



Dr. Merryn Sherwood

*Senior Lecturer in Journalism in La Trobe University, Australia. A former sports journalist and international sport media manager, whose research now focuses on disruption in sport and media. She is the lead author of *Sport and The Media: Managing the Nexus* (2025, Routledge).*

Email: m.sherwood@latrobe.edu.au

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/merryn-sherwood-80239829/>

Oops, they did it again – from protest to criticism light



Dr. Jörg-Uwe Nieland

Senior scientist at Alpen Adria University Klagenfurt, associated staff member at the Institute for European Sports Development and Leisure Research at the German Sport University Cologne; Lectureships at the Universities of Düsseldorf, Salzburg, Vienna.

Email: Joerg-uwe.nieland@gmx.net



Dr. Thomas Horky

Professor for Sports Communication at Macromedia University of applied Sciences in Hamburg, Germany. He was visiting professor at Indiana University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and International Fellow of the University of Iowa.

Email: t.horky@macromedia.de

Bluesky: @thomashorky.bsky.social

In media and communication research, Qatar 2022 marked a turning point. Criticism of FIFA's awarding decision, the human-rights situation in the host country, and the commercialization of football did not remain confined to the pre-tournament phase, but persisted throughout the event and translated, at least in part, into behavioral consequences such as conscious non-viewing and weakened television ratings.

The pre-tournament media coverage of the 2026 World Cup in German-speaking countries initially seemed to confirm this pattern. In Germany and Austria, much of the debate centered less on tactics, squads, or sporting favorites than on the legitimacy of the event itself. Human-rights concerns, Trump's political style, the role of FIFA, and the symbolic implications of staging a global tournament in the US framed numerous articles and commentaries.

This critical framing was clearly visible in the headlines. The German quality paper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* explicitly argued for a boycott, while *Die ZEIT* and *Deutsche Welle* raised broader questions about the political and moral conditions of the tournament. The magazine *Der Spiegel* captured the central ambivalence particularly well when it described the World Cup as "absurd, obscene and problematic" while maintaining that one could still look forward to it. In Austria, *Der Standard* functioned less as a normative voice than as a forum for public negotiation, indicating a similarly politicized but somewhat more plural discourse.

From a mediatization perspective, this does not mean that criticism failed. Rather, boycott appeals, fan protests, and NGO interventions are themselves symptoms of advanced mediatization because they follow media logics of visibility, framing, scandalization, and resonance. In 2026, German media like *Sportschau* continued to foreground criticism of FIFA and the host country. Protest was thus no longer external to the event, but part of its mediated constitution.

The outlook for Germany remained bleak: time differences of up to nine hours, a qualification campaign that generated little enthusiasm, and the memory of Qatar 2022 all dampened expectations for a new German "football summer." Yet the tournament developed differently in practice. Germany remained deeply attached to football as a media experience, and the World Cup continued to function as the country's dominant media event. Moral skepticism became more pronounced, but it did not translate into lasting disengagement.

Yet the tournament developed differently in practice than much of the pre-tournament criticism had suggested. After weeks of late-night viewing and pervasive media attention, one conclusion became difficult to avoid: Germany remains deeply attached to football as a media experience. The national team may no longer embody former sporting authority, but the World

Cup still functions as the country's dominant media event. Moral skepticism may have become more pronounced, but it did not produce lasting disengagement.

The ratings illustrate this clearly. Germany achieved its highest audience, 24 million viewers, during the opening match against Curaçao. Even the match between Mexico and South Africa attracted 10 million viewers in Germany despite limited sporting significance and a late kick-off. The national team's later matches drew lower figures—18.26 million, 18.47 million, and 17.57 million—but this decline can plausibly be linked above all to scheduling, since the knockout match against Paraguay ended only around 1:30 am German time. Compared with the low point of 2022, when Germany's early exit corresponded with only 14.52 million viewers, the recovery in audience attention is unmistakable.

The broader broadcasting data reinforce this interpretation. Streaming service MagentaTV held the rights to all 104 matches and reported around 200 million contacts, even if this figure likely involved multiple counts. More importantly, the public service free-on-air ARD and ZDF, which sublicensed 60 matches, reached nearly 59 million people through their cross-media coverage. Around three-quarters of the population in Germany therefore came into contact with World Cup content on public-service television. Even major tennis broadcasts with successful German participation remained far below these figures, which underlines the exceptional status of the World Cup within the German media system.

This empirical contrast matters theoretically. Qatar 2022 had seemed to weaken the classic media-event pattern (Dayan & Katz 1992; by showing that politicization could disrupt habitual forms of collective viewing. North America 2026, by contrast, suggests a re-stabilization of that pattern at a very high level of attention. The event was not depoliticized; criticism remained visible at the level of discourse. But it was successfully re-normalized in media use.

The title therefore captures more than a journalistic punchline. FIFA "did it again" by producing a tournament that was politically troubling yet highly attractive as a media spectacle. The media "did it again" by moving from boycott discourse to routinized event narration. And audiences "did it again" by translating moral skepticism not into lasting abstention, but into reflective, selective, and still intense participation.

Germany remains a country profoundly shaped by football as a media culture. Regardless of political controversy or sporting uncertainty, the World Cup continues to command exceptional collective attention. When the tournament begins, Germany still turns on the screen and watches.

From training tool to broadcast innovation: Referee View at the Football World Cup 2026

The Football World Cup 2026 marked the most extensive deployment of referee body cameras in international football to date. In all 104 matches, referees wore such cameras that enabled both live broadcasting and recording of their point of view (POV). Prior to the tournament, several football federations and leagues had already experimented with the technology using different editorial approaches. In Germany and Italy, for example, POV footage was edited into highlight clips and shared on social media together with the referee's microphone audio, allowing audiences to follow conversations on the pitch. Serie A also integrated the RefCam as an additional camera angle during live broadcasts rather than restricting it to replays.

Although referee body cameras are now primarily promoted as a way of giving fans "an instant, unique view of the beautiful game through the eyes of the referee", it was originally invented by German referees Patrick Kessel and Nicolas Winter as a referee training tool. Only later did football organizations and broadcasters recognize its potential to create a more immersive viewing experience and increase audiences' understanding of refereeing decisions. This article examines how FIFA translated this potential into its World Cup coverage.

To examine FIFA's editorial use of the technology, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of the World Feed coverage of all 104 World Cup matches as broadcast by the German rights holders ARD/ZDF and MagentaTV. Since commercial breaks occasionally interrupted the World Feed (particularly before kick-off and during hydration breaks), a small number of Referee View sequences may not have been captured. Nevertheless, the dataset provides a valid representation of FIFA's editorial use.

Overall, we identified 297 Referee View sequences, corresponding to an average of 2.9 per match. Notably, six matches contained no such footage at all, while the maximum number of sequences in a single match was seven. Interestingly, the use of referees' POV did not correspond to the number of highlights in a match, nor did it change systematically over the course of the tournament.

Individual clips remained brief, averaging 6.6 seconds in length. When only replay sequences of match incidents are considered ($n = 251$), the average duration decreases further to 6.2 seconds. Referee View was used almost exclusively in replay sequences following important match events. Across the entire tournament, the director switched to the referees' POV during live play only twice: once during a throw-in and once during the treatment of an injured player. The remaining live Referee View footage occurred exclusively before kick-off during the pre-match handshake between players and officials ($n = 44$).

The content analysis further reveals that the Referee View primarily served as an alternative perspective on major match moments rather than on refereeing decisions themselves. Surprisingly,

potentially controversial incidents such as fouls or handball situations appeared only rarely. Fouls, for example, accounted for just 16.5% ($n = 49$) of all in-game Referee View sequences. Instead, the technology was predominantly used to replay goals (29.3%; $n = 87$) and goal-scoring opportunities (33.7%; $n = 100$).

Equally noteworthy is that FIFA chose not to include audio from the referees' microphones. Instead, all clips retained only the stadium atmosphere, preventing viewers largely from overhearing communication between match officials and players. The same editorial restraint is evident on FIFA's social media channels. Unlike the German Bundesliga and Italy's Serie A, FIFA did not include the referee microphone audio in its YouTube videos. However, media organizations such as the BBC published additional content incorporating audio, which will surely have required FIFA's approval. More broadly, FIFA itself made only limited use of social media to disseminate this immersive perspective during the tournament. At the time of writing, it had released only eleven YouTube videos featuring compilations of Referee View footage from individual matches.

Overall, our findings indicate that FIFA currently treats the Referee View less as a permanent broadcast perspective than as a carefully curated visual supplement designed to enhance selected moments. This cautious approach also reflects concerns expressed by referees themselves. In a German television interview, former Bundesliga referee Patrick Ittrich argued that officials still require spaces in which spontaneous communication on the pitch is not permanently exposed to public scrutiny. FIFA's selective editorial use appears consistent with this position by balancing technological innovation with professional protection.

At the same time, public reactions illustrate another dimension of the technology. Alongside fascination with the unprecedented first-person perspective, social media users frequently created humorous memes portraying referees as action-camera operators or filmmakers rather than match officials. Ironically, these representations invert Ittrich's assertion that referees are "athletes rather than cameramen". The Referee View technology thus simultaneously functions as a tool for transparency, immersive storytelling, and online entertainment.

In conclusion, the 2026 Football World Cup demonstrates that referee body cameras have completed a remarkable trajectory from an internal training instrument to a globally visible broadcast technology. Yet FIFA's editorial decisions also reveal that its implementation remains comparatively conservative. Rather than transforming football into a continuous first-person viewing experience, the Referee View currently serves as a selectively deployed narrative device that enriches key moments while preserving the conventions of football broadcasting.



Dr. Daniel Nölleke

Assistant professor for "Sports Journalism and Public Relations" at the Institute of Communication and Media Research at the German Sport University Cologne. His main areas of expertise include journalism studies, sports communication and mediatization theory. He is acting chair of the ECREA Temporary Working Group "Communication and Sport" and member of the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Sport Communication and Communication & Sport*.

Email: d.noelleke@dshs-koeln.de

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniel-noelleke-663326170>



Dr. Thaya Vester

Criminologist (fields of study: sociology, law and sports science) at the University of Tübingen; main areas of research: violence and discrimination in the context of sport; also serves on various committees within organized football (in particular the German Football Association (DFB) and the Württemberg Football Association (WfV)) and acts as a scientific adviser to the International Football Association Board (IFAB).

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-thaya-vester>

Email: thaya.vester@uni-tuebingen.de



David Zimmermann

holds a degree in Political and Social Studies from the University of Würzburg. He is currently a student research assistant at the Institute of Criminology at the University of Tübingen. His academic interests lie at the intersection of sport, political science, sociology, and criminology.

Email: david.zimmermann@guest.uni-tuebingen.de

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/david-f-zimmermann>

Visiting 'friends'? Media discourse on Europeans' World Cup experiences in times of transatlantic frictions



Dr. Karsten Senkbeil

Teaches and researches at the University of Hildesheim, Germany, in the Department of Intercultural Communication. He has researched and published on sports cultures worldwide, and focuses on inter- and transcultural exchange processes between North America and Europe through sports and other forms of popular culture.

Email: senkbeil@uni-hildesheim.de

When FIFA announced that the 23rd World Cup (WC) would take place in the USA, Canada, and Mexico, Europeans collectively sighed with relief. After two tournaments in which FIFA and participating nations had accommodated undemocratic regimes in Russia and Qatar, European fans and journalists looked forward to 'visiting friends' while enjoying a tournament hosted by three stable democracies with decent human-rights records and commitments to liberal values—despite familiar clichés about gun violence (USA) and crime (Mexico). Donald Trump's re-election, however, soon made clear that US foreign policy would increasingly clash with European interests, and US domestic policies were challenging some of the foundations of shared Western values. In this political climate, a trip to the USA, or watching one's national team play there, appeared less unequivocally enjoyable to many Europeans. Some even called for a boycott of the WC as a gesture of protest against the Trump administration, albeit with little effect.

An analysis of media discourse, particularly in critical and quality journalism, reveals uncertainty about what kind of 'friendship' between Europeans and US Americans—on political, sporting, and everyday levels—still prevailed in mid-2026. Media perspectives shifted between different extremes over time. Three phases can be identified: before the tournament; during the tournament until the 'Balogun case'; and after the Balogun case.

In the first phase, before any matches had taken place, anti-Trump sentiment merged with 'classic' anti-American tropes. The host country had recently "humiliated, reviled, deceived, threatened, betrayed, mocked, and subjected to tariffs" the rest of the world, prompting some commentators to call the tournament "Trump vs. the World – the rematch". Others framed the USA as a dystopian landscape of rampant commercialization, with "obscene" ticket prices, producing a festival of "greed and megalomania". The entry ban imposed on the Somali referee Omar Artan was interpreted as further evidence of state-sponsored xenophobia and nationalism. Even phenomena not attributable to Trump, politics, or capitalism, such as summer heat and North American wildlife, were folded into portrayals of a generally unwelcoming and dangerous country, for example when European media widely discussed the danger posed to the Swiss national team by poisonous rattlesnakes near its training grounds. A "very unofficial" Scottish WC song that went viral across Europe concluded semi-ironically: "The USA kinda sucks, but we've got to go there anyway...". *Die Zeit*, a usually high-brow, left-liberal German publication, not commonly known for populist sentiments, called for spite and defiance through football on US soil: Europeans and South Americans should declare, "This is our game, our tournament, our trophy!" Thus, "every celebration [becomes] a subversive act, every goal a small revenge" against the US government.

Once the games began, sport largely displaced politics in public perception. In phase two, European media soon emphasized the games' quality, full stadiums, and enthusiastic spectators. Reports described American soccer fans as welcoming and hospitable, highlighted the stadiums' size and opulence, and praised lighthearted forms of multiculturalism in the host cities. Contrary to expectations, members of the Trump administration showed little interest in soccer and never attended matches. Fears that ICE or other militarized law-enforcement would intimidate or harm foreign fans likewise remained unfounded. Consequently, European journalists remembered, and reported, that 'average Americans' are friendly people who shared fundamental values and peacefully celebrated sports. During that phase, the USA was mostly framed as the 'good old friend' it had been since World War II: perhaps somewhat eccentric, but still recognizable for its optimistic, live-and-let-live liberalism—at least in sport and everyday life.

This phase was interrupted by the Balogun case and the US president's blatant interference in FIFA's established regulatory system. In phase three, reporting hence oscillated between recognition of good organization, enthusiastic, and welcoming American crowds, and condescending criticism of Americans' alleged failure to understand established football conventions. Notably, Trump had admitted that he did not understand how red cards work, yet intervened nonetheless. Europeans were also shocked by the extension of the final game's half-time break—contradicting the 'eternal' 15-minute rule—to accommodate several pop music acts. This was interpreted as evidence that Americans misunderstood football's essence, subordinating it to shallow show business.

Media discourses depicting foreign cultures and 'national character' in sports and elsewhere are never monolithic; hegemonic narratives are often challenged, and occasionally substituted by alternative readings. The oscillations identified here in three phases are therefore unsurprising. Also, research has repeatedly shown that transcultural media discourse during major sporting events is intertwined with negotiations of cultural identity 'at home'. Without constructing a cultural other, there is no cultural self, and the 2026 WC coincided with growing European doubts about the continent's political, economic, and cultural future. The dusk of the old transatlantic alliance, in which the USA had long functioned as a strong, well-meaning father figure, catalyzed reactions also visible in WC reporting: anxiety that the USA might inflict serious harm on Europe; spite, condescension, and fantasies of revenge directed at the 'ex-partner'; and pragmatic optimism grounded in the observation that citizens and sports fans in liberal democracies can ultimately find common ground and interact peacefully. Taken together, the mélange of European perceptions of the USA during the 2026 WC points to significant collective psychological dynamics in a period of transatlantic uncertainty, beyond the realm of sport.

“No Payne, no gain”: New Zealand media sticks to traditional game plan

New Zealand's appearance at the 2026 FIFA World Cup drew international headlines through three unique and contemporary stories. However, all three were largely overlooked by local media. Instead, New Zealand media stuck to traditional coverage, with around two-thirds of published articles covering match reports, team news, or match analysis.

New Zealand's place at the 2026 FIFA World Cup was only its third appearance, and its first in the sixteen years since 2010, having debuted in 1982. Qualification was aided by the expansion of the finals from 32 to 48 teams, which gave the Oceania Confederation its first guaranteed spot, plus a 'half' spot for a second team to contest. As the region's dominant side, the All Whites, New Zealand's men's national team, were all but assured of that place.

New Zealand's first match was against Iran, the first country in World Cup history to compete on the soil of a host nation, the United States (U.S.), with which it is actively at war. In the lead-up to the FIFA World Cup, the Iran-U.S. conflict was covered extensively by international media. There were a number of high-profile challenges such as several Iranian officials, including football federation president Mehdi Taj, were denied U.S. visas and entry, and the Iranian team was based in Mexico due to security and reception concerns, commuting to California and Washington on match days. Analysts noted that the ongoing hostilities and failing ceasefires made FIFA's 'football unites the world' slogan questionable.

Coverage by New Zealand media was limited, with most published stories running copy directly from Agence France-Presse (AFP). There was one opinion piece published by The Post, and New Zealand Football's own media release focused on "shutting out the noise". One New Zealand media article covered "how the All Whites are preparing for World Cup chaos" and mentioned a list of potential issues, such as weather and risk of injury. However, there was no mention of Iran or any potential risk linked to playing Iran.

The second extraordinary and locally overlooked story was that of the sudden rise in social media popularity of New Zealand defender Tim Payne. Leading into the FIFA World Cup, Argentinian influencer Valen Scarsini identified Payne as the "least known" player competing at the World Cup. Payne had just over 4,700 Instagram followers on May 27th, 2026, which leapt to over one million followers in just two days. By June 6th, his followers had reached more than five million, approximately equivalent to the entire population of New Zealand.

Scarsini inspired the popularity boost for Payne by urging his millions of social media followers to "make Payne a World Cup hero" by flooding Payne's social media with likes and comments. Even a viral Spanish-language song,

"No Payne, no gain", was launched by Argentinian football fans.

However, there were fewer than ten articles by local New Zealand media on Payne's newfound fame. Of the over 400 reported media requests that Payne received, presumably only a small percentage came from his home country.

The third unique story to make headlines was that of New Zealand defender Tyler Bindon and his mother, Jenny Bindon, becoming the first mother-son duo to compete in respective World Cups. Tyler came on late in the second half of New Zealand's first game against Iran, his debut at a World Cup. His mother, Jenny, played in two World Cups for New Zealand as a goalkeeper, in 2007 when Tyler was two years old, and again in 2011.

The news of this World Cup record first broke in international media and on social media on June 17th, the day after the game Tyler made his appearance. The story did not make headlines in New Zealand media until two days later.

One in four New Zealanders watched the FIFA World Cup, meaning the audience was not just die-hard football fans. In addition, the topics of the international stories linked to New Zealand's appearance at the World Cup are all contemporary and show that with a global tournament like the World Cup, it is not just about football. New Zealand was involved in two firsts at a World Cup with the Iran-U.S. conflict and the Bindons' appearances. Neither involved match statistics, yet both are important. The three stories showed how politics, fan culture, influencers, and digital media can shape attention around players and teams. However, the New Zealand media did not deviate from its game plan of reporting predominantly on the games themselves.

Play-by-play analysis and 'player rankings' might still have a place for some, but New Zealand media needs to recognize that newsworthy events during the FIFA World Cup are broader than the game itself. As we learned, "no Payne, no gain" – New Zealand media needs to change its game plan.



Dr. Alida Shanks

She has a PhD from Massey University that focuses on the history of women's football and how to take a holistic and practical approach to address gender equity and a sense of belonging in community sports organisations. Alida brings a unique perspective with her research expertise, experience in strategic planning and community engagement, and passionate advocacy for women in sport.

Email: alida.shanks@gmail.com

How the FIFA World Cup shapes referees' Instagram visibility



David Zimmermann

holds a degree in Political and Social Studies from the University of Würzburg. He is currently a student research assistant at the Institute of Criminology at the University of Tübingen. His academic interests lie at the intersection of sport, political science, sociology, and criminology.

Email: david.zimmermann@guest.uni-tuebingen.de

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/david-f-zimmermann](https://www.linkedin.com/in/david-f-zimmermann)



Dr. Daniel Nölleke

Assistant professor for "Sports Journalism and Public Relations" at the Institute of Communication and Media Research at the German Sport University Cologne. His main areas of expertise include journalism studies, sports communication and mediatization theory. He is acting chair of the ECREA Temporary Working Group "Communication and Sport" and member of the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Sport Communication* and *Communication & Sport*.

Email: d.noelleke@dshs-koeln.de

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniel-noelleke-663326170>



Dr. Thaya Vester

Criminologist (fields of study: sociology, law and sports science) at the University of Tübingen; main areas of research: violence and discrimination in the context of sport; also serves on various committees within organized football (in particular the German Football Association (DFB) and the Württemberg Football Association (WFFV)) and acts as a scientific adviser to the International Football Association Board (IFAB)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-thaya-vester>

Email: thaya.vester@uni-tuebingen.de

In an era in which social media has become an integral part of everyday communication, online visibility and follower counts have gained increasing importance. Many professional football players have millions of followers, with some ranking among the largest accounts worldwide. By contrast, referees' online reach is usually significantly smaller, despite regularly becoming the focus of public attention during major sports events such as the FIFA World Cup. While this development has already attracted scholarly attention, previous research has focused almost exclusively on clubs and players, leaving referees largely overlooked. The World Cup therefore provides a unique opportunity to examine how their digital visibility develops over the course of the tournament. This article explores how the Instagram audiences of the 23 World Cup on-field referees with an Instagram account evolved in the lead-up to and throughout the tournament. In addition, it examines whether notable changes in follower counts coincided with match appointments and considers how the referees' posting activity and content may have influenced these trends.

Rather than focusing solely on final follower counts, the analysis considers the trajectory of follower growth in the lead-up to and throughout the tournament. The analysis is based on the Instagram profiles of the 23 on-field referees for whom authentic accounts could be identified with certainty. The sample includes both active and inactive profiles as well as both public and private accounts. Follower counts were tracked at regular intervals from May 26th – well in advance of the tournament's start – until July 20th 2026, the day after the World Cup final, to capture developments throughout the entire tournament. To properly contextualize the observed trends, the follower trajectories were cross-referenced with the referees' match appointments. In addition, an analysis of account activity was conducted. Posting frequency, the amount of World Cup-related content, the frequency of other football-related posts, and the amount of personal content were each examined.

From the start of the observation period, there were significant differences in the Instagram reach of the referees included in the study. Follower counts ranged from a few hundred to more than one million, illustrating the wide range of digital visibility within the sample. The development in follower numbers throughout the tournament was also by no means uniform. While some accounts showed only marginal or virtually no changes, others experienced significant increases within short periods of time. These observed trajectories indicate that participation in the World Cup alone cannot explain the observed differences. Instead, the observed trajectories indicate that no single factor adequately explains follower development, prompting a closer examination of match appointments, media attention, and Instagram activity.

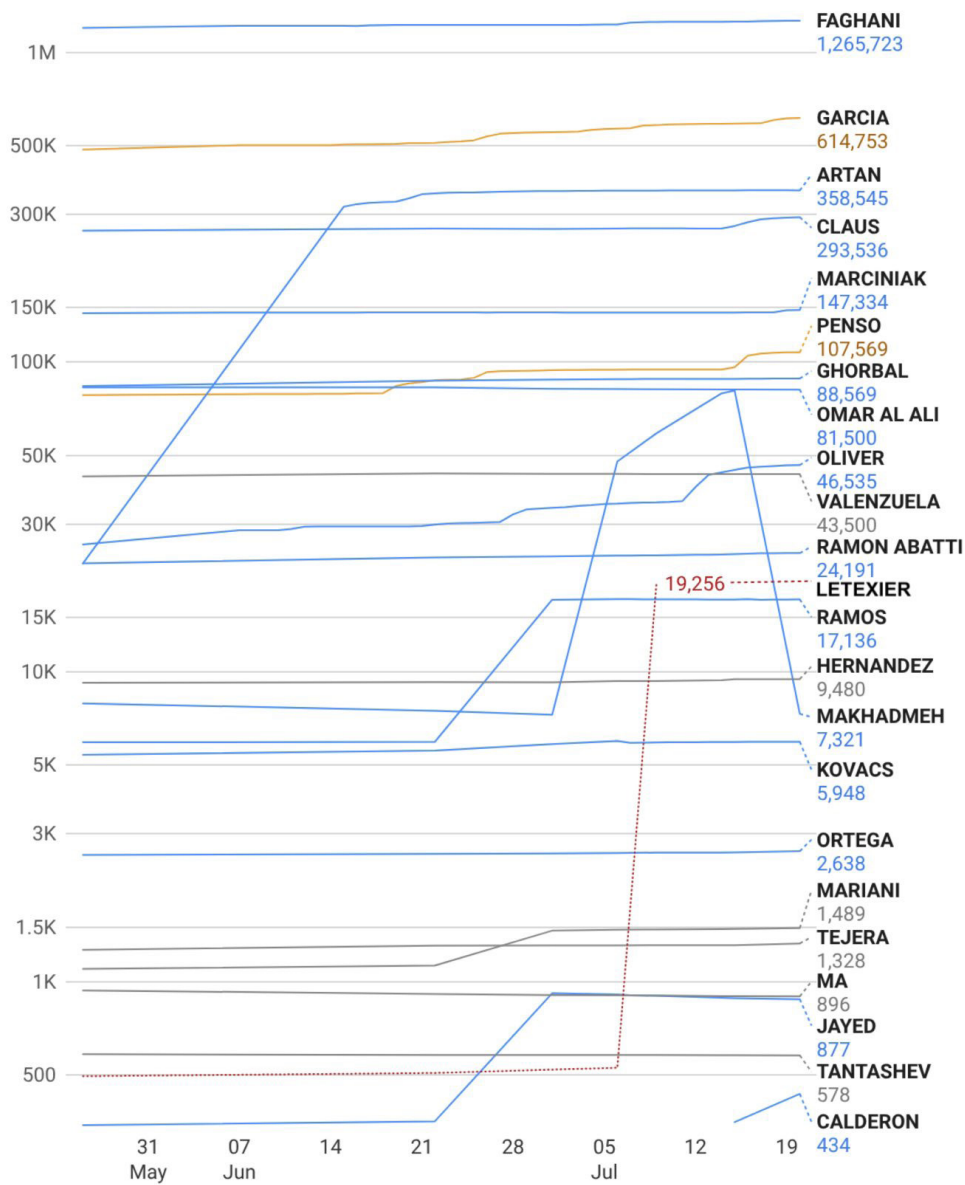
To better understand these differing trajectories, changes in follower counts were compared with referees' respective match appointments

and Instagram activity. The analysis revealed that neither the appointments nor the account activity alone could explain the observed differences. While several referees experienced significant periods of growth that coincided with their assignments, others saw only minor changes, or none at all, in their follower counts despite officiating multiple matches. Match appointments thus appear to be a relevant factor influencing digital visibility, but not the sole one.

The absence of a consistent relationship suggests that additional factors also shaped referees' digital prominence. In addition to their on-field performances, off-field events and media attention also appear to play an important role. For example, the substantial increase in Omar Artan's follower count coincided with international media coverage of his reported travel restriction to the United States. Likewise, François Letexier experienced a substantial increase in followers around the widely discussed Round of 16 match between Argentina and Egypt. Such examples illustrate that public attention towards referees may be driven not only by sporting events but also by media narratives, controversial matches, or viral social media content including the widely shared "After review" meme.

Beyond these external influences, the referees' own communication strategies may also have contributed to the observed developments. While no clear relationship was found between the total number of posts published and follower growth, it became apparent that accounts that remained active during the tournament and regularly posted tournament-related content more often experienced notable follower growth. Although the exploratory nature of this study does not permit causal conclusions, these observations suggest that active engagement with tournament-related content may increase digital visibility.

Taken together, these observations suggest that digital visibility is shaped by more than sporting performance alone. They also highlight a fundamental tension in modern refereeing. Unlike players or coaches, referees are expected to remain impartial and, ideally, inconspicuous during matches. Professional success is often associated with officiating matches without becoming the center of attention. Social media, however, follows a contrasting logic in which visibility, personal communication, and constant presence are rewarded. This places referees in a unique position, as professional success and digital visibility are not necessarily driven by the same mechanisms. The present findings therefore suggest that digital visibility among the World Cup referees is not determined by tournament participation alone but emerges from the interaction of sporting exposure, media attention, and individual communication. At the same time, the data demonstrate that digital prominence may also arise unintentionally through controversy, media attention, or viral online discussions rather than through deliberate self-presentation.



Instagram account of a male referee
 Instagram account of a female referee
 Private Instagram account
 Deactivated Instagram account

“Here we go!” Transfer journalism and the 2026 World Cup



Dr. Thomas Birkner

Full professor for Journalism at the University of Salzburg (Austria), Department of Communication. He teaches and conducts research on Journalism, Media and Sports, Political Communication and Media History.

Email: thomas.birkner@plus.ac.at

“Here we go!” – We were able to read this phrase also during the 2026 World Cup. This famous catchphrase and its author Fabrizio Romano embody a quite new phenomenon in modern sports communication, surrounding such mega sport events as the 2026 World Cup: transfer journalism. In a way, Romano epitomizes the shift from editorial sports journalism to influencers, or, as our colleague Simon McEnnis puts it: The Influencer-Sports Journalism of Fabrizio Romano. But he is only one of the most prominent figures in a field that is gaining ground in the sports media environment, especially in international soccer.

Of course, news about player transfers is, after all, almost as old as soccer itself. Nevertheless, transfer journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon in the world of international soccer. This has to do with several trends—some of which overlap—in the world of sports and the world of sports media alike. These include datafication, an increasing commercialization, and the platformization of the media. In his most recent book, German sports journalist Tobias Escher writes about the impact of artificial intelligence and big data in soccer. This trend is changing the training of the athletes and the knowledge about their skills, their measurable performance on and off the pitch and their potential impact on a new team’s performance in the event of a transfer. This has given a boost to transfer journalism just as much as the dramatic acceleration of real-time coverage in soccer. When Harry Kane, for example, was transferred from Tottenham Hotspur to Bayern Munich in 2023, the story was covered virtually every minute. What is problematic, from a professional and ethical perspective on sport news coverage: Transfer rumors travel as fast as facts in this media environment.

And social media platforms such as Instagram, X, YouTube, and Facebook have allowed not only clubs and organizations as FIFA to become their own content creators, bypassing traditional sports media, but also new actors in the business as sport media influencers. While we analyzed the coverage of The FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022 through a comparison of FIFA and journalistic media outlets, this time, in my seminar “The World Cup 2026 in the Media” at the University of Salzburg, we examined the event from several different perspectives, including podcasting, the players and the national soccer associations on Instagram, artificial intelligence in sports coverage, and the role of experts in TV coverage.

In the following, I will draw on preliminary findings from an analysis of transfer journalism during the 2026 World Cup, which my undergraduate students Martina Hammer, Felix Maierhofer, Senanur Özkan, and Jonas Stritzinger conducted as part of the seminar. They combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of three important transfer journalists (Fabrizio Romano, David Ornstein, Florian Plettenberg), based on theoretical concepts such as agenda setting, mediatization, and the hybrid media system by Andrew Chadwick. They

compared the transfer journalism during the World Cup 2026 with the transfer journalism of the same period in 2025, and, not surprisingly, they found that the tournament is a real boost for transfer news coverage. Major events like a World Cup generate intense media attention, in which individual players quickly become highly visible figures. Players who stand out particularly well in such a tournament are more likely to become the subject of transfer rumors, because media attention is already focused on them. The World Cup thus acts as a catalyst for transfer journalism. It creates a window of opportunity in which athletic performance, changes in market value, and transfer rumors are particularly closely intertwined.

Another finding is that language becomes significantly more emotional during the World Cup. Transfer rumors are transformed into stories worth telling. This is particularly relevant in the context of the World Cup, because players are already on a stage that is highly charged with symbolic significance. Their performances are reported in a more emotional way and transformed into stories of rise, breakthrough, and discovery.

And transfer journalists on X generally work faster, with a sharper focus, and are more event-driven than traditional sports media. In a World Cup year, this difference becomes particularly apparent because there is enough public attention to reward high-impact formats even more strongly and the transfer journalists’ communication is geared towards exclusivity, speed, and immediate reaction.

To sum up: transfer journalism operates at the intersection of sports journalism, rumor-mongering, real-time journalism, platform logics, and strategic communication. While transfer reports used to be primarily a seasonal phenomenon, they are now a media product in their own right, with their own actors and routines. This becomes particularly evident when looking at a mega event such as a World Cup in soccer, and makes it a relevant subject for communication and journalism research, especially since there has been little systematic research to date on how this sub-genre functions and what impact it has on professional soccer and its audience.

Mexican TV and its Three World Cups

Mexico has made a name for itself by winning hosting rights, not by winning World Cup matches. It's the first country to host the tournament three times: 1970, 1986, and as co-hosts with Canada and the United States for the 2026 World Cup.

The way these three hosting bids came together evolved considerably over the decades. This article briefly lays out how Telesistema Mexicano—later Televisa, and now Ollamani—landed the bids and shaped the narratives for each World Cup—or, in the case of 2026, how the Mexican broadcasters did not.

1970: The World Cup of the Authoritarian “Mexican Miracle”

The story of the Mexican Miracle is well known, a kind of political and economic myth about sky-high GDP growth and a stretch of political and social stability that was unheard of before and after. All of this unfolded under the authoritarian rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and a sociopolitical repression that swung between negotiation and extreme violence—tragically made clear on October 2, 1968, with the student massacre at Tlatelolco.

The owners of the broadcasting system, especially television, were integral to this period and stood out as major players. Telesistema Mexicano was key to creating the myth of the miracle and Mexican modernity. Landing the Olympics host bid was huge for cementing the idea of national progress and development.

But it was the 1970 World Cup project that made Telesistema Mexicano economically and narratively “own” a global mega-event. Several factors contributed to this, including television's somewhat haphazard foray into football broadcasting in 1956 and Telesistema Mexicano's purchase of one of Mexico's most iconic teams. The son of Telesistema Mexicano's owner, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, helped the organization gain administrative control over the Mexican Football Federation and later the regional confederation, CONCACAF, alongside figures like Guillermo Cañedo, consolidating Telesistema Mexicano's authority.

The Argentine delegation, which was competing with Mexico for the bid, accused the Mexicans of influence-peddling to secure votes during the 1964 FIFA Congress. Despite this controversy, Mexico “won” its first hosting gig, and Telesistema Mexicano rolled out an all-powerful narrative about the country's virtues, its people, and its government—violence and authoritarianism notwithstanding.

Mexico 1986: The Hand of God Brought the World Cup Too

If that tournament is remembered on the pitch for Diego Maradona and the Hand of God, the real divine hand was marked by corruption among Mexican and FIFA leadership. Originally, hosting had been awarded to Colombia. But

pressure mounted considerably when the infamous “notebooks of charges” demanded more from the South American country. Then-president Belisario Betancourt announced his country's “withdrawal” from organizing the Cup. Telesistema Mexicano, now called Televisa, and its leadership quickly sold the idea of how hosting a second World Cup would benefit Mexican society. With virtually no opposition, Mexico and its television consortium, won hosting rights.

Mexico—despite the aftermath of the brutal September 1985 earthquakes and a crushing economic crisis—was lauded as a flawless host. Political and commercial propaganda for the Cup flooded radios, TVs, newspapers, and the streets. Mexico was still under the definitive sway of television and its owners, who controlled football however they saw fit. Everything about the World Cup ran like clockwork under Televisa's auspices—so much so that a good chunk of the opening ceremony was purely digital creation for the TV broadcast.

Trump's World Cup (and Mexico's Crumbs)

Over the next forty years, changes in ownership of Televisa and in political power in Mexico led to significant societal shifts. After losing power in 2000, a series of political and economic issues brought PRI back in 2012.

In 2018, the PRI government joined Canada and the U.S. in a bid for the 2026 World Cup. As has been well documented, the U.S. had demanded consideration after the FIFAgate scandal, including losing bids to Russia and Qatar.

But Andrés Manuel López Obrador derailed the PRI's reelection train, and streaming—along with its own declining reputation—knocked Televisa off track. The drop in influence and ratings for Latin America's biggest media consortium has been so steep that Emilio Azcárraga Jean himself has had to distance himself from the group as much as possible. He faces corruption-related accusations tied to FIFA. Televisa formally split from the football business and created Grupo Ollamani, which currently controls Club América in partnership with the owners of the New England Patriots, as well as the Azteca Stadium—now Estadios Banorte, since that bank financed the massive stadium renovation project in anticipation of the World Cup.

Now, with Trump in his second presidency, it's clear that—unlike in 1970 and 1986—Mexican television didn't control either the big slice or the dominant narrative of the World Cup. Fox and other U.S. media conglomerates have taken over football and its big-money business: broadcast rights.

So, while Mexico was socially front and center with its celebrations and appetite for festivity, Ollamani—the watered-down front company for Televisa—had to settle for the crumbs that Fox and Trumpism tossed its way. Still, it's worth saying: those crumbs remain pretty juicy.



Dr. Sergio Varela Hernández

teaches at the Center for Anthropological Studies, part of UNAM's Faculty of Political and Social Sciences. Over the past 25 years, his research has explored sports and how they intersect with gender, the body, politics, and modernity in Mexico.

sergiovarela@politicas.unam.mx



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The 2026 World Cup, the carnivalesque, and “modern football”

Commonly, the story of the football World Cup as told through several 1990s and 2000s movies, fanzines and fans’ travelogues proceeds with a similar kind of storyline: a semi-spontaneous trip to a host country, some last-minute accommodation arrangements, a loose itinerary, match tickets still to be sourced, and, crucially, euphoric celebratory pre- or post-match scenes. Unsurprisingly, the World Cup is commonly viewed both as an expression and site of festivity and the carnivalesque. The tournament, and specifically its fan festivals, are spaces where football fans come, in FIFA’s own words, not just to watch the event, but to “celebrate, feel, and share” it.

As scholars highlight, international football mega-events – much like a Bakhtinian carnival – represent a suspension of everyday life: a transgression of norms, characterised by collective behaviours, humour, spontaneity and sociability. Glimpses of this became apparent in the images of Mexican supporters celebrating their team’s first goal of the tournament. They became apparent as Scotland’s “Tartan Army” celebrated their team’s 1-0 win against Haiti, and when the Norwegian fans – in Boston, Dallas, Miami, New Jersey and at Times Square – performed their viral “Viking row” chant. In stadiums, fan zones and throughout host cities, the waving of flags, banners, chanting and drinking were omnipresent. Indeed, when the TV cameras zoom in on the World Cup crowds during the hydration breaks or other breaks in the play, it always appears, as Jonathan Liew remarks, that “[e]veryone is dancing and putting their thumbs up”. “Nobody”, Liew continues, “is having a bad time”.

On the one hand, the contemporary World Cup “carnival” represents a break from the ordinariness, order and structures of the everyday. On the other, it must be emphasized this carnival also remains a highly regulated affair, shaped by overlapping processes of social and commercial control. Recognizing what lies beneath the carnivalesque therefore becomes imperative.

For instance, in host cities, the carnival’s official spaces are, as scholars note, carefully designed into a “commercially useful environment” for FIFA’s official partners. So-called “Clean Zones” are required by the event owner in the name of sponsor protection, and shape the conditions in which the carnival occurs, in the fan zones or stadiums. As is the norm for present-day sport mega-events, items considered to be “political” were prohibited in the World Cup stadiums’ “code of conduct”. After initially banning fans from carrying reusable water bottles, FIFA eventually made the decision to allow fans to carry one factory-sealed soft plastic bottle into stadiums. This, and the digital tickets and the smartphone Fan ID app, similarly illustrate how processes of control, regulation, and order are deeply embedded in almost every step of the carnival, and its proceedings.

Beyond these socio-spatial mechanisms, the ticketing processes and ticket prices illustrated a new chapter in “modern football”, whereby neoliberal rationalities, seemingly, were no longer concealed but more actively centralized and signposted. For the 2026 World Cup, FIFA employed dynamic pricing, so that ticket prices were adjusted according to demand. Pre-event, *The Guardian* reported that the average ticket price for a World Cup game had gone above \$1,000, despite a price floor at around \$60 per ticket. Indeed, some seats for the final went on sale for \$32,970. The current ticketing model, as Beissel and Davis write, also prioritized “[p]remium experiences and hospitality packages”, and so, access to the World Cup, they suggest, was largely determined by supporters’ “financial capacity to navigate increasingly expensive and volatile ticket markets”. Away from the stadium, the planned \$150 train tickets – from New York to MetLife Stadium, New Jersey – were, following backlash, reduced to \$98; still considerably more than the usual \$12.90 fare. Essentially, the contemporary fan carnival cannot be disassociated from wider questions about access, exclusion and pricing.

Unsurprisingly, some supporters dubbed the World Cup the “most inaccessible [tournament] there’s ever been”. Other fans described the prices of tickets and stadium transport as “completely out of the norm”. In March 2026, fan organisation Football Supporters Europe – teaming up with Euroconsumers – even filed a complaint with the European Commission, against FIFA, over “excessive ticket prices and opaque and unfair purchasing conditions”. When justifying the rising face-value price of tickets FIFA president Gianni Infantino pointed towards market forces. He emphasised that football is in the entertainment industry, and so, must apply market rates, claiming that tickets for less than \$300 could not even be found in US college sports.

Overall, the 2026 World Cup expressed certain new dynamics of “modern football” as its neoliberal expanding logic was more openly signposted through the tournament’s structure (more teams more games, more tickets), market-based references and justifications, and few suggestions that commercial interests would – in any near future – become secondary to supporters’ experiences and affordability.

One significant consequence of this, therefore, is not the full-scale *disappearance* of a carnival. Instead, the football fan carnival requires a reimagining, as it becomes ever more inaccessible to “ordinary” fans and host city residents, and participation is ever more defined by who possess the purchasing power to be there in the first place.



Dr. Jan Andre Lee Ludvigsen

Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Politics with Sociology at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. Jan’s research explores different political and social issues in sport, including football supporter cultures, social control and the regulation of football fandom. His most recent book is Sport, Activism, and Social Movements (Routledge, 2026, co-edited with Mark Turner).

Fandom and identity: Scotland



Prof. Raymond Boyle

*Director of the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow and Co-Director of the MSc Media Management programme. He has published widely on sport and the media and authored several books including (with Richard Haynes) *Streaming the Formula 1 Rivalry: Sport and the Media in the Platform Age* (2024: Peter Lang)*

Email: Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk

Football has always been the most popular sport in Scotland. Relative to the size of its population, Scotland has one of the highest attendances at football matches anywhere in Europe. For Scotland, a small nation with a rich footballing heritage, football, and the international media profile it can offer is important. International sport offers an arena in which to present a version of yourself to the world. In short, through media representations and discourse it becomes a marker of wider collective and national identities. In international sport, it does not get bigger or more international than the men's FIFA World Cup.

The fact that the men's Scottish national football team had failed to qualify for any World Cup since 1998 had become a narrative of national failure and footballing decline. Hence the 2026 World Cup was always going to generate extensive national interest in a football mad country. What emerged from the tournament and Scotland's fleeting participation in the event was an interesting inversion of the usual academic interpretation of the role of a team sport and its reproduction of national identity.

Received wisdom often notes that teams become conduits for expressions of various forms of national identity formation. A football team represents the imagined community of a nation, resplendent with national and cultural characteristics, be that the unrepentant and petulant nature of the defeated Argentinian team in the final, signifying the Latin myth that emotion is everything (and the more aggressively expressed the better), and that apologizing shows nothing but weakness.

However, the case of Scotland turned this notion on its head. The Scottish football team on the pitch became the antithesis of the representations of Scottishness that were evident in the stands and in the cities flooded with thousands of Scotland supporters. Here, the self-styled Tartan Army that took over large parts of Boston and Miami displayed a performative Scottishness that was loud, confident, musical, creative, friendly, and inventive in finding ways to make new friends in both cities. They were the opposite of a team on the pitch that was insipid, frail, lacking in creativity, endeavor, or any sort of confidence (except for the last 30 minutes against Morocco!).

If the football team on the pitch represented aspects of Scottishness and national characteristics associated with the country, then this does not bode well for the future of the country. The other Scotland, evident through the fans with their color, kilts and bagpipe-inspired marches to the games and acts of charity and kindness towards their hosts, showed a different Scottishness, one both self-aware and self-referencing aspects of identity markers of a particular version of Scotland.

It was social media that allowed this version of the fans to be widely disseminated (often by

mainstream media mobilizing social media clips) and highlighted the friendly fan takeover by 5,000 Scots of the baseball at the Red Sox Fenway Park stadium. Or the generous donations organized by fans for Boston-based charities. Indeed, such was the welcome and the enjoyment of the energy, music, color, humor and capacity to drink that the Scots fans brought to Boston that the mayor of the city quickly arranged to have the city twinned with Glasgow, while the Boston Globe posted a letter of thanks to the fans for the energy they brought to the city during their brief sojourn there.

Football journalist Rory Smith, writing in the UK newspaper the Observer, noted this impact the Scottish fans had on the hearts of the Boston population with their colorful and ubiquitous presence. He reflected on the differing aspects of fan culture in sports and across countries, noting that the World Cup brings something distinctive in this context even within the sport of football. He describes a carnival element to the tournament: while some fans travel hoping to see their team lift the trophy, most come for the more realistic pleasure of having a good time and, as he puts it, "performing their national identity for the world to see."

As Scotland exited, again having failed to reach the knockout stage of a World Cup, the football team had produced yet another way of losing at a tournament. On the pitch the Scottish media narrative was one of underperformance, and of a team looking out of place at this gathering of the world's footballing elite. Off the pitch, the fans represented another Scotland, even receiving celebrity endorsement for their time in Boston and highlighting that fan culture, at least as much as sporting performance, is an important marker of ongoing national and collective identity formation.

Football and the reasons that bring us together

During every World Cup, an old debate resurfaces in Brazil: does football genuinely unite the nation, or is national passion merely exploited by commercial and political interests? The 2026 tournament was no exception. Drawing on psychoanalytic clinical practice, this piece argues that these two possibilities need not exclude one another – that we can love the national team and remain clear-eyed about the interests that feed on that love.

To understand this dynamic, it is helpful to look at human relationships through a clinical lens. In psychoanalytic clinical practice, it is common for an analysand to complain about being sought out by someone “only out of self-interest.” Statements such as “they only called me because they needed something” and “they only called out of self-interest” are common. A plausible clinical signifier in these expressions is the word “only,” because it indicates exclusion; that is, the analysand excludes love in opposition to self-interest. The resulting suffering stems from the feeling that “if there is self-interest, there is no love.”

However, the fact that someone does something out of momentary “self-interest” (the quotation marks indicate that the word interest is displaced here, as it is attributed a moral connotation that is not necessarily appropriate to the reason why someone made a decision) does not exclude the feeling of love one may have for another person. No one is capable of acting all the time solely out of love, given our human condition, marked by the necessities of survival and the consequent constitutive ambivalence. For example, a couple may decide to live together because of financial difficulties and, in the process, build a loving relationship. This raises the difficulty of determining what came first: necessity or love. If we return to the epistemologies of certain philosophical traditions, we find the binary mode of thought that opposes body and soul, as well as religious conceptions of a potentially exclusionary relationship between these dimensions of life. Nobody loves only. And everybody acts out of some form of “interest,” even in loving relationships. Reflection could therefore focus on which motives are healthy and on the extent to which they are bearable for each pair within a loving relationship or friendship.

Having established this, we arrive at football and the reflection on national identity, or national passion. We wish to consider the possibility that two feelings may coexist within the same phenomenon. All the turmoil surrounding football, the ugliness that often accompanies it, and the interests in which it has become immersed – reflecting the socioeconomic historical moment of humanity – do not exclude the operation of its symbolic force within the subject. Our feelings are not exclusionary, in the sense of “either this or that”; rather, they are cumulative and contradictory. The demand for one hundred percent certainty, or the logic of “either this or that,” corresponds, in many cases, to psychic structures considered pathological

when they generate excessive suffering. National identity may remain positively invested despite the absurdities that surround football. The 2026 tournament itself embodied this duality. Hosted jointly by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, it projected an image of international cooperation and shared celebration while also marking a new level of commercial expansion, global media reach, and corporate investment in the World Cup.

A brief clarification is needed. The commercialization of football cannot be reduced to individual actors, governing bodies, or sponsors. It reflects broader economic and political structures that increasingly shape elite sport. The 2026 World Cup highlighted how data-driven marketing, commercial partnerships, and global media exposure have made football an especially valuable site for converting emotional attachment into commercial value. Recognizing these structural forces does not diminish the symbolic meaning of football; rather, it helps explain why national passion has become such a powerful resource for political and economic interests.

We return, then, to the proposition that it is possible to share a national identity and regard football as a national passion despite all its distortions: one thing does not exclude the other. Indeed, it is precisely because football is a national passion that serves the interests of the unscrupulous. From a clinical perspective, a source of anguish often appears in the confusion created by the fact that one’s own passion is used to serve particular interests. Sociocultural issues constitute the “moral individual” and are carried into intersubjective coexistence, fostering the fantasy of one hundred percent of coherence in human feelings. This, in turn, undermines our ability to analyze both the personalities involved in interpersonal relationships and the complexity of the mechanisms that structure social life.

If the passion for football brings together a national identity to the extent that it becomes a phenomenon used by capitalism to serve its interests, it is not by depriving football of this symbolic place that the criminal actions of capitalist financial agents will come to an end. The 2026 World Cup reminds us that these two realities are not mutually exclusive: the tournament brought people together through powerful expressions of national identity while simultaneously serving unprecedented commercial and political interests. The struggle we advocate is not against passion or national alterity, but rather for greater awareness of the effects of unscrupulous interests on the relationship between capitalism and football, as well as for a clearer understanding of the implications of those interests. Such awareness can provide a basis for choosing the rules and values that govern collective life. Criticism of football driven purely by resentment or emotional reaction may, in fact, be a displacement of feelings of powerlessness in the face of the forces of capitalism in its current financialized phase.



Hilvânia Maria de Carvalho

A social scientist, psychoanalyst, and master's student in Education at the University of São Paulo (USP), where she is also a researcher with the Olympic Studies Group. Before transitioning to academia and clinical practice, she worked in the financial sector and holds an MBA in Capital Markets and an ANBIMA CPA-20 certification.

Email: hilvania.carvalho@gmail.com

What are we watching when we watch the World Cup: A very American take



Dr. Amy Bass.

Professor of Sport Studies and Chair of the Division of Social Science and Communication, Executive Director of the Sport Knowledge Institute, Manhattanville University. An Emmy Award winning writer, she is the author of One Goal: A Coach, a Team and the Game that brought a Divided Town Together; among other titles.

Instagram: @bassab1

Web: www.amybass.net

Email: amy.bass@mville.edu

The headlines were as predictable as the opening whistle, another World Cup ushered in trailing controversy, from immigration crackdowns to militarized security, exorbitant ticket prices to thousand-dollar train rides. Every four years we are reminded that this beloved tournament is one of our most complicated spectacles.

And yet, we watch.

At the center, of course, is the sport itself. Ninety minutes (ha!), twenty-two players, a ball, an impossibly large pitch, and the irresistible drama that theatrical flopping and questionable red cards produce.

But the World Cup has never simply been about soccer. It is a global cacophony of performative nationalism, capitalistic greed, political nonsense, and media intervention, a carnival built within a marketplace where thousands of people find themselves connected to folks they would never otherwise meet.

In 1994, when the United States hosted the men's World Cup, the game arrived hoping to convince Americans that it belonged. Flash forward thirty-two years, and no convincing is necessary. The future was here, all grown up and with a gaggle of children of its own.

Kids who watched for the first time in 1994 now coach youth teams. They are the journalists covering the game and decision-makers helping America's professional leagues thrive. In 2012, NBC's first contract to broadcast the Premier League expanded what many Americans knew of the sport, widening the circles of soccer fans from generations of immigrant communities who carried the game in their baggage to a broader cultural realm.

The real story, then, hasn't been whether America embraced soccer this time around. America already had. What this tournament revealed instead was something deeper about who Americans are, what the world thinks of them, and what happens when people turn away from the news and take in what is right in front of them.

One of the central arguments I made in *One Goal* was that sport doesn't create social change as much as it exposes where change is needed. Soccer did not make Somali refugees in Lewiston, Maine, American. It became the language through which a community and its newcomers negotiated with one another, a language the World Cup speaks fluently. At a moment when political policy narrowly and punitively mandates who belongs, soccer quietly claims that identity is seldom singular, turning binary oppositions into couples. American and Mexican. American and Ghanaian. American and Portuguese. These layered identities are not contradictions, but rather soccer's foundations, making clear that belonging can be vast. Beyond the frames curated by broadcast television (the graphics and endless statistics and multiple camera

angles), beyond the dynamic ticket pricing and Stub Hub controversies that make sport a luxury product, and beyond FIFA itself, something stubbornly human breaks through.

Massachusetts born and bred, there was no clearer example to me than watching the Tartan Army descend upon Boston, arriving by the thousands in kilts, singing at full volume, emptying kegs across the city, and somehow convincing the Fenway Faithful to replace "Sweet Caroline" with chants celebrating John McGinn. They ate lobster rolls and chowder, learned how to pronounce Worcester and Leominster, and placed orange traffic cones on everyone from John Harvard to the famous ducks of Boston Common.

On the pitch, fans adopted Cape Verde, one of sport's many feel-good stories. A small island nation whose remarkable run captured hearts far beyond its population, the team who recruited players through LinkedIn reminded everyone that sport sometimes becomes a rare space in which size, wealth, and geopolitical influence yield to hope. For a few unforgettable weeks, millions of people who could not have located Cape Verde on a map found themselves obsessed with 40-year-old keeper Vozinha, who gained almost six million new Instagram followers within hours of his heroics against Spain.

It is a curious kind of magic in which strangers celebrate each other's joy, something that sociologist Émile Durkheim dubbed "collective effervescence." When I studied Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* as a first-year college student, sport, never mind soccer, was not on my bingo card — nor was it on his. But the feeling Durkheim described — the spirit that emerges when people gather around something bigger than themselves — comes alive at the World Cup. With apologies to the New York Knicks, few events generate it more reliably.

That Americans experience this feels especially valuable. Unlike so much of sporting culture, the World Cup reminds the United States that even as a host, it is not the center of the story, but rather participants in a genuinely global conversation. So many countries. So many chants in so many languages. So many colors. So many stories.

The headlines surrounding the World Cup deserve their scrutiny. The politics remain, at best, messy. But for all its contradictions, the World Cup continues to create fleeting moments when humanity takes center stage, as people fill stadiums and streets to celebrate together, mourn together, and discover that the strangers they may have been taught to fear might become the friends they remember most.

Fanship and shifting national identities: The promise of the World Cup

At the end of the group stage of the World Cup, I saw a post on social media that read: “Me, changing ethnicities as I cheer during World Cup matches.” The post was accompanied with the portion at the end of the video that accompanied Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” in which a series of men and women of different ethnicities (and ages) slowly but seamlessly morph one in the other as if a single person was taking on multiple ethnicities (and genders).

What made this comment particularly interesting was that it meshed with an observation that a significant portion of U.S. soccer fans have an ability or tendency to treat national teams as franchises rather than as nationally determined fan bases. On the one hand, US nationalism and fanship is, of course, a solid subject position. Laurent Dubois, in his *The Language of the Game*, observes that part of the draw of national competitions, like the World Cup, “is that many people who might rarely make a show of nationalism can, in the festival atmosphere, deck themselves out in flags and national symbols in a way that feels joyful and playful and creates connections across social and class boundaries.” More, he goes as far as to say that perhaps one of the pleasures of supporting the USMNST (the United States men’s national soccer team) is, rather than holding onto American exceptionalism, as Dubois notes, “The fact that US soccer culture has in many ways lived, and thrived, on the margins of mainstream sports is part of what has made it a vector for different ways of thinking about what this country is and can be.” That is, in short, he is arguing that supporting the US Men’s team is an opportunity to rethink the US as only one country of many.

Yet, something more seems to be going on here. Michael B. Devlin and Andrew C. Billings have illustrated that, “Given the heterogeneous demographics of the United States, a U.S. citizen may, nonetheless, identify with another country in a manner equal to—or superseding—perceived kinship with the United States.” Moreover, it is not simply heterogeneous demographics but this is coupled with changing viewing demographics. As Darin W. White illustrates, soccer fans in the US have a growing tendency to watch foreign (mostly European leagues) rather than, or in addition to, their fanship of MLS clubs. While all soccer viewing and fanship is on the rise, the commitment of fan identity toward teams and players outside of the United States, who come from nations across the globe, means that not only are US viewers heterogeneous, but so are their fan identities. This combination allows for a shifting sense of support and identity.

Rather than an ability to rethink what the US might be through sport, then, it might be that the US fans ability to switch alliances so easily (to change ethnicities?) provides an even more

interesting, or more creative, subject position—the ability to not just rethink what the US might be but to rethink subjectivity itself. More, given a sports landscape that has never required geographic proximity to become a *franchise* fan (of American sports, or, indeed, of our favorite Premier League franchises), the ability to choose a different country to identify with (e.g., a fling one had during study abroad in France) becomes easy (just as the ability of franchises to pick and move encourages a looser aligned team identity). If national identities are imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson tells us, the past inability to articulate the men’s soccer team with success has made it far easier for US fans to support others, to identify as if constituted by a different imagined community. If hard core supporter groups elsewhere often identities politically with their nations (or some version of it), as both Franklin Foer has pointed out, that is not the case here.

Hence, in supporting soccer—well, men’s soccer—identity for US fans is far more fluid, far less fixed than it is for other nationalities, and it is overdetermined by our history with franchise economics, our lack of success as a team, and understanding the sport itself as “foreign” and marginal, despite its long history in the US. As a result, fans have the ability to switch identities, to link with other nations, in ways unimaginable by others. And perhaps, this is just the type of creative imaginary we need in this moment. Perhaps it is just as beneficial to imagine oneself as a member of different community as it is to rethink one’s own. What is it, for example, for a 50-year-old Midwestern woman to identify with Cape Verde? What benefits or costs are derived from a moment, even one so rare, when one is able to disarticulate themselves from their own nation state?

The World Cup is giving us an opportunity to ask that question. And it’s one very much worth pondering.



Dr. John M Sloop

*Andrew W. Mellon
Chair in the Humanities
and Professor of
Communication Studies
at Vanderbilt University.
He is a cultural critic of
matters of public interest.
He is the author of
several books, including
Soccer Neoliberal Pitch:
The Sport’s Power, Profit,
and Discursive Politics
(2023, University of
Alabama Press): .*

*Email: John.m.sloop@
vanderbilt.edu*

EAFC and the building blocks of soccer fandom in the United States



Dr. Johnathan Anderson

Assistant Professor of Sports Media in the department of Communication and Media at Samford University. He teaches and conducts research on the role and impact of sports video games within contemporary sports culture.

Email: jander20@samford.edu

As a sports media scholar, I'm interested in fan beliefs and behaviors, their tendencies and how they navigate tough losses emotionally. The question I find most interesting though is pretty simple: How does someone become a fan in the first place?

As the United States plays co-host to the 2026 World Cup, I find that origin question even more compelling. The culture of soccer in the U.S. has grown tremendously in the last decade; understanding how Americans managed to get to this point is a progression worth exploring.

Scholars conceptualize the mechanisms and processes behind fandom formation in a variety of ways. In my classes, I approach the topic through a discussion of what I call the five building blocks of fandom. These foundational elements include exposure, knowledge, points of attachment, community, and emotional triggers. Together, the formation of these building blocks can help explain how someone might move from awareness to obsession within their sports fandom.

However, forming those building blocks requires an entry point, and historically, the typical entry points to fandom for nearly all other major sports in the United States haven't applied for soccer. Most sports fans inherited their fandom from their family, grew up with a sport being a pervasive element of their upbringing, or were introduced to it through the variety of sports programming that dominated the airwaves. Given that soccer lacked these generational traditions, cultural ubiquity and consistent media visibility in the U.S., it required alternative entry points to establish a meaningful foothold within the American sports landscape.

Fortunately for U.S. soccer enthusiasts, the contemporary media environment was successful in reshaping these conditions. Streaming services and social media have contributed immensely to this growth, bringing international competition to American audiences and opening the door for those audiences to engage in a more global sporting conversation. While these two arenas are rightly celebrated for their contributions, another important and often underemphasized area of sports media has also played a significant role. Sports video games (SVGs) have long served as entry points into the sport, helping to educate newcomers while fostering early forms of connection and identification with the sport.

For years, EA Sports' soccer franchise has quietly contributed to the normalization of global football culture among American audiences. Long before casual viewers regularly watched Premier League or Champions League matches, EAFC (EA Sports FC, formerly FIFA) players were interacting with clubs, national teams, tactics, and international stars through gameplay. EAFC lowered the barriers to soccer fandom, allowing players to 'talk soccer' by functioning as an informal educational and cultural space through which users learned how to understand and engage with the global game.

At the same time, the franchise's influence

extended beyond simple exposure and knowledge acquisition. Through repeated interaction with clubs, players, and competitions, users often developed points of attachments and social connections tied to the sport. They began following teams they frequently used in-game, developed affinities for particular nations or athletes, and engaged with online soccer communities through gaming spaces, social media, and streaming platforms. Throughout these engagements, EAFC contributed to each of the foundational building blocks associated with fandom formation.

In the buildup to the 2026 World Cup, EAFC released *The World's Game* update, a reflection of EA Sports' continued attempt to position EAFC as a gateway into global football culture following the company's split from FIFA branding. Beyond introducing World Cup-themed content to Ultimate Team, EAFC's most popular mode, the update introduced a new game mode by the same name which allows players to simulate the World Cup while controlling their preferred nation(s). Players can play the tournament as true to life or modify the experience by rearranging group pairings or swap qualified teams with select nations that missed out. Each nation in the game mode is presented with a biography alongside its ratings that details the footballing story of each nation as well as a summary of its success, including total World Cup appearances and highest finish as well as their success in regional competitions. These elements highlight the intentions of the mode to function as a digital entry point into both the tournament and global football culture.

The World Cup already provides a uniquely accessible entry point for newer fans. The structure, national identities, recognizable stars, and dramatic stakes simplify many of the barriers that can complicate entry into global club soccer. *The World's Game* builds upon this accessibility by allowing users not just to watch the tournament, but to actively participate within it. It provides a platform for players to develop the building blocks of their own fandom.

In the wake of the 2026 World Cup, the long-term success of soccer fandom in the United States will depend on more than visibility alone. Exposure introduces audiences to the sport, but sustained fandom emerges through emotional investment, cultural familiarity, and participatory engagement. Within this broader process, EAFC and *The World's Game* should be considered as meaningful contributors helping audiences learn how to experience, understand, and ultimately care about soccer.

While EAFC is not solely responsible for the growth of soccer in the U.S., and *The World's Game* will not alone determine the continued growth of soccer in this country, they remain incredibly powerful entry points to the sport worthy of scholarly recognition.

“There’s always a few dickheads”: Live sites, public dis/order and the crowd as media spectacle

The behavior and unpredictability of crowds in urban life have occupied the minds of politicians, authorities and police since at the least the French Revolution and the First Republic of the late 19th century. The shared frisson of the crowd expressing its excitement mobilizes the power of sociality and democratic expression, while also representing a potential threat to social order and authority if it descends into mob behavior and violence.

The longstanding power and fear of the crowd became apparent in Australia during the lead up to the 2026 FIFA men’s World Cup. The Chief Executive responsible for the arts, culture and public event precinct located in the center of Melbourne, Federation Square, announced that live broadcasts of the Australian team’s matches on the “big screen” in the Square were being cancelled. The reason given was fear of anti-social and dangerous behavior by attendees. This fear centered on the potential behavior of young male fans and the lighting of flares during games.

The decision was overturned quickly by the Victorian State Premier, Jacinta Allan. Leading an unpopular Labor government in an election year, Allan released an official statement that strained for “relatability” by invoking a crude colloquialism: “There’s always a risk of bad behaviour from a few dickheads at every public gathering, but police and security will be on site, and there’ll be zero tolerance of it. The World Cup should bring us together, not keep us apart.” The Premier’s statement is a rare example of fulsome political support for association football in a state and country where the game struggles for consistent popular attention outside of World Cup tournaments and, to a lesser extent, Asian Cups.

Federation Square as a live site attracted national and international attention during the 2022 men’s World Cup in Qatar and the 2023 women’s World Cup hosted by Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Fixtures featuring the Australian Socceroos and Matildas drew energetic 7,500 capacity crowds who gathered to watch games on the Square’s big screen. Crowd celebrations hit raucous crescendos during night time games when goals were scored by Australia, including the lighting of flares. As videos uploaded to YouTube show, intense celebrations followed the goal-scoring heroics of Matthew Leckie (vs Denmark in the 2022 group stage), Courtney Vine (the 10th penalty taker in a nerve-wracking shootout between Australia and France in a 2023 quarter-final) and Sam Kerr (vs England in a 2023 semi-final). The popularity and media coverage of Federation Square grew with each game and goal, triggering a multiplication of World Cup live sites in other areas of Melbourne and capital cities across the country.

The affective intensity witnessed in Federation Square is reinforced by a recursive mode of mediatization. A global media sport mega-event

– the World Cup – is transmitted live to the screen in a public square and watched by a large crowd of Australian fans. Those watching in the Square are then folded into the overall experience of the mega-event for audiences as their reactions are live-streamed, recorded, broadcast and replayed via smartphones, social media networks and news media. The crowd becomes a mediatized public spectacle enacted by a mediatized sporting spectacle, in which people watch and respond to other people watching and reacting. The catalyst for both is the visceral tension-release and emotion expressed by fans when their national football team scores.

The crowds in Federation Square this year were mostly well-behaved. They were also noticeably male dominated when compared to the 2023 women’s World Cup. Fears of an aggressive masculine threat were given substance across Australia’s four games by reports of an alleged sexual assault of a woman by a 16-year-old male, a small brawl breaking out in the viewing area, and mounted police intervening to prevent fans rushing the security barriers. A police officer suffered a minor injury after being pinned against a barrier and a small number of arrests were made for the possession or lighting of flares and fireworks.

These offences aligned, to a degree, with kick-off times in Melbourne and the results of the Socceroos. A festival atmosphere (a 2-0 victory over Turkey following a 2pm kick-off on a Sunday afternoon) gave way to discontent (a 2-0 defeat to a conceited USA team commencing at 4am on a Saturday morning). These results were followed by muted satisfaction (a scoreless draw against Paraguay at midday on a Friday, which saw Australia qualify for the group stage) and stinging disappointment (another 4am Saturday morning start for a round of 32 loss against Egypt in a penalty shootout).

World Cup live sites make visible football’s capacity as a potent outlet for publicly expressed emotion. Perched on the edge of order and momentary disorder, the assembled crowd experiences and expresses a range of unpredictable emotions – joy, excitement, pride, disbelief, frustration, anger – that are then shared and represented across innumerable mobile, digital and television screens to wider audiences. This signals a short-lived but sociologically significant convergence of public, media and sporting spectacle, even with a few dickheads present.



Dr. Brett Hutchins

Professor of Media and Communications at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He has published extensively over many years on sport media, digital technologies, and environmental communication. He is the co-editor of his latest volume: Sport and the Environment: Communication, Politics and Culture in the Age of Climate Crisis (forthcoming, Routledge, with Libby Lester and Toby Miller).

Email: brett.hutchins@monash.edu

‘No Scotland, no party’: Framing the Tartan Army as Scottish ambassadors



Dr. Richard Haynes

Professor of Media Sport in the School of Communication at University of Stirling. His research focuses on the interplay of sport, the media and popular culture.

Email: r.b.haynes@stir.ac.uk

The Tartan Army, the moniker given to the travelling fan base of Scotland men's national team since the 1970s, have long been recognised as the gregarious symbolic expression of Scottishness within international football. The informal display of Scotland's cultural heritage through the wearing of kilts and Glengarry marching hats, are invariably combined with contemporary replica Scotland shirts and are the most visible marker that Scotland fans are in town.

As previous academic research by Richard Giulianotti has explained, the Scottish symbolism of the Tartan Army was forged in contradistinction to the destructive and chauvinistic media profile of English national supporters of the 1980's and 1990's. Where English fans had historically been associated with rampaging forms of hooliganism, the Tartan Army incorporated a constructed self-styled sense of Scottish bonhomie with their hosts. Carrying a visibly cheerful disposition which displayed collective warmth and friendliness to whoever crossed their path, the Tartan Army also became synonymous with loud and often eccentric public drunkenness which rarely fuelled violent behaviour. After half a century the Tartan Army is now an incredibly well connected and intergenerational network of supporters from across Scotland and the Scottish diaspora and welcomed wherever they travel.

The FIFA World Cup 2026 was the first time Scotland men's national team had made the finals in 28 years. Little wonder then that many Scots chose to travel to the USA to both attend Scotland's group games but also join the camaraderie and carnivalesque identity of the Tartan Army.

Scotland's first two group games against Haiti on June 13th and Morocco on June 19th were held at the Gillette Stadium, Foxborough, Massachusetts, known as Boston Stadium for the World Cup. With the majority of Scotland fans being located in the city of Boston the Tartan Army had a coherence and visibility for over a week, occupying the hotels, bars and public spaces. STV News labelled it "The friendly takeover of Boston".

According to a BBC report an estimated 50,000 Scots visited Boston during Scotland's first two games. This mass influx of tartan-wearing, flag-waving Scots attracted worldwide media attention. The stories in mainstream news outlets in Scotland were framed by historical references to Scotland's glorious failure at previous World Cups. In five attempts Scotland had failed to qualify for the knock-out phase of the competition.

But the wider stories about the Tartan Army were not directly about the football at all. Themes of travel, visa's, tickets prices, singing and beer drinking dominated much of both the broadcast news coverage and social media platforms.

Just a small selection of the most prominent news stories provides a sense of how the Tartan Army's presence in Boston created a vortexual

force which took over much of the headlines around the first week of the World Cup.

For example, concerns about the cost of travelling to stadia in the US led to an ingenious thinking by two Tartan Army fans to side-step the profiteering around the World Cup host cities. Davie Hood and Gregor Cowan hired a fleet of 21 American school buses to transport 1,000 Scotland fans from the small town of Providence to the Boston stadium for the games against Haiti and Morocco. The yellow buses featured prominently across all news outlets and had a special feature on Gary Lineker's Netflix podcast series *The Rest Is Football*.

Another lead story came from Scotland fan Craig Ferguson who trekked 3000 miles from Los Angeles to Boston to arrive for the opening game, raising £1m for Scottish Action for Mental Health. This was one of many stories of fans navigating their way to Boston, including those who had initially been denied visa's to enter the US and discovered alternative routes to Boston.

The city of Boston, especially their publicans, fell in love with the Scots who reputedly drank the famous Sam Adam's brewery taproom out of their Boston Lager. Other reports showcased acts of kindness and kinship between Scots and their hosts, which have left lasting bonds between the city and Scotland. One symbol of this Tartan Army ambassadorial behaviour was the furnishing of various statues in Boston with a traffic cone. A long-standing whimsy in the centre of Glasgow where a cone adorns the head of the Duke of Wellington statue the transgressive act has become an iconic popular cultural tourist attraction. The city of Boston subsequently assimilated traffic cone symbol as their own with an annual Traffic Cone holiday. The Tartan Army also flew over a cone covered in messages to Boston including the reworked chant "No Boston, No Party" to help raise funds for mental health charities in the city.

On the pitch Scotland's tournament didn't last long, but the shining light of its Tartan Army ambassadors shone incredibly bright, creating lifelong memories and international bonds. This is surely what the World Cup is about.

No cheers for Bafana Bafana: Nigerian football fans and the politics of xenophobia

Nigeria is unarguably a football powerhouse in Africa. In fact, scholars like Onwumechili and Akpan have constantly argued that Nigeria lives and breathes football. The game commands a passion and loyalty that transcends politics, rabid religious and ethnic bigotry. The love Nigerians have for the game runs through the nation like a familiar river, nourishing conversations in village squares, markets, churches, and bars alike. When the FIFA 2026 World Cup arrives, Nigerian fans typically rally behind any African representative with pride and passion. But the 2026 tournament unfolding in the United States revealed a striking exception. When South Africa faced Mexico, Nigerians did not rally behind South Africa. Instead, they poured onto social media with biting humor, deep resentment, and a unified decision to support Mexico. Instead of continental solidarity, Nigerians both at home and abroad flooded their social media handles with unequivocal support for the Mexican side. The reason cuts deep, which is, the persistent and brutal xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and other African foreign nationals in South Africa.

The xenophobic attacks, which surged notably around 2019 with renewed ferocity in 2021, 2025, and 2026 have left deep scars. Nigerian business owners have been looted, students assaulted, and citizens murdered in places like Johannesburg and Pretoria. What makes the attacks more painful is historical memory. The Nigerian government and people stood firmly with South Africans during their struggle against apartheid. Many Nigerians feel that this debt of solidarity has been repaid with violence and ingratitude.

This piece does not merely report anger but systematically samples and analyses social media posts from Nigerian fans across Facebook to understand how football became a vehicle for political expression. The analysis draws on eleven Facebook posts and their comment threads to reveal patterns of collective resentment, ethnic pride, and the weaponization of sporting loyalty.

For instance, one Nigerian fan shared a meme of a Mexican fan laughing alongside the caption, “Even my ancestors are supporting Mexico today.” Another one said “I pray they don’t win a single match” +Ben Udechukwu, 2026). The next post featured a montage of South African xenophobic attacks with the text, “You burn our shops, we cheer your opponent. Fair trade.” A third user commented, “My father donated to the ANC in the 1980s. Now they call us drug dealers. Mexico all the way.” The comment threads reveal layered emotions. Some Nigerians expressed guilt at abandoning continental unity, but most responded with a firm position: football support is a luxury that respect must first earn. One particularly viral video showed a Nigerian fan wearing a Mexican jersey while waving the Nigerian flag, a symbol of strategic allegiance. A notable post compared

the Nigerian government’s quiet diplomacy on xenophobia to the loud support for Bafana Bafana, asking, “Why should we cheer those who silence our government?” (Idowu, 2026).

Adams Omokhekhai captured the absolute refusal of solidarity by writing, “Even if South Africa play alone inside a stadium we NIGERIANS will support the stadium.” The logic is not about football quality but about punishing a nation perceived as ungrateful. Lukman Hussain added a pointed reminder of the violence that follows the final whistle: “After their next match, they will return to South Africa for the Xenophobia.” This comment implies that South African players and fans do not deserve sporting goodwill when their countrymen harm Nigerians back home.

Perhaps the most recurring theme in the comments is the satirical use of the phrase “taking our jobs.” Labake Ilori Akinyemi wrote, “We are leaving the JOB of supporting South African team at the World Cup to South Africans because we don’t want to take their JOBS.” This directly mocks the anti-immigrant sentiment prevalent in some South African communities.

What emerges from these comments is a coherent political statement wrapped in football banter. Nigerian fans have not forgotten the historical solidarity their country offered South Africa during apartheid. They have not forgotten the xenophobic attacks. And at the World Cup, they found a harmless but yet humiliating way to say: we remember. Also, the findings suggest that for many Nigerians, the football stadium has become a courtroom. The verdict is clear, which is, South Africa must feel the sting of sporting isolation before it confronts its xenophobia.

The theoretical explanation to this can be found in the Social Identity Theory perspective, and Collective Memory and Retributive Justice. Social Identity Theory helps explain how Nigerians reassert their ingroup identity by rejecting an outgroup (South Africa) even at the cost of continental solidarity. Collective Memory provides the historical contrast between past Nigerian sacrifice and present South African hostility.

This collective action is also gauged by Political Economy of Sport and Collective Action Theory. Political Economy of Sport allows us to see how labor migration, job competition, and national resource distribution shape football loyalties. Collective Action Theory explains how Nigerians coordinated their support for Mexico as a form of nonviolent protest. Together, these frameworks provide an analytical lens for understanding how a football match became a referendum on xenophobia. Together, these frameworks allow an analytical dissection of how a football match becomes a nonviolent site of referendum on xenophobia.



Dr. Unwana Samuel Akpan

lecturer in the Department of Journalism, Broadcasting and Media Studies at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. His research focuses on broadcast journalism, sport communication, and African Indigenous communication and media systems. He has published extensively in these fields, has been a Visiting Scholar at Howard University, and is Editor of Communication Review.



Dr. Chuka Onwumechili

Professor of Communications at Howard University (USA) and Editor-in-Chief of the Howard Journal of Communications. He has authored more than 15 books, including Women’s Football in Africa and Sport Communication: An International Approach (2024), and has published extensively on sport communication, intercultural communication, and migration.

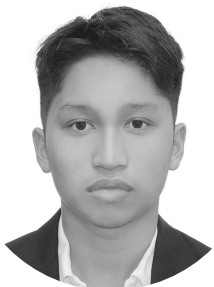
Cosmopolitan kick: Watch parties, global imaginaries, and World Cup fandom in Singapore



Dr. Lou Antolihao

Senior Lecturer of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, where he teaches courses on sports studies, senses and society, and the sociology of the body. He has published on sports and postcolonialism, sports fandom, and football betting.

Email: lou.antolihao@nus.edu.sg



Luis Necias P. Antolihao

Former U10 academy player for Real Madrid Singapore and a graduating high school student at Singapore American School (SAS).

Email: antolihao791694@sas.edu.sg

Across the globe, the watch party became a popular way to experience the 2026 World Cup matches. The celebrations allow fans to experience some of the elements that football spectatorship is known for – wearing jerseys, team chants, and riding the emotional roller coaster that goes with the flow of the game. In Singapore, watch parties were organized in bars, dining spots, mall atriums, community centers, and even in a few places of worship. The predominantly European league-oriented fans, the presence of a large and diverse expatriate population, and other social factors such as wee-hours screenings, alcohol consumption rules, and food culture shaped the watch parties. In turn, these fan events show the impact of the recent World Cup and the larger cultural significance of sports in Singapore.

Singapore had a strong local football fandom, driven by the participation of its national team, the Lions, in Malaysian football tournaments. This arrangement started long before the country's independence in 1965, when the city-state was part of British Malaya, and later of the postcolonial state of Malaysia. With 24 championships, Singapore was one of the most successful clubs in the Malaysia Cup, and its rivalry with teams from the Malaysian states of Pahang and Selangor sparked a strong following among local football fans. In 1997, Singapore decided to break away from the Malaysian league to form its own. While the move was heralded for responding to the call for the small city-state to have its own professional league, it also led to the fragmentation of local football fans into smaller groups to support their “neighborhood” teams. Most of these local teams struggled to sustain themselves, so attracting the interest of fans was even more challenging. Around the same time, the emergence of satellite technology allowed for regular live broadcasts of the English Premier League and other European tournaments. As a result, the local football fandom shifted towards a more international outlook since the turn of the 21st century. This football scene makes the World Cup a much-awaited event in Singapore.

As a global financial hub, Singapore has attracted immigrants and expatriate workers from around the world. Foreigners from over 150 countries comprise around 40% of Singapore's 6.11 million population. The most well-attended 2026 World Cup watch parties were those organized by consular offices and expat groups. The Embassy of Mexico, representing one of the mega-event's co-hosts, organized a jam-packed World Cup opening party which featured a mariachi band and other cultural performances. The Korean Association, the British Club, and the Spanish Association were among those that organized a watch party throughout the month-long tournament. Even the Jordanian community organized a smaller but well-prepared celebration with traditional food

and a booth distributing tourist brochures and Dead Sea salt skin products.

The time difference between Singapore and World Cup venues across North America means that most of the games are screened between 3:00 and 12:00 am, with key fixtures such as the opening Mexico vs South Africa match and the finals between Argentina and Spain, both held in the wee hours. It means that those who attended were mostly avid fans or were driven by the World Cup hysteria. Many shared that joined the watch parties just to see what's going on and experience the hype surrounding the major sports event.

CHIJMES, a historic dining complex that used to house a convent, stood as the most popular among the many watch party venues in Singapore. Its ample outdoor space, sponsored activities, and location in the middle of downtown made it a popular option, especially for the expat crowd who live around the fringes of the city center. CHIJMES was also one of the few venues that received an exemption from the government regulation banning the sale of alcoholic drinks after 10:30 pm. However, the prohibition against the sale and consumption of alcohol between 3-6 am was still imposed, even during the watch parties. This law differs from practices in other countries, particularly those in Europe and North America, where beer and other alcoholic drinks are an important part of football fan culture. Food, however, remained an integral part of the watch parties. From late-night durian snacks to early-morning kaya toast breakfast, the local food culture adds to the distinctive flavor of the watch parties in Singapore. This is more evident in the World Cup screenings in Lau Pa Sat, the country's historic hawker food center, where some stalls are 24 hours, providing another reason to join the watch parties.

Despite these distinct elements, the World Cup watch parties in Singapore were driven by the same force that made them popular in other parts of the world. They provide a space to define boundaries, forge alliances, and explore a new way of expressing one's identity. Finally, those who joined the World Cup watch parties in Singapore clearly came for a “cosmopolitan kick” – a collective outburst that momentarily binds local fans to their favorite overseas football teams, reconnects expatriates to their faraway home, and offers a sense of coherence to the differing state, corporate, and sports imaginaries.

Toward the 2026 World Cup: Transforming Indonesian soccer into a sportification of popular culture

The 2026 World Cup has also transformed the face of soccer in new and different ways. Whereas in the past, spectators in Indonesia at stadium matches were synonymous with rioting, rowdiness, and unruly behaviour, the 2026 World Cup qualifiers have changed that perception. Spectators now resemble those at a music concert, and many children feel safe watching the matches at the stadium. Additionally, a new phenomenon has emerged among those watching live at the stadium: the widespread use of cell phones to capture the excitement of the stadium experience and the match itself for sharing on social media. Thus, the Indonesian national team's journey toward the World Cup should be understood as a process of social and cultural transformation, not merely a sporting endeavour. There has been a shift in the national team's image from one dominated by diaspora players, mostly from Europe, to the presence of a foreign coach who has also gained popularity, such as Shin Tae-yong from South Korea. This has gone hand in hand with the national team's achievements, which have made history for Indonesian soccer by advancing to the fourth round of World Cup qualifiers and their popularity has been intertwined with these accomplishments.

The phenomenon of changing soccer viewing habits that occurred during the Indonesian national team's journey toward the World Cup is part of an interconnected series of events, primarily driven by the strong influence of social media. Coaches, players, and fans have become content that attracts mass audiences. The South Korean coach, who has been in charge from 2019 to 2025, is closely tied to the large K-Pop fanbase. When he was first introduced to the public in 2019, Statista data showed that Indonesia ranked second globally in K-Pop video streaming consumption. Meanwhile, the players' appeal has significantly strengthened, drawing fans to the stadiums. According to data, Indonesia recorded the highest number of spectators during the Asian zone qualifiers for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which took place from September 2024 to June 2025. Another notable trend is the widespread culture of public viewings across various regions of Indonesia. The appeal of having diaspora players on the national team—most of whom are of European descent has become a phenomenon emerging as a new icon of Indonesian soccer. Popular names such as Maarten Paes, Thom Haye, Calvin Verdonk, Jay Idzes, and several others on the national team have become figures who are not only beloved but have also transformed the face of Indonesian soccer.

This transformation in soccer demonstrates that the national team's journey serves as an example of how sports have become central to popular culture. Here, soccer evolved into a cultural force that influences media consumption

practices, the formation of collective identity, and the dynamics of public spaces. In this context, soccer is understood as a form of popular culture that shapes the rhythm of social life for instance, conversations about game strategies take place in various settings such as workplaces, cafes, public spaces, and social media; the culture of watching games together has evolved into a collective ritual; and the national team jersey has become both a symbol of identity and a lifestyle product. Players and coaches are not merely positioned as athletes or team managers but also as public figures who influence cultural trends, consumption practices, and even national representation in the digital sphere. Drawing on the concept MediaSport (1998) by Lawrence Wenner, which states that "sports and media form a mutually reinforcing relationship, making sports one of the most dominant forms of entertainment in modern society". Subsequently, Media Sports Cultural Complex (2003) by David Rowe asserts that "media and sports have converged to form a media sports cultural complex," and Mediatization (2013) by Andreas Hepp explains that the media is no longer merely a conduit for information but shapes social practices and everyday life. When these three perspectives are considered together, the Indonesian national team's journey to the World Cup can be understood as a process of the "Sportification of Popular Culture". This term is used to describe a condition in which sports particularly soccer is no longer merely part of popular culture but have evolved into a cultural force that shapes media consumption, such as the formation of identity and social practices. The national team's matches are no longer merely sporting events but also cultural events that generate conversations, symbols, emotions, and social practices that extend far beyond the confines of the stadium.

The greatest achievement of the Indonesian national team's journey may not be solely the opportunity to compete in the 2026 World Cup finals. Equally important, however, is how this journey has transformed the role of soccer in the lives of Indonesians today. Soccer has now become one of the most influential cultural languages in shaping the national imagination, connecting millions of people through shared media experiences. What has changed most is the public's perception of soccer, which has become more inclusive and welcoming to all groups. Thus, the journey toward the World Cup today is not merely a story of Indonesia's growing athletic achievements, but also of how soccer has become a cultural force that shapes public life in the digital media era.



Dr. Meistra Budiasa

is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of 17 August 1945, Jakarta, Indonesia and Executive Director of the Center for Media and Sport Studies. Rooted in cultural studies, his research explores sport events, media, and culture as spaces of identity, representation, and mediatization. A leading scholar in Indonesia's sports communication ecosystem, he has authored 2 books, contributed to the Olympic and Paralympic Analysis 2024 volume, and published in accredited national and peer-reviewed international publications, including the Howard Journal of Communications. He frequently contributes op-eds and commentary to national media outlets. Dr. Budiasa serves as Communication Director for the International Association for Communication and Sport (IACS), International Liaison for the ICA Sport Communication Interest Group, and a reviewer for Journal Communication & Sport.

Email meistra@gmail.com

Twitter (X) [@meistra](https://twitter.com/meistra)

Linkedin www.linkedin.com/in/meistra/

Instagram [@meistra](https://www.instagram.com/meistra)

Cheering for someone else's team: Israel's World Cup without Israel



Dr. Haim Hagay

Lecturer at The Department of Communication Studies, Kinneret Academic College. His research interests include the intersection of sports media and nationalism, sports media and gender, sports journalism and media production studies.

Twitter: @haimhagay

Email: haimhagay@mx.kinneret.ac.il



Dr. Alina Bernstein

Senior Lecturer at the School of Media Studies, College of Management Academic Studies, and at the Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, Tel Aviv University, Israel. Her research focuses on sport, media, and society, with particular interests in gender, national identity, and the representation of sport in digital and social media.

Email: alinabernstein@gmail.com

Twitter: @alinabernstein

Israel did not qualify for the 2026 World Cup — one might say, as usual. Ranked 76th in the world, it has reached the tournament only once, in 1970, and was pushed out of Asian football soon afterwards when Arab and Muslim states refused to play it, eventually landing in UEFA. Israelis have therefore been supporting other people's teams for half a century. What was new in 2026 was the basis for their choice.

Adopting somebody else's team is not an Israeli peculiarity. The literature points to three broad routes. One is identity-based: a symbolic connection through shared ethnicity, religion, region or ideology — diasporic loyalty, or the pan-Arab and pan-African solidarities that embraced Morocco in 2022 and resurfaced more conditionally in 2026. A second is mediated: globalization and social media build loyalties detached from territory, often centered on athletes rather than teams through what Horton and Wohl called a parasocial relationship. A third is situational: when your own country fails to qualify, you adopt a substitute for the tournament. After the United States missed the 2018 World Cup, American fans largely chose replacement teams for footballing rather than personal or ancestral reasons.

Israel's version carries an additional, overtly political layer. After two years of war in Gaza, Israelis felt an acute sense of international isolation. UEFA came close to a vote on suspending Israel in the autumn of 2025, and the qualifying campaign unfolded under the possibility of expulsion. The isolation supplied the axis along which Israelis sorted the tournament: not who plays well, but who has been decent to us.

That sorting has a name in the marketing literature: the animosity model, in which consumers avoid products from countries toward which they hold political or historical grievances, regardless of the product's merits — a dynamic documented among Israeli Jewish consumers toward Germany. What was striking in 2026 was how openly and how widely it was applied to football.

The roster itself was not stable, and 2026 shows how it was rewritten. In 2014, research found the Netherlands the most supported team among Jewish Israelis, credited with sheltering Jews during the Holocaust, while Germany, Iran and Algeria led the teams Israelis wanted to see lose. Twelve years later Germany had been absolved, and a satirical World Cup supplement in *Yedioth Ahronoth* was explicit about why: "our grandparents would not have dared buy German-made toenail clippers, but now that Israel is short of friends it is legitimate to keep a passport photo of Florian Wirtz in your wallet". The grievance had not aged out. It had been outbid. Qatar, widely seen in Israel as Hamas's patron, inherited the vacancy — the ledger ran

on present need, not history.

Those same pages plotted the whole field on a grid: one axis for footballing quality, the other for relations with Israel, running from "a date at sunset" down to "may it go on their medical bills". Spain, called attractive but antisemitic, was portrayed as attacking with Palestinian flags in an operation dubbed "Swords of Pep". The grid does what the scholarship does not: researchers treat team quality and government friendliness as competing explanations for foreign support, but Israeli readers were handed both as axes and invited to trade one against the other — and the relations axis was the live one.

A website launched during the tournament worked through the entire fixture list, telling Israelis which side to support in every match. Whether it was joking was never entirely clear. One entry backed Cape Verde over Spain: Cape Verde was praised for preserving Sephardi memory, while Spain was credited with its Jewish golden age but blamed for the 1492 expulsion and recent anti-Israel politics. That 1492 could be charged against Spain the same season 1945 was written off for Germany is the point: an old grievance became usable only through the present relationship.

Broadcasters made the question a recurring feature, pre-match shows returning night after night whom Israelis ought to support. By the eve of the final it had reached the top of the state: Netanyahu received Argentina's ambassador and sent Milei a message his office posted — Javier, you are a true friend, we support you and Argentina tomorrow. The order is the argument in miniature: the team was an appendage of the friendship, not its object.

This invites an objection — Israelis loved Messi long before they had heard of Milei. True, and precisely the point: Messi had been there for twenty years, the ambassador had not. The team Israelis had the strongest political reason to adopt was also the team they would plausibly have adopted anyway — isolation simply moved that preference from the living room into the prime minister's diary.

In the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Analysis we described how social media fragmented Israel's national media event, turning medals into occasions for internal conflict. In 2026 there were no medals and no team, and the argument turned outward: for a month Israelis spent less time fighting one another than sorting everybody else. What they were sorting was not football, but who had been decent to us — the tournament followed as a running tally of Israel's standing in the world. The same supplement let the quieter thing slip in its entry on Curaçao, population 150,000, which had qualified: "what have they contributed to humanity, and why are they there and we are not?"

Cones and goings: Scotland at the World Cup

There is a common narrative progression that unites domestic media coverage of a team's performance in the World Cup: the build-up and heightened expectation, early frustration at adequate but underwhelming performances at the group stages, overblown triumphalism and optimism following a knock-out victory and coming to form, a period of national outrage and recrimination at another disappointing exit. Scotland's media has been guilty of stages one and four (most notably around the Argentina World Cup of 1978 and the collective madness around "Ally's Tartan Army"), but the national football culture of Scotland has limited experience of group stage adequacy and remains excluded altogether from knock-out stage triumphalism.

After a 28-year gap in qualification for the Finals, Scotland's media agenda takes a quite different role and divergent focus. Scotland rarely reaches the World Cup Finals and carries no expectation of overall victory. Rather, the target set is to qualify from the group stage and proceed to the knockout stage; something the nation has never achieved.

There were many conventional elements to the mediation of the World Cup in Scotland: squad updates, match reports and analyses, praise and recriminations depending upon results, but the focus we will take here is the presentation of the Scottish support. At the risk of pretentiousness, there is a mythology associated with Scotland's support. Indeed, since Barthes' first volume on Mythologies it has been clear that sport offers fertile ground for mythmaking.

The visual icon for the beginning of Scotland's World Cup adventure was provided during the qualifying stage. The opening goal in the final qualifier against Denmark was an overhead kick by Scott McTominay, the aesthetic elegance and rounded symmetry of which inspired its use on fan merchandise and various retail items. The kick even featured on a gable-end mural on a tenement block near Scotland's national stadium of Hampden, the tenements themselves an icon of urban Scottish identity. Temporarily, McTominay was Scotland's answer to Vitruvian Man.

However, McTominay's bicycle kick was to be supplanted as Scotland's national football symbol by the orange and white traffic cone. The association between these cones and Scotland results from a long-standing tradition of keeping one on the head of the statue of the Duke of Wellington in Glasgow's Royal Exchange Square. This symbolises the people of the city's irreverence and prompted artist Banksy to describe it as "his favourite work of art in the UK" (the statue is also situated in front of the Gallery of Modern Art). In the absence of newsworthy exploits on the pitch, attention fell on the coning of statues as a calling card of the Scottish fans, most notably in Boston. While Miami Police were less enamoured of the cones on their city's statues, Boston's mayor Michelle Wu signalled her approval by coning a

statue of basketball player Bill Russell. The bond was sealed after Scotland's exit, when a cone, emblazoned with national slogans and imagery, was flown to New England to its own welcoming ceremony.

The projection of good-spirited humour sustained in domestic news coverage, aided by social media videos posted by both gleeful Scots and bemused – but appreciative – Americans. For a week, it became commonplace to see videos of Scotland fans marching on baseball stadiums, whereupon they would bring a gregarious Scottish noise to the home of the Great American Pastime.

Even the traditionally taciturn tabloid newspapers couldn't ignore the mood. The Scottish Sun's front page detailed each stage of the Tartan Army's journey, concentrating on the supporters, and after the team's defeat and subsequent resignation of manager Steve Clarke, they adapted the line for the affectionate back page headline "No Scotland ..No Clarky". This was a nod to 'No Scotland, no party'; a musical trope that would permeate footage of the fans and assist in defining their attitude. The title was used by a self-penned song by Nick Morgan in 2024 but came to be sung by fans to the tune of *Seven Nation Army* by The White Stripes.

As a claim, this is of course arrant nonsense. More successful footballing nations such as Brazil are capable of letting their hair down without Scottish assistance. But to dispute the line is to miss the point – its preposterous confidence and enthusiasm feed the narrative of partying without a care. Its success is to assert and enact the goodwill and enthusiasm of the Scottish supporters, even though the activities represented as partying – exuberant public drinking – look less attractive if undertaken by less positively connoted supporters. Along with the punning of the headlines, the overall projection is of humour and conviviality as innate Scottish traits.

The Tartan Army's international reputation stands in stark contrast to the domestic game. A notoriously divisive, ill-tempered rivalry between Glasgow teams Rangers and Celtic, which is prone to darker undercurrents of bigotry and violence, colours the impression of club fans and is bound up in class-based representations of football more broadly. On this basis, a positive fan image is something to take pleasure in and shouldn't be taken for granted.



Andy Harrow

Teaching Associate in Journalism, Media and Communications at the University of Strathclyde. He is also a freelance sports journalist who has written for Scottish publications such as The Herald and The Scotsman, as well as regularly contributing to a popular Scottish football podcast.



Dr. Michael Higgins

Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Strathclyde. His past books include Media and Their Publics (Open University Press), The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture (Cambridge University Press) and Belligerent Broadcasting (Routledge). His next book is Conflict Culture: Anger in a Mediated World and will be published next year by Routledge.

Streets in green and yellow as spaces of *communitas* in Brazil during FIFA World Cup



Dr. Otávio Tavares

Full Professor in the Federal University of Espírito Santo. Head of the ARETE – Centre of Olympic Studies and Sport. He teaches and conducts research on sport sociology and Olympic Studies. He is the author of four books, 67 academic papers and 51 book chapters.

Email: otavio.silva@ufes.br



Bruno Malias Mendes

Master in Physical Education from the Graduate Program in Physical Education at the Federal University of Espírito Santo. He conducts research on the social impact of sport on vulnerable communities and on public policies for sport and leisure. He is also an international FIFA beach soccer instructor.

Email: bruno.malias@hotmail.com

Routine has returned to normal in Brazil. For a few weeks, however, it is interrupted every four years by the men's FIFA World Cup. Homes, bars, and even workplaces adjust their schedules to follow the Brazilian national team's matches. Streets decked out in green and yellow - the national colors - team jerseys, flags in windows, and a profusion of decorations create a festive atmosphere that transforms everyday life.

As social scientist Victor Turner observed, large-scale collective rituals create temporary experiences of belonging—a *communitas*—in which social differences are momentarily suspended around a common goal. It is well established that football and carnival in Brazil function as rituals through which society generates collective experiences of belonging. During the World Cup, in particular, the national team transforms into what the prominent Brazilian intellectual Nelson Rodrigues called the "fatherland in cleats", an embodiment of the country in the form of a football team.

Banners, flags, and crowds gathering in public spaces to watch World Cup matches on giant screens are not unique to Brazil. They occur in many places around the world, particularly in countries with a deep passion for football, whose national teams are among the title favorites or both, creating that sense of *communitas* that will, sooner or later, come to an end. Yet, in this country, we can identify two different types of urban spaces that serve as gathering places for experiencing the sense of collective belonging that the World Cup tends to foster. On one side, the large central squares and avenues of the city. On the other, the neighborhood streets.

Almost every city has a traditional space for collective gatherings, whether for celebrations or protests. For example, the Plaza de Cibeles in Madrid, Times Square in New York, Cinelândia in Rio de Janeiro and the Obelisco in Buenos Aires. These spaces are generally located in central urban areas, normally spaces of circulation and impersonality: the "non-places" described by the French sociologist Marc Augé. It is in these places that the collective experience of watching and cheering for one's national team during the World Cup traditionally takes place bringing together people from various regions, transforming them into communities of the moment. However, when the game ends, the public space must return to what it was, a clean and organized space for its original urban functions.

On the other hand, neighborhood streets are spaces that are neither excessively private nor entirely alien. Places where community life can unfold and where, consequently, disruptions to daily routines are generally less tolerated. Yet, in Brazil, these are precisely places that

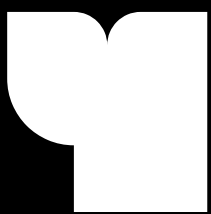
are occupied and marked, serving as the most common stage for the materialization of that sense of belonging, of *communitas*, during the World Cup.

Unlike Fan Fests organized by public authorities or the private sector, the use of neighborhood streets as venues to celebrate the Brazilian national team stems from community action and neighborhood organization, efforts that begin before the tournament to decorate the street as beautifully as possible. This means decorating streets with bunting or shiny fabric streamers in the national colors, and painting walls and the pavement with images of players, the FIFA World Cup trophy, and many other drawings that celebrate the glories of Brazilian football and envision the coveted sixth title, which has once again been postponed.

In many Brazilian cities this festive occupation of space leaves lasting marks and frequently, and in various ways, simply defies public authorities. Regardless of any legal authorization, decorations are hung from utility poles and streets are closed off, sometimes at night, sometimes on weekends, simply so that the asphalt and sidewalks can be painted over long stretches. Unlike the fan fests and their sponsors, the decorations are funded by the residents themselves, with occasional help from local businesses.

This tradition is so deeply rooted in the country that public authorities, even knowing they shouldn't, gently pretend those interventions do not exist, neither interfering with nor suppressing them. Unlike the large urban spaces that revert to their original state after the World Cup, leaving little traces or memories of the installations that once gathered hundreds or thousands of people, the decorated neighborhood streets in Brazil remain after the tournament ends, regardless of the sporting outcome, serving as a daily reminder of a collective project and the celebration of a *communitas* for some time.





IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

Access at the World Cup

On December 16th, 2025, the Sports and Rights Alliance (SRA) announced that FIFA was facing complaints that changes in policies related to disabled attendees were effectively excluding them from the World Cup. The SRA noted that such exclusions went against “FIFA’s Statutes, Human Rights Policy, and international human rights standards” and that they directly contradicted FIFA’s claims that the 2026 games would set new standards in diversity and inclusion.

Among the changes this year, FIFA began charging higher prices for caregiver seats accompanying wheelchair attendees, and they were unable to guarantee that an attendant could sit next to the wheelchair user. Parking charges for accessible spots ran as high as \$300 in Los Angeles, USA, which created another financial hardship. Such issues are complicated by the three-host format, as access policies in host countries differ. Mexico makes no provision for companion seating, and the United States does not cap resale prices even for accessible seats. These issues mean that many wheelchair and mobility-assisted users were unable to afford and effectively excluded from attending the games in person.

At the time the games began, FIFA had not addressed these barriers for wheelchair-using fans, yet they did take a step toward improving access during the games. On May 21st they announced that this World Cup would be the “first FIFA tournament to have sign language interpretation broadcasts for all matches.” FIFA explicitly stated that this was part of its efforts at “enhancing accessibility for fans with disabilities” and that the policy would “best serve the diverse community of football fans.” FIFA contended that this move demonstrated that it is “working hard to raise the standard for inclusion in the sport, and to provide services and support that allow all fans to enjoy the beautiful game” and that it showed their dedication to “making sure that all fans – including those with disabilities and their families and friends – have an excellent experience at this year’s FIFA World Cup.”

While signing during a broadcast does provide a measure of access and visibly signals an attempt to increase accessibility, in the context of the earlier concerns it can be read as resembled a tactic primarily designed to repair damage to FIFA’s image caused by the ticket, parking, and seating problems.

By appearing to address wheelchair users’ accessibility issues by providing measures that increase access for deaf fans, the policy aligns with the ableist tendency to treat all disabled people as a homogenous group of anyone not able-bodied. Moreover, to access signed broadcasts users need to download, adjust the settings, and watch the matches on FIFA’s app, meaning that audiences desiring sign language interpretation are functionally segregated from many viewing venues. Two

additional issues further limit the significance of access provided by the policy.

First, the policy involves signing in only two sign languages. During the group stage broadcasts in the US and Canada will include American Sign Language (ASL), and those in Mexico will include Mexican Sign Language (LSM).

Unfortunately, most deaf people on the planet do not use either language. ASL is widely used in the United States and Canada, and LSM is common in Mexico, but deaf people from other countries and localities use many distinct sign languages. Countries identify 131 different official sign languages, and adding unofficial linguistic variations results in an estimated 300 different sign languages worldwide.

As with distinct spoken languages, signers cannot readily understand signers using another language, even when culturally associated with the same spoken language. For example, ASL and British Sign Language, while used in primarily English-speaking countries, are completely incompatible and use distinct signs, grammar, and even fingerspelling handshapes for the alphabet.

Second, already present measures tend to make redundant and lessen the value of adding ASL and LSM to broadcasts. Closed captioning, for example, is already widely available in the languages used by audiences receiving the broadcast, thereby providing access for many. Textual overlays displaying such information as team names, the score, and the match-time also contextualize the video of play on the field.

Moreover, football already employs a wide variety of signs that render the sport visible and readily comprehended by many deaf audiences. The uniforms visually identify the separate teams and distinguish the goal keepers, and teams use numeric signboards to specify players involved in substitutions. While clearly not a language, officials use body, card, and flag signals to communicate with the audiences and with each other, thereby making visible important decisions and assessments related to game play. Players themselves signal visually by celebrating goals, displaying anguish, and demonstrating that they are in pain or are injured. Broadcasts display crowd reactions at such critical moments such as goals and near-missed shots, which visibly convey fan euphoria or agony.

Simply put, the benefit of increased access for some fans hardly compares to the cost felt by those who were effectively priced out of the stadium. They have lost the chance to carry with them the memory of having been there in person to cheer their team.



Dr. James L. Cherney

*Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. His work examines ableism’s impact throughout society, particularly in the areas of sport, law, and media. He is the author of *Ableist Rhetoric: How We Know, Value, and See Disability* (2019, Pennsylvania State University Press)*

Email: jcherney@unr.edu

A tale of two migrations: Socceroo Mo Toure and the migrant politics of the world's game.



Prof. Andy Ruddock

*Andy Ruddock is Senior Lecturer in Media at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Andy has written six books on the social impact of the media and has published several journal articles and book chapters on the politics of mediated soccer. Andy is currently writing a seventh book, *Understanding Media Violence*, for Edward Elgar.*

Email: Andy.Ruddock@monash.edu

Australia's Socceroos came out fighting in a World Cup where the politics of migration are front and centre. Against a backdrop of allegations that performative cruelty has become a hallmark of US immigration policy, the Australian national team released a social media clip celebrating the refugee background of many of its players. The Socceroos made their move in the same week that Australia's One Nation Party made history by taking the lead in national polls of voters' preferred government, ahead of Anthony Albanese's incumbent Labor. Migration cuts and deportations are high on One Nation's policy agenda and its leader, Pauline Hanson, has spoken at anti-migration rallies that also featured the UK's Tommy Robinson. One way or another, it seemed Australia's World Cup Team wanted to say something about politics, foreign and domestic.

Striker Mo Toure arguably embodied the link between Australian and global politics. Toure was born to Liberian parents in a refugee camp in Guinea. As Hanson has had to account for widely condemned Islamophobic comments, Toure's tale became a powerful migration counter-narrative. Raised in the Muslim faith, Toure progressed through the footballing ranks, to the Socceroo squad. By 2026, the young forward was plying his trade in Denmark's Superliga with Randers FC. Toure was forging a career, but a modest one. And then, everything changed.

In February of that year, Randers sold Toure to Norwich City FC. A well-respected team with a significant history in the top ranks of English soccer, Norwich were struggling. Adrift at the bottom of the Championship league, 'The Canaries' faced ignominious relegation to third-tier competition. Fortunes were reversed thanks to an attacking trident where Toure joined two other Muslim players - Tunisian Ben Slimane and Canada's Ali Ahmed - to score a remarkable nine goals in eleven games, with three assists to boot. Toure headed to the US, having led an extraordinary turnaround lifting Norwich to safety and preventing the financial catastrophe that relegation would have delivered.

Not for Toure, the argument that football and politics should never mix, nor the commitment to do all his talking on the pitch. The striker beat his Socceroo teammates to the punch on June 4, telling his migration story the UNHCR Instagram account and dedicating his World Cup adventure to 'every kid still looking for a place to belong'. There's no doubt that in the context of American and Australian politics, these were brave and meaningful words indeed. Just one of the reasons why, on the eve of Australia's first match, Toure already enjoyed a legion of adoring fans.

However, Toure's story also sheds light on a different kind of migration story that exists entirely within soccer and has little if anything to do with World Cup politics.

Unsurprisingly, Toure's astonishing performances led to excited speculation over the future for both the player and Norwich City. Heartwarming as his story was, the question of what would happen for him and his club if just a little of his unworldly club form transferred to the global stage became, unemotionally practical. In the past Norwich had profited from lucrative sales of former players who had played in the World Cup. The implication was, should Toure attract attention from bigger clubs during the tournament, Norwich stood to gain a financial windfall. Arguably, the biggest contribution that a successful Toure could make to his new home, would be to leave.

As exciting as Toure's prospects are, they also speak to a very particular kind of migrant vulnerability that is both unique to the soccer world, but which also underlines Toure's connection to the placeless kids that he wants to represent. If he plays well, he will be sold for profit. He will have little say in where he goes. Not a bad place to be given how lucrative any such move would be, and part and parcel of elite soccer, for sure.

Except that elides the reality that the global soccer industry has its own flows of African players who negotiate the emotional and bureaucratic turmoil of migration, with little support, as they service the needs of European leagues. Such players, some observe, are at the mercy of a capitalistic system where most of the players, most of the time, enjoy little of the agency that Toure has, for now.

Two big stories have dominated World Cup 2026. One is about politics. The other is about business. In both cases, the criticisms are that players and fans are being abused and exploited by populist politics and the inexorable machinations of global capital. The Socceroos have taken on the first. Mo Toure has done more than his share. However, perhaps the more interesting question is how Toure also represents a kind of migration exploitation story that will continue after this tournament.

Come together

Within this commentary, we focus on the official England Men's 2026 World Cup Squad 'reveal', *Come Together*: a product of a confluence of interrelated factors indicative of the economic forces and conjoined cultural politics of the contemporary moment. Our interest lies in explicating how a spectacularized cultural product of national recollection and embodiments of 'Englishness' reflects and reproduces social hierarchies, offering constructions of the character, culture and the historical trajectory of people; constructions that by their very nature are acts of inclusion and exclusion.

Come Together: The 'reveal'

Produced by the Dirty Vanilla creative Agency, *Come Together* opens with a black and white clip of a young John Lennon. A reporter asks Lennon if he believes that The Beatles are 'very English?' Lennon replies, with a hint of irony, his Liverpool accent replaced with the 'Queen's English', "I think we're jolly English actually." Scored by the Beatles Hit, 'Come Together', the clip cuts to a polychrome cacophony of an England three-lions crest adorning a stylised version of an England training shirt. The scene unfolds—in slow motion—with an unnamed black male, running down Jamaica Avenue in New York City, dreadlocks flying in the air as he traverses the cityscape with names of squad members appearing in various guises (e.g. on a taxi, on shop signage, and the back of a denim jacket). Interspersed with clips of screaming Beatle fans (holding signs with the names of England squad members) the scene cuts to a Beatles inspired poster adorned with images of the defensive 'fab-four': Ezri Konza, Nico O'Reilly, Marc Guehi and Reece James. Laced with historic Beatles references (psychedelic Yellow Submarine animation, Abbey Road) and a scene in a Texan inspired line-dancing bar (with Declan Rice imprinted on a cowboy boot, and Morgan Rogers on the back pocket of a pair of denim shorts), the 'reveal' nods to the cultural impact the Beatles had on the United States in the 1960s, with the presumption being that this England squad can do the same. A photobooth animation then reveals the images of Eberechi Eze, Noni Madueke, Kobbie Mainoo and Bukayo Saka (the midfield 'fab four'). The protagonist (the runner) is joined by native New Yorkers (the most prominent were two black women, one wearing a remodelled Mets Baseball top adorned with ENGLAND) as various attacking players names were revealed on t-shirts (Kane), umbrellas (Toney and Watkins) or hand-held signs (Gordon and Rashford). The 'reveal' ended with a shot imitating Theatre inspired signage, announcing the squad as 'live and in person' (a detached signifier relating to The Beatles 1964 appearance at the Paramount Theatre).

A utopian abstraction of nation

Much like the iconic *Three Lions* anthem, *Come Together* collapses distinct temporal moments and disrupts the linear chronology of the past. However, unlike *Three Lions* which depicts both a past and present England as completely homogenous in its whiteness, *Come Together* depicts a multi-racial England squad—framed by the creative mobilisation of a black aesthetic manifest in the New York city streetscape (contrasted perhaps with the apparent whiteness of country music and line dancing) and the key protagonist—with the most prominent bodies (the defensive and midfield 'fab-fours') being exclusively black or mixed-race. Whiteness, however, is signified through an embodied absence of sorts, reduced to text on Cowboy boots, t-shirts, shop fronts and signage. This can, in part, be read as a progressive racial narrative, a *utopian abstraction of the nation* in an imagined community of shared allegiance. However, *Come Together* is released at a conjunctural moment in England of distinct racial tension and fear within communities and on the bodies of non-white citizens: the nothingness of 'Englishness'; the assurgency of right-wing political parties and groups; the politics of (il)legal migration; the ongoing attacks of mosques, synagogues and other places of worship; 'Islamophobia'; urban segregation; and, non-white asylum seekers and care workers being dragged from homes, hotels and workplaces due to the colour of their skin.

It is in this context in which we read *Come Together* critically. *Come Together* may well appear as a positive and progressive artifact subverting the status quo and providing an opportunity to recover greatness *in the imagination*—literally an invitation come together as a nation. However, and in so doing, it effaces the harsh realities witnessed in the everyday interactions of a diverse population, screens out confrontation, and ignores structural inequalities, competing discourses, histories and pasts. In this sense, *Come Together* performs a pride politics: a mythic multicultural 'jolly' Englishness in which legitimate multicultural racialised subjects are not only 'let in', but redefined as 'integral' to speak (and play) for the nation—exemplary embodiments of multicultural England, the perfect rejoinder to assertions of ethnic essentialism, racism and intolerance. Critically however, inclusion is contingent on toeing the line(s) as 'appropriate' national subjects: not least through being concretely grounded within a pre-told 'common' narrative: the simplicity and 'greatness' of 1960's English popular culture. *Come Together* thus renders racism dead whilst echoes of colonial racism are at play in the limit points of multiculturalism that filter and order immigration, identities and minorities in England (Back et al. 2012). And of course, contingent multi-racial inclusion will err perilously close to these 'limit points', likely 'revealed' if one of the fab-four were to miss a penalty.



Prof. Michael Silk

Director of the Sport & Physical Activity Research Centre, Bournemouth University. Professor Silk's interdisciplinary research focuses on the various relationships between sport & physical activity (physical culture), mediated spectacles, inequality and urban spaces.

Email: msilk@bournemouth.ac.uk



Dr. Keith Parry

Principal Academic, Bournemouth University. Dr Parry's research is primarily focused on identity, sport and in/exclusion and how both traditional and newer, online media formats are used to present and discuss these subjects.

A stigmatized symbol: The St George's Cross at the 2026 FIFA World Cup



Dr. Daniel Read

Daniel is a Senior Lecturer in the Institute for Sport Business at Loughborough University London. His research focuses on sport business and integrity, with particular emphasis on the ethical and commercial dynamics shaping contemporary sport.

Email: d.read3@lboro.ac.uk



Prof. Daniel Lock

Daniel is Director of the Institute for Sport Business at Loughborough University London. His research interests focus on how social identities shape the ways in which sport is watched, played, and led.

Email: D.J.Lock@lboro.ac.uk

National identities are, perhaps, most pervasively symbolized through flags. In this vein, as major tournaments for the Men's and Women's teams always do, the 2026 FIFA World Cup saw the St George's Cross flag prominently displayed in England, and abroad, as a symbol of support for the team. On a surface level, the St George's Cross and other totems symbolizing English football (e.g., The Three Lions) provide a point of coherence and shared national identity.

Under the surface, however, these symbols are highly contentious because they represent an array of visions about what and who England is for. In this article, we explore the contested nature of the English flag in the context of events leading up to, and during, the 2026 World Cup.

In July 2025, 'Operation Raise the Colours'—a movement with alleged links to nationalist groups—gained prominence during the England Lionesses run at the Women's European Championships. Its supporters took to English streets, spray painting red crosses on roads and roundabouts to display their 'patriotism' and 'national pride'.

The defacing of public property was highly contentious more broadly. Critics argued that the displays were a racist dog whistle promoting exclusionary far-right positions on immigration and inclusion in England. Local councils, on the other hand, were left with a significant public spend to clean up the red and white paint marks from roads, buildings, and other public properties. It is in this context of political polarization that England traveled to compete in the 2026 Men's World Cup.

The flag was at the center of this polarization. One survey found that 39% of English people, and 47% of English people who identified with an ethnic minority group(s) agreed they would not wave or display an England flag to avoid appearing to support the English far-right. Data from YouGov shows that 39% of English people agreed that the flag has become a racist symbol, increasing to 52% for English people that identified with ethnic minority groups. This illustrates that there is a stigma attached to the St George's Cross *by some English people*.

Stigma reflects that people or groups can be accused of possessing negative attributes that differentiate them from others in society. This process operates on both sides of debates about what and who the St George's Cross is for. To individuals espousing far-right ideals about anti-immigration, stigma is placed on asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants to the United Kingdom.

However, on the other side, stigma applies to the far-right, which makes the St George's Cross a somewhat toxic symbol for people

with more centrist or left-leaning views about immigration. In this vein, researchers have observed pronounced differences in supporters' relationship to the England team based on political beliefs and social class. Supporters with more centrist or left-wing political views tended to distance themselves from an identity they perceived to be stigmatized because of its associations with the far right and hooliganism.

These stigmatizing processes were heightened in the lead up to the 2026 World Cup. The tournament took place in the U.S. with Trumpism in full flight and Reform doing well in the United Kingdom's electoral polls. Each of these factors has emboldened those with far-right views to attach them to public displays of the St George's Cross.

In this political and social context, a diverse group of men represented England during the 2026 World Cup. Drawn from a range of ethnic, religious, regional, and class backgrounds, these players embodied a version of England that is, in many ways, the antithesis of far-right definitions of The St George's Cross and what it means to be English. It is for this reason that the English football team, and its symbols, are often held up as a force for good in a divided nation.

In this sense, the temporality of major tournament football enables moments when the St George's Cross comes to represent a shared hope that the England Men's team will win their first World Cup since 1966. The 2026 World Cup was no different and reflects the social and temporal nature of national identities. During tournaments, supporters—that fly a flag or not—can disagree fundamentally about politics, immigration, race, and religion. Yet, they can all understand the distinctiveness of their nation in contrast to Mexico, Norway, or Argentina.

Yet this fleeting inclusivity is conditional on the team's performance. Players may be celebrated as national heroes following victory but as soon as the World Cup ends for England and social conditions change, pre-existing stigmas re-emerge. No clearer is this than when black England players were racially abused when they were perceived to be responsible for England's failures at Euro 2020 (held in 2021), a response that campaigns like Raise the Colours has only emboldened.

The shared English identity that forms around the national football team's performance serves as a reminder of how sport can unite people. Yet, when the context changes, these fleeting moments of togetherness can quickly transform into a pervasive platform through which the stigmas attached to groups in society quickly re-emerge. It remains to be seen what and who the St George's Cross will represent at the 2030 World Cup.

The “first” women referees breaking the norms

Stéphanie Frappart, from France, made history at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar by officiating the Germany–Costa Rica match, as she was the first woman head referee at the men’s tournament. This time, she was followed by two women, Tori Penso from the United States and Katia Itzel García from Mexico, who were selected as the head referees for the 2026 World Cup. Both are highly accomplished referees; Penso has officiated in the Major League Soccer (MLS) and was the head referee in the previous Women’s World Cup final 2023, and García has been a referee in Liga MX and at the 2024 Summer Olympics, among other competitions. In addition to them, FIFA selected three women assistant referees and one woman video match official (VAR) for the 2026 tournament.

Research has revealed that during the previous FIFA World Cup, both international sports media and its audience perpetuated the hegemonic masculinity of football by marginalizing the role of women referees. Sports media highlighted how unusual it was to have a woman as the head referee on the field, while the majority of the audience directly expressed their views on Twitter that women referees do not belong in men’s major competitions. Although Penso and García were no longer the first women ever to referee at the men’s World Cup this time, the sports media continued to highlight the uniqueness of the situation. It was reported that the referees representing the host countries were “the first Mexican female” and “the first all-American, all-women” to hold those positions. The news report noted that they were following in the footsteps of Frappart, who had paved the way in the previous World Cup and was thus the very first of the first.

There is nothing inherently wrong with highlighting the first trailblazers, but maintaining this kind of narrative puts pressure on them and places the responsibility for improving the status of women referees on individuals. In the sports world, women professionals are constantly forced to prove their competence, which, combined with their status as role models, places an additional burden on them. This distracts attention from the structural problems in football, namely the fact that, despite their expertise, women are still the exception rather than the norm in professional roles – a situation that needs to change, driven by sports organizations.

Outside of pre-match coverage, the gender of referees did not become a central focus of attention in the (international) professional media, unlike in online comments by football fans. Before the Czech Republic–South Africa match refereed by Penso, South African fans already expressed their disappointment with the referee on online forums. Some online commenters considered the selection of a women referee to be extremely bad

luck, but even more than gender, it was the referee’s nationality that was the issue, as fans would under no circumstances have wanted a referee representing Trump to officiate the game.

After refereeing the Ecuador–Germany match, Penso came under criticism because the opening goal of the match was scored after a German player’s high foot. Many sports experts felt that it was a dangerous play and that the goal should have been ruled out. However, hardly anyone mentioned the VAR official’s role in the matter. Unsurprisingly, Penso became the target of online hate from fans, in which her gender was also brought up.

Katia Itzel García, however, became a social media sensation when, in the final moments of the match between the U.S. and Australia, she ran onto the field as the fourth official to offer pickle juice to the head referee, who was suffering from a leg cramp. Rather than gender-based belittlement, this case was more a reflection of the meme-like nature of social media, where the ‘magic potion’ became the focus of the humor.

Just as in the previous tournament, only a small number of the affirming comments directed at women referees on social media encouraged the increased participation of women as referees. More common, in general, are sexist comments intended to drive women referees off the field. Discriminatory, patriarchal content typically reinforces views that are consistent with hegemonic masculinity. While mocking and condescending comments are directed not only at the decisions women referees make during matches but also at their physical characteristics. The most insulting and profane comments clearly meet the criteria for online harassment directed at women professionals, which is, unfortunately, all too common in sports in general. In addition, in countries such as Brazil and Spain, the sports media has tended to focus on sensationalist reporting about violence against women referees without addressing the structural problems that affect their working conditions.

It would be desirable that women referees become so common at the FIFA World Cup in the near future that they could focus on their work without being subjected to gender-based online harassment. Ideally, of course, a referee could be of any gender without anyone paying any attention to it. However, to support this structural change, there must first be a shared commitment among sports media, football fans, and sports organizations. Will the situation be better in four years?



Dr. Riikka Turtiainen

University Lecturer in Digital Culture at the University of Turku, Finland. Her research focuses on gender equality in media sport, particularly the representation of women’s sports and social media in the context of team sports, athlete-activists, and online harassment. She is one of the editors of the book Women in a Digitized Sports Culture: Nordic Perspectives (2025, Routledge).

E-mail: riikka.turtiainen@utu.fi

Inherited, contested, recreated: England-Argentina as living heritage



Dr. Josh Bland

Postdoctoral researcher at the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre, University of Cambridge. His research focuses on football fandom cultures, industrial heritage, and critical heritage studies. His PhD explored football fandom as living heritage and its role in fostering working-class cultural resilience. He is Director of Research for Fair Game UK, serves on the creative committee of the National Football Museum, and runs the heritage-focused Substack Against the Run of Play.

Email: jcwb2@cam.ac.uk

Twitter: <https://x.com/JoshBland13>

Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/joshbland13.bsky.social>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/josh-bland-9402a494/?skipRedirect=true>

Substack: <https://joshbland.substack.com/9402a494/?skipRedirect=true>

Substack: <https://joshbland.substack.com/>

With only five minutes remaining in the semi-final, it appeared England were heading to their first World Cup final since 1966. But then the story changed. Enzo Fernández shubristically celebrated equaliser was followed by Lautaro Martínez's last-gasp winner. Cue scenes of Argentinian jubilation and English heartbreak. And as a crescendo to a giddy three hours, several victorious Argentinian players stood beneath their baying supporters and hauled a banner aloft: “*Las Malvinas son Argentinas*”.

England and Argentina's pulsating semi-final in Atlanta was not only an instant classic. It was the latest instalment of the greatest rivalry in World Cup history. But beyond the iconic images, bitter controversies and swirling emotions, the fixture provided something more. It represented a microcosm of how football functions as a form of living cultural heritage by crystallising three central characteristics of the World Cup as an evolving cultural tradition.

First, the meaning of the World Cup is sustained through *intergenerational myths*. Individual matches rarely take place in isolation, but are interpreted through inherited memories. Clearly, the clash between England and Argentina possesses an especially rich footballing mythology: Antonio Rattín's red card and the “robbery of the century” in 1966, Diego Maradona's infamous Hand of God and “goal of the century” in 1986, David Beckham's red card in 1998 and his redemptive penalty in 2002. And underlying all the needle, the acrimonious legacy of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas conflict.

Collectively, this bundle of memories – sporting and political – represented more than a benign historical backdrop for the 2026 fixture. They formed a set of collective memory landmarks, stories which are repeatedly watched, narrated and invested with emotional meaning. Before the semi-final, Lionel Messi – born a year after the 1986 World Cup – explained that he was cognizant of the importance of the game having grown up watching videos and images of Maradona's iconic brace against England some 40 years previously. In this context, we can see how collective understandings of the England-Argentina rivalry are sustained by a form of intergenerational memory. Supporters not only inherit knowledge of what happened previously, but an understanding of which events matter, what they symbolise and how they should make them feel.

Second, the England-Argentina rivalry encapsulates the *dissonance* at the heart of the intergenerational memories that bind football supporters. Like all forms of heritage, the myths attached to football never possess a single, settled meaning. Whilst the 1966 quarter-final is remembered in Argentina as a historical injustice, in England it is remembered as a righteous come-uppance for an overly abrasive, unsportsmanlike Argentinian team. In the wider context of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict, Maradona's “Hand of God” in 1986 can be remembered as a form of

cheating, a divine intervention or symbolic revenge. His second goal is both an expression of transcendent genius and an English trauma.

In 2026, the “Malvinas” banner hoisted by the victorious Argentinians adds another dissonant layer to this fierce rivalry. Argentina's players presented the gesture not only as an act of remembrance and national affirmation, but also as an expression of a sovereignty claim deeply embedded within Argentine public culture. In contrast, English supporters reacted with disdain and UK-based politicians condemned the banner as inappropriate.

From these divergent interpretations, we can see a central truth. Heritage is not simply the accumulation of history. It is the process through which elements of the past are selected, interpreted and used in the present. Those acts are unavoidably political. Governments, governing bodies, media organisations, players and supporters all compete to determine what the rivalry legitimately means, and its heritage is produced through that tension and dissonance, rather than being diminished by it.

Finally, living heritage is characterized by *adaptive continuity*. Cultural traditions do not survive by remaining unchanged. They persist by absorbing new experiences while retaining a recognizable thread of connection with what came before.

The 2026 semi-final repeated several established features of England-Argentina: a 2–1 Argentine victory, English heartbreak, emotional excess and the entanglement of football with political history. But it also transformed the rivalry. Gordon, Fernández and Martínez became new protagonists. Messi inherited Maradona's symbolic role as Argentina's magical, talismanic number 10. The banner consciously connected the new victory with the ever reverberating memories of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict. Within hours, another layer had been added to the rivalry's accumulated mythology.

The result was also absorbed into England's broader national football story. Once again, England hoped. Once again, apparent triumph dissolved into defeat. The match therefore felt simultaneously shocking and culturally familiar. It supplied fresh evidence for an inherited narrative of glorious failure, ensuring that “It's Coming Home” will carry another layer of irony and longing when it is sung at the next tournament.

England-Argentina shows that the World Cup is not simply an event with a history. It is a living cultural tradition. Its communities inherit myths, contest their meanings and incorporate new experiences into an evolving collective story. The World Cup endures not because its past is preserved unchanged, but because players and supporters continually make that past meaningful in the present. In Atlanta, England and Argentina did not merely play another semi-final. Together, they created the newest layer of the World Cup's living heritage.

FIFA 2026 the people's game: walking, white & wealthy

Admittedly I have indulged in more football watching than I care to admit over these 5 weeks of football mania, and have enjoyed more than anticipated, the social camaraderie generated by the sporting spectacle of FIFA World Cup 2026. However, for many reasons I did not attend a match in-person. Yet, I could have. In fact, other than my gender and heterosexuality, I am representative of FIFA's target market.

I am white, wealthy, and I walk.

Perhaps this positionality, my whiteness, my wealth and my normative mobility, is the reason why I chose to be absent from the many host stadiums, where happy crowds of joyful football fans celebrated their sport, their cultural identities, and perhaps forgot the woes of the world for 90 minutes (+/- additional time, however that is actually calculated).

Call me a conscientious abstainer.

Much has been written about the exclusionary practices around FIFA World Cup 2026, in traditional media and sport scholarship. All but a tiny percentage of the global population were economically excluded by ticket pricing. In 2026, tickets for the group stage, were as much as 63% more expensive than a similar ticket at this same event, just four years ago in Qatar. The threat and practice of military-style policing in host cities, particularly in the United States were sufficient to deter non-Caucasian American citizens from purchasing tickets, due to a rational fear of harassment or arrest. Social exclusion based on skin colour and ethnicity was even more acute for Americans who call the US home, residents with black and brown skin, identifiable by the clothing of their culture, their language, or in fact the nation they supported during FIFA 2026 and live without documentation. Dynamic pricing coupled with militarized immigration enforcement prevented these Americans from attending a match and forced some to retreat from the everyday practices of life during this sporting spectacle — to stay at home, abstain from work and school and faith services, to become invisible, just to be safe.

I have chosen to highlight how FIFA 2026 has failed miserably to include, to make welcome, those who don't walk, those whose bodies move, see, hear, behave differently. In 2026, this cohort of people remain marginalized, economically, socially and politically, even in the Global North. FIFA's Disability Tool Kit and the storm of rhetoric — 'football unites the world' was grossly insufficient to foster in-person participation of football fans with disabilities.

To reiterate, I do not live with a disability. I walk. The critical lens I bring to this piece is informed by decades of involvement with athletes and non-athletes living with disabilities. As is often the case, what little information I could find about the experiences of football fans with disabilities at this World Cup focused on those who use

wheelchairs. Once again, those with mobility impairment are the de facto representatives of the diverse population of people who live with disability.

Football has long been regarded as a very accessible sport. It is a game of many; equipment is minimal and inexpensive, and physical access to a pitch is straightforward. In some parts of the world, the exponential growth of football for 'all abilities', for those with visual impairment or 'blind soccer', those with physical disabilities, for women and girls, and powerchair football, is real. Despite these deep roots in accessibility, accessible tickets for the group stage in 2026 were 38 times more expensive than four years previously in Qatar. At World Cup 2022, a football fan with a disability purchased their ticket for approximately \$10 USD and just four years later, this same ticket ranged in price from \$140-450 USD. In 2026, no proof was required to purchase an accessible seat, such that eager fans without disabilities could purchase. In 2026, no discount was provided for accessible parking at stadiums, with group stage prices ranging from \$125-300. In Qatar, fans who purchased an accessible seat were provided the option of a complimentary companion seat, to share with family or friend or support person. In 2026, companion seats were not offered at time of purchase, nor were they complimentary. The number of these seats was limited, and in fact, were found 'for sale' on general sale sites. Ironically, FIFA would not guarantee that a companion seat would be adjacent to the accessible ticket, only that "companions will be seated as close as possible to you".

The intersection of economic, physical and social exclusion of football fans with disabilities was staggering. As for FIFA's Disability Football Toolkit, mentioned often by the media, this resource has nothing to do with fans of the game attending World Cup 2026 in Canada, US, and Mexico. Rather, 'the toolkit has been designed to support the global advancement and sustainability of Disability Football opportunities and structures and the inclusive and active participation of disabled people in all aspects of the beautiful game'. Note in **all** aspects of the game. Perhaps though not as a fan?

To conclude, I suggest that this event was a "perfect cover for rights violations", a space of profound exclusion. Is football really the "people's game?". Football fans who are not white, who are not wealthy and for those who don't walk, might argue otherwise.



Dr. Nancy Harrington

is an Adjunct Scholar within the School of Kinesiology at Western University. Her research interests include the nexus of disability and sport and how sport can be a tool for authentic inclusion and social change. Her work with Commonwealth Sport and most recently Invictus Games 2025 examined the relevance and impact of diverse models for sport participation. Currently she is participating in a Caribbean-led project that aims to grow para/Para sport capacity in-region, and to develop alternative ways to deliver classification utilizing digital technologies. She holds Diploma in Sport Physiotherapy, has worked at numerous multi-sport Games, attended six Paralympic Games, and served as Chief Therapist for four of these Games.

Email: nquinn9@uwo

Notes on xenophobia and the “true identity” of the Brazilian national team



João Vítor Marques

PhD student in Social Communication at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil. Research interests include hate speech, xenophobia, and identities in football. Journalist for No Ataque. Covered the 2022 and 2026 World Cups and the 2021 and 2024 Olympics Games on-site.

Instagram: @joaovitor marques

Twitter: @jvnmarques

Email: jvnmarques@gmail.com

You didn't have to walk more than two or three blocks—whether in Houston, Dallas, Kansas City, Atlanta, or even Mexico City. A few steps through the city center or near the stadiums were enough to spot someone wearing that yellow jersey everyone recognizes. The catch? The Brazilian national team didn't even play in those cities, and the people wearing the five-star shirt usually didn't speak Portuguese.

World Cup after World Cup, Brazil remains football's biggest international brand. The “beautiful game,” the titles, and the team's historical significance uphold this status—even though Brazilians themselves perceive a clear crisis regarding the team's technical quality and, above all, its identity. While foreigners wear the jersey with pride, we feel that things just aren't the way they used to be.

A disconnection between the players and the fans, more than two decades without a World Cup title, the political appropriation of the jersey by the right and far-right... One could list over a dozen reasons to explain the roots and consequences of this sentiment. Yet, one particular reason stood out in 2026: an alleged “loss of identity” on the pitch. The Brazil of “artistic football” was knocked out with just 34% possession against Norway—a good team, certainly, but historically less significant on the footballing stage—a result that infuriated fans and analysts alike. On the bench sat the Italian Carlo Ancelotti—only the fourth foreigner to manage the Brazilian national team in history, and the first to do so at a World Cup.

The failure in the tournament's Round of 16 opened the door not only to a technical debate but also to a range of narratives that could dangerously flirt with xenophobia. After all, what exactly constitutes this so-called “identity” of Brazilian football? This concept—so vital to research in the field of social communication—holds a special place in studies concerning the national team. Since the 1970s, a number of researchers—such as Simoni Lahud Guedes, Arno Vogel, Ronaldo Helal, Edison Gastaldo, Hugo Lovisoló, Leda Maria da Costa, Álvaro do Cabo, and Francisco Brinati—have explored the connections between soccer, nationalism, and a certain sense of “Brazilianness.”

In this context, the very notion of the nation is discursively constructed as sociologist Ronaldo Helal argued in 1994, and the Brazilian national team emerges as a key symbol that has historically united people through a shared sense of imagined collective belonging. On the pitch, the team's performance appeared to mirror the nation's progress or failure in the broadest sense of the word, as noted in a 2022 study by Costa and Helal.

Scholars also analyze the period from the 1990s onwards as a time of crisis regarding national identification with the men's team, highlighting the turbulence in the relationship

between sport and nationalism in Brazil. More recently, analyses of frequent defeats on the World Cups have become more technical—focusing on the game itself rather than the idea of the nation: “what happened during the match?”, “who made a mistake?”, “what was missing?”, “in what aspects was the opponent better?”, “what could the Brazilian team have done differently?”

However, regarding 2026, there seemed to be an expectation that the relaxed attitude, fun, and broad smiles—stereotypical traits associated with Brazilians off the pitch—would be reflected on the field through a more attacking, dominant, and “beautiful” style of soccer. Yet, to what extent was this expectation purely technical, and to what degree was it amplified by the fact that a foreigner was in charge for the first time?

In recent years, dozens of foreign coaches have managed Brazilian clubs, leading up to Ancelotti's arrival at the national team—a milestone for the squad with the most World Cup titles. This market trend sparked criticism and attacks from Brazilian-born coaches—such as Abel Braga, Antônio Lopes, Dunga, Vanderlei Luxemburgo, Emerson Leão, Oswaldo de Oliveira, Renato Gaúcho, and Mano Menezes—some of whom had previously managed the national team, albeit without much success.

This sentiment also resonated with certain journalists and fans. At times, it mirrors classic hate speech tactics—such as attacking or insulting an individual or group in a “veiled” manner, disguised as mere opinion. Whether or not such rhetoric qualifies as hate speech depends on a range of parameters that must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis—particularly when dealing with non-minority groups, such as Europeans in South America.

Regarding the discourse surrounding Ancelotti and the World Cup, the technical criticisms seem entirely valid: there is a consensus that the national team could have performed better. However, there is certainly room to question—and seek empirical data to understand—whether there is something beyond purely technical analysis driving the narrative about reclaiming “Brazilian identity.”

Why racist abuse of France persisted at a World Cup like no other

The 2026 FIFA World Cup was remarkable in many respects: it was hosted by three countries (the United States, Mexico and Canada), it featured 48 teams across 12 groups, produced numerous records and included a special half-time show during the final. Yet, one tradition from beyond the pitch persisted, and it was far less welcome than the tournament's crowded stadiums. As France progressed through the competition and moved closer to the title, racist rhetoric surfaced once again. As four and eight years earlier, it came variously from politicians in opposing countries, supporters and former players. Drawing primarily on French media coverage, this article reviews the controversies and briefly places them in their historical and political context.

Probably the most widely discussed insult came during France's round of 16 match against Paraguay. Paraguayan senator Celeste Amarilla described French captain and eventual tournament top scorer Kylian Mbappé as a "*colonised Cameroonian*"; the rest of her remarks were even more offensive and need not be repeated. "*Because of your recklessness and blatant racism, the world has forgotten the historical journey and effort of your players...*" Mbappé replied. Former goalkeeper José Luis Chilavert invoked the same theme by questioning the origins of the French players: "*In 1998 we faced France and now Paraguay will face a squad from Africa.*" Hebe Casado, vice-governor of the Argentine province of Mendoza, made a similar comparison. The next scandal erupted following remarks by former Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy. Ahead of the semi-final, he described France as a strong opponent, but one "*without a single Frenchman*".

French media recalled that the players had also faced racist abuse in 2018 and 2022. Eight years ago, when France won its second World Cup title, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro described the result as a triumph for Africa. Four years later, France came close to retaining the title, only to lose the final to Argentina in a penalty shoot-out. Alongside the disappointment of defeat, the players also had to endure a racist chant by Argentine supporters. Stripped of its explicit sexual obscenities, its message was: "*Coming from Angola, they do run quickly, mother from Nigeria, father from Cambodia, the French passport...*" Worse still, social-media posts later implicated Argentine players in repeating the same words during the 2024 Copa América.

The arguments and statistics presented by French journalists in response may seem almost beside the point: only three members of the 26-player squad were born abroad, one of them in Italy while his father was playing football there. Conversely, 99 of the 1,248 players participating in the 2026 World Cup were born in France – more than in any other country. It should also be noted that other representatives of the countries

mentioned above have rejected these racist statements.

No single article could capture every aspect of the relationship between the French national football team and immigration. "*In France, the history of football is strongly linked to that of immigration,*" write the authors of Football & Migrations, an excellent overview presented by the Palais de la Porte Dorée. Prepared specifically for this World Cup, it proved particularly timely in light of the incidents that followed.

It has been almost a century since footballers of African descent first represented France. That long history has been marked by doubts, questions and, particularly in its early years, insults. Yet sporting success – including third place at the 1958 World Cup and victory at Euro 1984 – helped earlier reservations to fade.

If one moment stands out, it is France's first World Cup triumph, achieved on home soil in 1998 and followed by victory at Euro 2000. Those successes prompted renewed interest in the contribution of immigration to French football. Paul Dietschy of the Université de Franche-Comté notes that the victorious side was characterised as "*Black-Blanc-Beur*" – a metaphor for the players' different backgrounds and a "*mosaic of French diversity*". "It was a collective victory," adds Guillaume Narguet, a French journalist specialising in football and history, in an interview for this article. This did not mean that all problems subsequently disappeared: Dietschy described the episode as an "*apparent enchantment*". Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly a turning point in how the issue was perceived. "Football – and sport more generally – helped," Narguet concludes.

Although the insults described above have come from abroad in recent years, it is worth recalling that Jean-Marie Le Pen, then leader of France's far-right National Front, employed the same narrative in the 1990s, shortly before the celebrated 1998 triumph. Today, another extremist, Éric Zemmour, has adopted some of that rhetoric, but with little effect. "The origin of the players is no longer a relevant issue in French society, including on the far right," Narguet confirms.

Rajoy or Casado, however, share a political orientation: they belong to the right or far right. Generally, such rhetoric resonates "*particularly among the most conservative and extremist groups*," explains Patrick Clastres of the University of Lausanne. According to the historian, those making such statements are addressing domestic voters who expect them to deny what contemporary France, in all its diversity, has become.



Dr. Ondřej Trunečka

Researcher and Associate Lecturer at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. He focuses his research on sports journalism. He is a former editor-in-chief of one of the biggest sports websites in the Czech Republic.

Email: ondrej.trunekca@fsv.cuni.cz

The other side of globalization: Congolese of Belgian origins in DR Congo's 2026 World Cup squad



**Dr. Guilherme Silva
Pires de Freitas**

Guest professor in the Postgraduate Program in Social Change and Political Participation (PROMUSPP) and a Postdoctoral researcher in the University of São Paulo (Brazil).

Email:
guilhermespfreitas@usp.br / guilhermespfreitas@alumni.usp.br



**Dr. Felipe Antonio
Honorato**

Professor in the Postgraduate Program in African Studies and Representations of Africa (PPGEARA – Bahia State University, Brazil).

E-mail: felipe.honorato@alumni.usp.br / felipehonorato@uneb.br

In contemporary Western Europe, there were two main immigration processes: the formation of large immigrant communities attracted to boost local labor markets and migratory movements through colonial and post-colonial networks. Within this framework, the Congolese diaspora in Belgium can be seen as an atypical case.

In other former colonial metropolises the intensification of migratory flows from the then colonies to the then metropolises began with the consequences of the Second World War. In Belgium, this “influx” movement only began at the end of the 1980s. The First (1960-1965) and Second (1965-1997) Congolese republics represented a continuation of the old migratory dynamics established between the two countries in colonial times: while the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was a colony, immigration to Belgium was extremely limited.

Officially, there was no immigration during the colonial period. The few residents of Congolese origin in Belgium were students or occasional visitors. There are two reasons for this: firstly, there was a great need for workers in Congo itself for industrial and agricultural exploitation; secondly, the metropolitan political elites were concerned about the racial homogeneity of Belgium.

However, between the 1990s and the early 2000s, a series of political, economic, and social instabilities reversed this situation, originating numerous and periodical migratory flows between the DRC and Belgium: the decline of Joseph Mobutu's dictatorship (1990-1997), the First Congo War (1996-1997), and the Second Congo War (1998-2003).

In 2006, there were officially 26,909 Congolese citizens living in Belgium. The estimation, however, was that the total number was around 80,000 individuals including undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers. This migratory context reverberated in football: while the so-called “Golden generation” of Belgium men's football had names of Congolese origin (as Romelu Lukaku and Vincent Kompany), the Congolese national team that qualified to the 2026 World Cup also has numerous players that were born, spent their youth, or live in Belgium.

The squad called up by the French coach Sébastien Desabre for the 2026 World Cup includes five players born in Belgium: Matthieu Epolo, Joris Kayembe, Noah Sadiki, Ngal'ayel Mukau, and Théo Bongonda. All of them played for Belgium's youth national teams, from under-16 to under-21, before opting to represent the DRC at the professional level. In addition to them, 15 other players were born in Europe, especially in France. In total, only six players were born in the DRC.

This phenomenon is becoming increasingly frequent for African national teams. In the last African Cup of Nations (AFCON), held between 2025 and 2026 in Morocco, almost 30% of all

participating players were born in Europe. This movement is strictly linked to the effects of the globalization of football, which was intensified mainly after the enactment of the Bosman ruling in 1995.

Marc Jean Bosman, then a player for Royal Liège, decided not to renew his contract and transfer to Union Sportive Dunkerque in France. The Belgian team wanted financial compensation and blocked the transaction. Bosman had his contract suspended and took legal action in the European Union based on Article 48 of the Treaty of Rome. In December 1995, the court ruled in favor of the player, arguing that as a European citizen he could not be prevented from working in another member country of the European Union.

The Bosman ruling was the trigger that made European football highly globalized and the main professional center of the sport in the world, which increasingly relies on athletes from the Global South.

The multicultural composition of the Congolese national team further demonstrates how football has become a field of discussion about identity and belonging in an increasingly interconnected society. Many of these athletes could play for the Belgian national team, given that they played in Belgium's youth categories in the past; however, they chose to represent the homeland of their ancestors, reflecting not only a professional decision but also an opportunity to reaffirm their origins and cultural ties through diasporic networks.

The case of the Congolese national team that will compete in the 2026 World Cup further demonstrates the paradoxes of globalization. While African players go to Europe at a very young age to play for European clubs, African national teams benefit from the existence of diasporic communities that allow descendants to represent them and reinforce their transnational identities.

Also, the case of DRC shows how contemporary national teams are no longer defined solely by place of birth, but by the complex historical, identity-related, familial, and cultural connections that link individuals to nations on different continents.

“Amefricanidades” on the global stage: Brazil, Cape Verde, and Afro-Atlantic belonging in FIFA World Cup media narratives

African presences have shaped Brazil's nationhood through processes of resistance and cultural transformation across histories marked by enslavement and colonial violences. Music, religions, cuisines and languages persisted and reinvented themselves through resistance. Brazilian intellectual Lélia Gonzalez (1988), in formulating the political-cultural category of “Amefricanidade”, conceived it as a “historical process of intense cultural dynamism, adaptation, resistance, and reinterpretation”, advancing an Afro-centered perspective on the formation of the Americas. Rather than a static legacy, “Amefricanidade” is a living continuum, made particularly visible in Brazilian media coverage of Cape Verde's FIFA World Cup debut.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup in the United States created a high-visibility moment for narratives linking Brazil and Cape Verde. This article examines how World Cup coverage and online circulation around Cape Verde's debut reframed Brazil–Africa ties through the analysis of Grupo Globo, Brazil's largest media conglomerate. Focus centers on GE and G1, news websites of Grupo Globo, with GE specialized in sports and G1 in general news. According to Kantar IBOPE Media, the audience measurement company formerly known as the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (IBOPE), Globo's broadcasts reached 117.6 million Brazilians during the first round of the group stage, with 84% of the population accessing its content. Digitally, Globo's websites “GE” and “G1” recorded their highest average daily users of 2026 in the first round, 25% above the yearly baseline. A qualitative catalog of GE and G1 content from June 11 to July 19 was conducted using the search terms “Cabo Verde AND Brasil.” After screening headlines, six freely accessible pieces were selected, focusing on representativity and connection between Brazil and Cape Verde.

Within this corpus, GE emphasizes that Brazil and Cape Verde are connected not only by a shared colonizer but by a broader Atlantic historical ecology linking people, cultures, and circulations across the ocean. G1 highlights how Brazilian engagement with Cape Verde during the World Cup functioned as a “mirror gaze,” inviting Brazilians to reconsider their own histories. The coverage suggests that Brazil's relative forgetfulness about Cape Verde can be challenged through historical awareness, and that a global sporting event can catalyze cultural connections otherwise obscured. Cultural affinities emerged clearly: according to GE, Brazil is widely admired across Cape Verde, where audiences are familiar with Brazilian telenovelas, music, football, and cultural products. Brazilian fans, in turn, “adopted” Cape Verde's national team during its first FIFA World Cup appearance, affectionately calling Cape Verdeans “brothers” and “cousins.” In the Brazilian municipality of Cabo Verde, Minas Gerais, the tournament also prompted classroom discussions about the presence and heritage of Black populations in the town's

formation, showing how sport can activate local memory and educational reflection.

Josimar Dias, Cape Verde's veteran goalkeeper, became a vivid expression of the Brazil–Cape Verde connection and the tournament's most extensively covered Cape Verdean player. His nickname, “Vozinha”, used in both Brazilian and Cape Verdean Portuguese as an affectionate diminutive for grandmother, resonated with Brazilian audiences who recognized its linguistic intimacy. At 40, he combined standout saves with a relatable persona and gained more than 29 million new followers on Instagram, mostly Brazilian, as clips circulated across social platforms. The shared Lusophone field, with mutual intelligibility and Portuguese comment threads, amplified circulation and identification, making Cape Verde's debut emotionally legible to Brazilian publics.

By foregrounding often-silenced Black histories, memories, and experiences, these media narratives can enable subjects to recognize themselves in their histories, origins, and forms of belonging through encounters with the Other. Portal GE also recalls a literary articulation of this affinity: in the poem “Você Brasil” (1956), Cape Verdean poet Jorge Barbosa compares the two lands, writing, “We are the same — only in Cape Verde, we are in a smaller version,” expressing a sense of kinship and resemblance that resonates with World Cup-era coverage.

Media coverage extended beyond match results. Narratives surrounding Cape Verde's participation transcended wins, losses, and goals, centering on the recovery of shared histories and recognition of Afro-Atlantic ties. The World Cup functioned as a symbolic site of cultural encounter, where identification and recognition were recreated through visibility and emotional engagement. Fan adoption of Cape Verde, GE's framing of trans-Atlantic historical ecologies, G1's “mirror” metaphor, and educational initiatives in Minas Gerais demonstrate how the FIFA World Cup can mobilize Afro-Brazilian connections often latent in everyday discourse.

In sum, Cape Verde's 2026 FIFA World Cup journey, as narrated by Brazilian media, operated as a catalyst for reflection on Afro-Brazilian identity, historical memory, and trans-Atlantic belonging. By highlighting Cape Verde through GE and G1, the analysis reveals an expanded public archive of recognition, where sporting spectacle becomes a platform for re-inscribing African presences in Brazilian culture and renewing Brazil's connection to Africa. The reception of Cape Verde's team, symbolized by the recognition of goalkeeper Vozinha, demonstrated how shared language, affection, and cultural memory can strengthen Afro-Atlantic bonds. This suggests that global events, when mediated through high-audience platforms, can counter historical silencing, prompting Brazilians to revisit their past and recognize, in Cape Verde's debut, the living expression of Amefricanidades: a shared Afro-Atlantic belonging unfolding on football's grandest stage.



Dr. Doiara Silva dos Santos

Tenured Assistant Professor at the Federal University of Viçosa (UFV), Brazil, and Director of the Laboratory of Olympic and Sociocultural Studies of Sports (LEOS). Her research focuses on Olympic Studies, with particular interests in the sociocultural dimensions of the Olympic Movement, Olympic education, and sport policy.

Email: santosdoiara@ufv.br.

@leos.ufv (Instagram).



Clarisse Silva Caetano

PhD Candidate in Physical Education at the Federal University of Viçosa (UFV), Brazil. She is affiliated with the Laboratory of Olympic and Sociocultural Studies of Sports (LEOS). Her research focuses on Olympic studies and athletes' activism.

Email: clarisse.caetano@ufv.br.

Gender inequalities in World Cup coverage: why a recurring issue remains difficult to frame



Dr. Sandy Montañola

*Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Rennes (France) and Head of the Journalism program. Her researches focus on gender in sports media coverage, with a particular interest in the sociology of journalism, professional practices, and social representations. She is the author of *Genre et journalisme* (De Boeck) and *Couvrir le sport à la télévision* (INA).*

Email: sandy.montanola@univ-rennes.fr

Linkedin: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sandy-montanola-70206327/>

As media attention turns to the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup, one topic remains overlooked: who is sent to report from the field? Who gets to comment on the matches? Being selected to cover the World Cup is one of the highest forms of professional recognition in sports journalism. It therefore provides an interesting lens to examine how gender inequalities are made visible and framed.

Mega-events amplify existing inequalities in sports newsrooms

Although journalism has undergone a process of feminization, sports newsrooms remain among the most male-dominated areas. Around 2010, women accounted for about 10% of sports journalists across Europe, a figure similar to that observed in the United States. Mega-events reinforce these inequalities. A study examining the 2016 Olympic Games found that 4.5% of bylines were attributed to women compared with 35.2% to men among Spanish journalists. These women also covered football and international athletics less often than men. The FIFA World Cup combines several forms of symbolic prestige: on-site reporting, live match commentary and football, the most prestigious sport within the sports media hierarchy. In a competitive field, these positions continue to be assigned primarily to men, as shown by the accreditation data of the last tournaments. In 2018, among the 419 German journalists, 49 were women (11.69%). In 2022, the figures vary by country: 9%, 12% and 24% of women for France, Germany and Sweden respectively. Of the 150 French journalists in 2026, 10 were women (6.67%). These figures suggest that Women's access to World Cup remains selective. The sociology of journalism shows that inequalities do not only occur at the point of entry into the profession, but also through the hierarchy of assignments. A study examining the 2022 World Cup shows that Spanish women (6.70%), received less airtime than men and were more often assigned hosting roles rather than tactical analysis.

Can the World Cup turn the lack of gender diversity in sports journalism into a public problem?

While the FIFA World Cup amplifies these inequalities, can this visibility also transform them into a public problem? The French case can be useful: Since 2021, the foundation of the Women Sports Journalists Association and the documentary *"I'm Not a Slut, I'm a Journalist"* have contributed to reframing gender inequalities as a collective issue. Research gained renewed visibility as it can be observed through a scientific study conducted in 2026 with this Association to measure the proportion of women working in sports journalism. Making this situation public required several elements: the organization of a specific event (press

conference) the media opportunity generated by the World Cup, the production of data, but also a process of appropriation, reframing and dissemination by a range of actors from the sports, media and political fields. In fact, this visibility was further strengthened by an opinion piece written by Marie Portolano "Just tell us if we're bothering you", and by the dissemination of the results by the French Ministry of gender equality. But, as research in the sociology of public problems has shown a social situation and inequalities doesn't automatically become a publicly recognized problem. In fact, each FIFA tournament generates media attention but the coverage tends to follow two recurring narratives. The first focuses on pioneer as the first women to commentate men's football. For example, Le Monde noted in 2018: "Abroad, journalism becoming more feminized in Great-Britain with Vicki Sparks on the BBC, or in Germany with Claudia Neumann on the ZDF (...) yet in France, in 2018, women commentating on football matches on television can be counted on the fingers of one hand". The second narrative focuses on controversy particularly the harassment, insult, criticism of women's voices, from Claudia Neumann to Sara Carbonero or from campaign.

This temporary media attention rarely frames the situation as professional inequalities; coverage tends to focus on the exceptional context and to individualize experiences through personal testimonies rather than examining the structural mechanisms shaping careers and access. As a result, similar media narratives reappear from one tournament to the next, without connecting individual experiences to broader patterns of professional inequality. Several obstacles help explain this situation: First, sports institutions, such as FIFA, and media organizations rarely provide systematic information on the gender distribution of accredited journalists. Second, academic research rarely reaches the media, despite decades of convergent findings across countries from the United Kingdom to Poland: women remain underrepresented in the most prestigious sections, sports and positions of responsibility. Professional routines continue to constrain their careers, while harassment reveals the persistence of professional norms in which authority and credibility are still implicitly associated with masculinity. Third, gender inequalities are often treated as a separate issue and remain largely absent from broader discussions about the transformation of sports journalism, including the growing role of content creators, the creator economy, sports consultants and artificial intelligence.... These transformations are shaped by powerful actors such as FIFA, which increasingly determine who gains visibility, who accesses privileged spaces, and which forms of sports storytelling are promoted. Yet these transformations also constitute spaces where gender norms can be reproduced or renegotiated.

Finally on the road to normalization? The inclusion of female referees at the 2026 FIFA World Cup

When discussing women in refereeing, the question quickly arises as to whether women should also referee men's matches. Conversely, hardly anyone finds it strange when a man referees a women's match. The inclusion of female referees in men's football has often been, and continues to be, viewed with skepticism. This overlooks the fact that women and men must meet the same requirements for the role, despite their different physical conditions. Objectively, this alone should be enough to end such a debate, but reality tells us otherwise.

There are several reasons for the low proportion of women in football refereeing worldwide. One contributing factor is the ban on women playing football – and therefore also becoming referees – which lasted for decades and continues to have an impact today. Another is that it remains more difficult for women to establish themselves in a field shaped by predominantly male structures and power relations. Although the refereeing community succeeds in attracting young women and girls, the greater challenge is retaining them. Significantly more women than men leave the refereeing community again quite quickly. This can be explained, at least in part, by sexist experiences on the pitch and within football associations.

The fewer women there are in the system, the fewer will subsequently reach the highest levels of the sport. In 2022, France's Stéphanie Frappart became the first woman to referee a match at a Men's World Cup. Although historically significant, this remained a one-off event at that tournament. The situation was different at the 2026 World Cup: six women were deployed in 12 matches as referees, assistant referees or VAR/AVAR officials. When assignments as fourth officials, reserve assistants and standby officials are included, women were involved in 19 matches.

The group stage match between the Czech Republic and South Africa attracted particular attention because it featured an all-female refereeing team: Tori Penso as referee, assisted by Brooke Mayo and Kathryn Nesbitt.

Penso was subsequently assigned to Ecuador v Germany on June 25, 2026. A day later, Mexico's Katia García refereed Tunisia v Netherlands. Meanwhile, Tatiana Guzmán from Nicaragua was deployed as a VAR on several occasions throughout the tournament.

Overall, media coverage and reactions on social media were predominantly positive. The appointments were widely welcomed as a historic step forward. Penso was celebrated as only the second woman after Frappart to referee a Men's World Cup match. García subsequently became the third woman and the first Latin American woman to do so. Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum described García as an inspiration to girls worldwide, while Mexican media highlighted her composure, authority and the historic significance of her appointment.

As with male referees, however, their individual performances were sometimes discussed

critically. García received mixed reviews. Mexican media described her performance as confident and credited her with maintaining good control of the match. Dutch media, by contrast, strongly criticized the failure of García and the VAR to identify Mohamed Amine Ben Hamida's kick to Tijjani Reijnders' Achilles tendon as a possible red-card offense.

There were also controversial incidents in the matches refereed by Penso. In her first match, she awarded South Africa a disputed handball penalty. Although VAR confirmed the decision, it was intensely debated in traditional and social media. Some referee observers praised her performance, whereas the specialist platform Law 5 criticized her handling of cautions and her overall control of the match.

Penso's second match, Ecuador v Germany, also generated controversy. Germany's early goal came under scrutiny because a possible high foot or foul on Pedro Vite before Sané's goal went unpunished. Some media outlets described the decision as a "joke", while several experts considered it a clear foul requiring VAR intervention. Part of the criticism subsequently shifted from the decision itself to Penso's gender. Italian journalist Tancredi Palmeri explicitly focused on Penso's gender and called for her not to be appointed again. This triggered a strong backlash and accusations of chauvinism. Consequently, the legitimate discussion of a specific refereeing decision was overshadowed by a wider debate about sexism.

Apart from this incident, Penso received considerable positive feedback on social media. A YouTube Short compiling examples of her performance and clear body language, entitled "Nothing beats watching an all-female referee crew spending 90 minutes babysitting grown men", quickly received more than one hundred thousand likes.

Tatiana Guzmán's appearances as a VAR were the subject of even more heated debate. Headlines included "She had already been involved in the DFB's exit: Germany's VAR nemesis is causing a stir once again". However, these reports did not explicitly reject her because of her gender. They can instead be interpreted primarily as part of the broader controversy surrounding VAR at the World Cup.

This is precisely the point that football needs to reach: officials should not be judged or disparaged because of personal characteristics but assessed solely on their performance. Female referees must be subject to the same professional scrutiny as their male colleagues – no less, but also no more. In this respect, the 2026 World Cup made a positive contribution towards normalizing the involvement of women in official roles.



Dr. Thaya Vester

Criminologist (fields of study: sociology, law and sports science) at the University of Tübingen; main areas of research: violence and discrimination in the context of sport; also serves on various committees within organized football (in particular the German Football Association (DFB) and the Württemberg Football Association (WFFV)) and acts as a scientific adviser to the International Football Association Board (IFAB)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-thaya-vester>

Email: thaya.vester@uni-tuebingen.de



David Zimmermann

holds a degree in Political and Social Studies from the University of Würzburg. He is currently a student research assistant at the Institute of Criminology at the University of Tübingen. His academic interests lie at the intersection of sport, political science, sociology, and criminology.

Email: david.zimmermann@guest.uni-tuebingen.de

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/david-f-l-zimmermann>



Dr. Daniel Nölleke

Assistant professor for "Sports Journalism and Public Relations" at the Institute of Communication and Media Research at the German Sport University Cologne. His main areas of expertise include journalism studies, sports communication and mediatization theory. He is acting chair of the ECREA Temporary Working Group "Communication and Sport" and member of the editorial boards of the International Journal of Sport Communication and Communication & Sport.

Email: d.noelleke@dshs-koeln.de

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniel-nölleke-663326170>

Pathway to a global platform for disability football: Paralympics, FIFA or both?



Prof. Sean Tweedy

NIISQ Chair in Physical Activity and Disability, School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, the University of Queensland. He is a member of the IPC Classification Compliance and Oversight Committee and Principal Investigator, IPC Classification Research and Development Centre

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/sean-tweedy-am-a7105711](https://www.linkedin.com/in/sean-tweedy-am-a7105711)

Email: s.tweedy@uq.edu.au



Prof. John Cairney

Head of School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, the University of Queensland. He is Deputy Executive Director of the Office of 2032 Games Engagement and Director of the Queensland Centre for Olympic and Paralympic Studies.

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/john-cairney68](https://www.linkedin.com/in/john-cairney68)

Email: j.cairney@uq.edu.au



Prof. Sam Robertson

A researcher and consultant focusing on developing methods and systems to optimize integration between humans and technology. He holds an appointment at the School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences at the University of Queensland and is a consultant to the Innovation Division of FIFA.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/robertsonsj/>

Email: sam@trackconsultinggroup.com



Prof. Emma Beckman

School of Human Movement and Nutrition, the University of Queensland is an International Classifier in World Para Athletics and Research Lead in the IPC Classification Research and Development Centre.

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/emma-beckman-590b4943](https://www.linkedin.com/in/emma-beckman-590b4943)

Email: e.beckman@uq.edu.au

Football is the world's game. No other sport matches its global reach, cultural influence or viewing audiences. Yet one significant group does not feature prominently in football's otherwise impressive program of showcase events and initiatives: people with disabilities.

This is not because disability football lacks talent or international appeal for a showcase event. Around the world, athletes compete in a range of established football formats, including for the blind, people with cerebral palsy, amputees and powerchair users. These disability-specific versions of football have dedicated participants, growing international competitions, and passionate supporters. What they lack is a global platform capable of bringing them together and showcasing their excellence.

A crucial barrier to such a platform is the organizational fragmentation of disability football. Different impairment groups are governed by separate organizations, each with distinct competitions and development pathways. These separate, focused organizations have enabled growth within individual disability groups, but their fragmentation limits visibility, commercial investment, and public awareness. They remain heavily reliant on participants, their parents and volunteers, often working with limited resources.

There is therefore a strong case for greater alignment. Consolidating governance arrangements could reduce duplication, improve economies of scale, and make more effective use of scarce resources. The question is not whether disability football deserves a larger platform, but who can provide that platform.

One possibility is the Paralympic Games, which represents the pinnacle of international sport for athletes with disabilities in many sports. Their success has transformed public perceptions of disability and created opportunities that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. Following the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, nearly three-quarters of surveyed viewers reported more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, while four in five reported greater appreciation of their abilities and stronger support for social inclusion.

However, the Paralympic Games also face a fundamental constraint: capacity. Despite dramatic global growth in Para sport participation and increasing demand from sports seeking Games inclusion, the number of athletes at the Games has remained steady at approximately 4,400 for the last quarter of a century. There is no official policy to cap athlete numbers but the cost of hosting the Games has been a concern for several decades now and, since growing athlete numbers will necessarily increase hosting costs, the lack of growth in athlete numbers at the Games is likely to be attributable – at least in part – to prioritization of games affordability.

Constrained numbers create a significant challenge. Men's blind football is the only form of disability football on the Games program, and expecting multiple forms of disability football – both men's and women's – to gain meaningful representation within a finite Games program does not seem realistic.

An alternative pathway involves FIFA taking

a more active leadership role. No sporting organization is better positioned to do so. FIFA already oversees the world's most watched sporting event and possesses unparalleled expertise in delivery of football events, global promotion, commercial development and football participation. Its commitment to disability inclusion has also expanded considerably in recent years and includes the recently published Disability Football Toolkit which provides guidance on promoting participation by people with disabilities throughout the football ecosystem. Leading the establishment of a global event to showcase the very best of disability football represents both a natural extension of these commitments and an opportunity for FIFA.

Yet framing the future as a choice between FIFA and the Paralympic movement presents a false dilemma. Rather than asking whether disability football belongs with FIFA or the IPC, a more productive question may be how the two organizations can work together.

Each brings complementary strengths. FIFA understands football better than any organization, and its strengths have been enumerated above. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) brings a different but equally important set of capabilities. Over several decades, the Paralympic movement has developed world-leading expertise in the specialist area of disability sport governance, including its unique components of classification, athlete eligibility criteria, competition integrity and rules. A collaborative model could combine the strengths of both organizations.

In practical terms, this could begin with disability football showcase tournaments staged alongside existing FIFA events. An integrated 'festival of disability football' could build audiences, attract sponsors, demonstrate demand and explore what a more integrated future might look like. Existing disability football organizations would remain central to the process while benefiting from stronger pathways for visibility and development.

Such an approach would address a looming issue for the IPC. Their mission is "... to enable Para athletes to achieve sporting excellence" and currently the undisputed pinnacle for establishing excellence is the Paralympic games. So, while IPC are rightly proud of growing the number of Para sports, the capacity to showcase and recognize the elite performers in these sports at the Paralympic Games is not growing. A successful partnership between FIFA and the IPC could provide a new model for recognizing and showcasing excellence among athletes with disabilities that would have unquestionable prestige and credibility, would benefit athletes and strengthen disability football.

If successful, such a partnership would allow FIFA to brilliantly showcase its sport and its commitment to inclusion. It would also provide the IPC with a model for expanding the opportunities for athletes with disabilities to demonstrate excellence beyond the Games. Opportunities that benefit FIFA, benefit the IPC and deliver meaningful social good are rare. This is one worth pursuing.

Liberté, Égalité, Mbappé: Les Bleus and America at 250

France's FIFA 2026 campaign made a memorable mark in the United States, even if it fell short of winning a third World Cup.

Les Bleus dazzled U.S. audiences en route to contesting their third straight semifinal, a rarified feat. The team's star talent, led by talisman and Golden Boot winner Kylian Mbappé, Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembélé, and artist extraordinaire Michael Olise, attracted many. So, too, did their style of play, as longtime manager Didier Deschamps empowered his front line to attack with blistering speed and selfless play. Even the team's riveting second half comeback in an otherwise inglorious third place match garnered excitement among U.S. commentators, influencers, and casual fans.

But Les Bleus dished up more than just world class football. They reminded Americans of their shared republican bonds, work facilitated by their masterclass in how to be a sports diplomat.

Franco-American relations run deep. Both republics were founded on Enlightenment ideals and forged by revolution. They've enjoyed a close, albeit at times quarrelsome, relationship for 250 years that since the late 19th century included sports. Although most visible within basketball, the ties are there within football, too.

Les Bleus wrote a new chapter in the transatlantic story this summer with liberty (*liberté*) as a cornerstone. France made their basecamp in Boston near Faneuil Hall, "The Cradle of Liberty," a strategic choice that minimized the team's travel mileage and optimized their (and their families') enjoyment of the city. Their away kit reflected the Statue of Liberty, a gift by the French in 1876, with its light green color and bronze Gaelic coq signifying Lady Liberty's original color and subsequent oxidation. This was the shirt France sported for their July 4knockout match in Philadelphia where, encouraged by a stadium full of U.S. fans who cheered them on, they battled football's "dark arts" deployed by Paraguay.

Equality (*égalité*) also featured prominently. Football is one of the France's most democratic, meritocratic milieus, and one in four boys plays the game. In the aftermath of the USMNT's Round of 16 exit, discussions around how to "fix" a U.S. pay-to-play youth soccer system looked to their transatlantic counterpart as one in which socio-economic inequality is not a barrier.

A third pillar, fraternity (*fraternité*), was on display, too. The team's identity was that of individuals who sacrificed egos, starting spots, and more as they bought into the collective goal of winning. Les Bleus had a common purpose that showed as they played cohesively in most matches. As Bradley Barcola, part of France's deadly attack, told the press, players "took great pleasure playing together... We play as if we were back in the neighborhood." That joy was alluring to fans and casual spectators alike.

Les Bleus served as sports diplomats in service to the French republican motto *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, but it reminded their amis américains of such shared values. And nobody did it better than Mbappé, France's best-known ambassador to the United States, through his practice as a "diplomat in track suit."

France's captain, who as a kid practiced giving press conferences, communicated to American and global audiences what it means to be French today. He described why he felt French on teammate Aurélien Tchouameni's podcast, "The Bridge," while appreciating his family's Cameroonian and Algerian heritage. In the June *Vanity Fair*, Mbappé discussed his political outspokenness against the country's far-right-wing as a function of being a citizen first, footballer second. When Paraguayan senator Celeste Amarilla hurled a series of racist abuse his way, Mbappé penned an intelligent, diplomatic yet scathing response on X.

The kid who dreamed of representing France did so as a 27-year-old this summer. Mbappé embodied French excellence as a product of the country's famed development system, notably the FFF's elite section at Clairefontaine. It's a pipeline that produced the most players at FIFA 2026 (99, 26 who played for Les Bleus) and made France the only country to contest the World Cup final four times in the last eight editions. A key part of the French methodology is to create players who are adaptable, creative problem-solvers with high football IQs, which Mbappé exhibited on- and off-pitch. Deschamps described him as "exemplary as a captain and in everything that he does on the pitch" (despite those Kylian Dictator memes).

Mbappé also negotiated American, French, and foreign understandings about the ways an elite footballer can serve as a proactive sports diplomat. Historically, most French players were known for *langue du bois* (wooden tongue), a reference to how they rarely said much of consequence publicly. Instead, Mbappé (and many of this generation Les Bleus) are comfortable taking the microphone and often discuss how French football's traits of diversity, unity, tolerance, and community spirit are its strengths.

France did not win the World Cup, but their FIFA 2026 story was a fitting celebration of shared republican bonds during the America at 250 festivities. If the Marquis de Lafayette was the original French celebrity in the United States, building bonds between the two peoples, after this summer France's penultimate sports diplomat, Kylian Mbappé, has taken on the mantle.



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Dr. Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Clinical Assistant Professor at the Tisch Institute for Global Sport, New York University

She teaches and conducts research on sports diplomacy; focused on basketball, football (soccer), and Franco-American sports diplomacy. Author of Basketball Empire: France and the Making of a Global NBA and WNBA (Bloomsbury, 2023) and The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958-2010 (Lexington Books, 2013), she directs the FranceAndUS project.

Twitter: @Lempika7

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lindsaysarahkrasnoff>

Email: lsk222@nyu.edu
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The World Cup and the racial boundaries of the nation: Football, Whiteness and belonging in Europe



Dr. Carmen Longas Luque

Lecturer and postdoctoral researcher at Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, at Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Her research focuses on the role of sport and esports in reproducing societal inequalities, particularly those related to race/ethnicity and gender. Email: longasluque@eshcc.eur.nl

Ahead of the World Cup semi-finals, former Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy described the French national team in an op-ed as a “formidable adversary” before adding that “they have an excellent squad, albeit one without any French players.” In the days that followed, these words were heavily criticized by various Spanish and French media outlets, especially those on the political left, which described them as racist.

The 2026 men’s football World Cup has provided numerous examples of racism and other forms of violence. Another case involved Paraguayan senator Celeste Amarilla, who targeted Kylian Mbappé, one of the most acclaimed footballers on the French national team, in a social media post. Among other insults, the senator described Mbappé as a “colonized Cameroonian, desperately trying to pass himself off as French.”

Previous research has revealed how narratives surrounding players of national teams, particularly those with postcolonial migrant backgrounds, contribute to defining who is perceived as belonging to the nation and who is not. The reactions to the racial/ethnic diversity of the French national team offer relevant insights into how race operates in the construction of narratives about national belonging. The examples introduced above also highlight the role of mediated international sporting events in amplifying everyday discourses surrounding race and national belonging.

An important reflection arising from the racist claims described at the beginning of this article is that, despite widespread claims of color-blindness, dominant narratives about the French nation continue to equate Frenchness with Whiteness. Rajoy’s suggestion that the French team does not have any French players illustrates how Black and/or Muslim footballers are not conceived, from this perspective, as truly French. This view reveals how colonial understandings of Europeaness as exclusively White and Christian continue to shape ideas of national belonging.

Players such as Mbappé or Dembélé, in whom many young people with similar backgrounds in Europe see themselves represented, are denied full recognition as members of the nation they represent. In doing so, football once again misses an opportunity to serve as a force for social integration and instead contributes to the reproduction of discourses that reinforce social exclusion.

The Spanish national team also provides a case that reveals the privilege of Whiteness as an unmarked social category. Aymeric Laporte and Robin Le Normand are two White players born and raised in France who play for the Spanish national team after having been naturalized. While the Blackness and/or Muslimness of players like Mbappé or Dembélé, born and raised in France, raised concerns about the Frenchness of the team, the presence of Aymeric Laporte and Robin Le Normand did not seem to raise similar concerns

about the *Spanishness* of the team. This contrast underscores once again the centrality of Whiteness in dominant constructions of European national identities. Whiteness remains unmarked and invisible, conferring privilege on those defined by it.

These narratives of (un)belonging can also legitimize racial abuse. It would be inaccurate to suggest that racialized players are only discriminated against. In fact, they are often praised for their sporting abilities and embraced as representatives of the nation. Lamine Yamal, a young player of the Spanish national team with a Moroccan and Equatoguinean background, has been widely praised throughout the World Cup for his outstanding performance. However, research has shown that the belonging of racialized footballers can be contingent on their performance and that poor performance can trigger racial abuse. The online racial abuse directed at English footballer Bukayo Saka after he missed a penalty in the Euro 2020 final illustrated this dynamic.

Finally, the examples discussed at the beginning of this article are also illustrative of the paradoxical character of racism in today’s European societies. Rajoy’s and Amarilla’s remarks were openly criticized by many media outlets in Spain, suggesting a progressive and even anti-racist positioning of the media. At the same time, recent research has shown that Spanish football media continues to reproduce racial stereotypes through football commentary, and that Spanish sports newsrooms lack racial and ethnic diversity, a condition that can hinder the production of less biased football commentary. Rajoy’s later response, in which he downplayed the significance of his remarks and, in doing so, contributed to the trivialization of racism, is also representative of the ways in which racism remains insufficiently addressed in Spain.

Next year will see the FIFA Women’s World Cup. To date, most research examining racism, the nation and belonging in football has focused on the men’s game. The upcoming tournament therefore will provide a good opportunity to advance research on how discourses surrounding gender, race/ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation intersect to shape ideas of national (un)belonging.

The Man Who Would Be King

In a book published in 1888 titled *The Man Who Would Be King*, Rudyard Kipling tells the story of two former British Empire soldiers who head to Central Asia in search of adventure and riches. The story recounts how one of them, hailed as a deity by the locals, becomes a king and gains access to the unknown treasures of Alexander the Great, which had been deposited there. Blinded by the ambition and glory he has achieved, he disregards the risks until he is killed when the locals discover they have been deceived and that he is just as human as any of them.

The ending is tragic and the protagonists are foreigners, but this story came to mind when, intrigued, we began observing populations in countries on the periphery of global football who passionately root for Brazil and Argentina during the FIFA World Cup. This is especially striking because some of the most ardent fans in these nations are citizens of countries in the very region where Kipling's story is set. What drives citizens in Karachi (Pakistan), Kerala (India), and Bangladesh as well as in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Jamaica, and Lebanon, to wave the flags and wear the jerseys of distant nations, cheering so fervently for Messi or Neymar?

By this point in the text, you have likely noticed our view that citizens of countries with only a remote chance of making a significant mark on the World Cup seize upon an identification with football powerhouses from developing world as a way to feel like kings themselves. As the Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta taught us, the World Cup is an event in which the local encompasses the universal. Unlike the sporting diversity of the Olympic Games, which dissolves identities, the football World Cup revolving around a single globally popular sport allows for identification and direct comparison between nations and their styles. In this sense, could we speak of foreign fanbases as “(transnational) imagined communities,” in the terms of Benedict Anderson?

The idea seems as appealing as it is simplistic. Despite William of Ockham's principle of parsimony, the identification postulate appears to be merely a general hypothesis; among fans located on the world's periphery, there are differences in how they identify with national teams from the Global South - an umbrella term for a multitude of countries contrasted against the lingering structures of colonial power.

It is worth noting that, despite being neighbors, the overarching identities of Brazil and Argentina oscillate between a shared Latin identity and distinct ethno-cultural narratives. Although the white population in Brazil accounts for just over 45% and the number of people living in poverty has decreased significantly, in the minds of many, Brazil remains a Black, underdeveloped, tropical country. Meanwhile, our neighbors—economically “Third World” despite a glorious past—cultivate an image of whiteness and a claim to a Europeanized culture (both outwardly and internally), notwithstanding

the significant Indigenous component of their population.

We can assume that the shared Portuguese language, a common colonial past, and a perceived ethnic identity may foster a sense of identification with the Brazilian national team among Angolans, Mozambicans, and Timorese. Similarly, we can assume that Haitians and Jamaicans, despite differing languages and histories, have reasons to identify with the Brazilian team, given the prevailing perception of Brazil as a Black and Third World nation. In the case of Haiti, moreover, tangible aid provided through United Nations missions likely cemented a positive image and the notion that the Brazilian people are “one of us.”

Lebanon is another country where a vibrant fan base for Brazil was found, complete with street parties, fireworks, and flags. While there is no shared language or colonial history here, the Lebanese people have a long and deep-rooted connection with Brazil. Since the 19th century, waves of people from that region have migrated to Brazil to such an extent that the population of Lebanese descent in Brazil is estimated to be larger than the population of Lebanon itself! Despite their high level of integration into local society, the enduring family ties spanning both sides of the globe and the resulting bonds of mutual sharing inevitably come to the fore at moments like these.

More challenging to understand are the bonds of identification that have formed in regions of Asian countries as diverse as Pakistan (especially Karachi), Bangladesh, India (especially Kerala), and Indonesia. How can one make sense of fanbases in countries of such immense ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity being so passionate about the Brazilian and Argentine national teams? Language, history, and culture offer no basis for a plausible explanation. The temptation to attribute this to similar skin color falls apart the moment one looks at a photo of the Argentine national team, leaving us with the same question.

Perhaps here we must revisit the hypothesis of an “imagined community” among people from peripheral nations, members of the Global South who view and identify with the Brazilian and Argentine national teams as offspring of a European colonial past that, at least in football, asserted a position of superiority over the countries of core capitalism. As we have seen, this transnational, imagined, and temporary community (manifesting only every four years) appears to possess structural layers and nuances. Yet, in any case, the national teams of Brazil and Argentina may, even unintentionally, offer people from such diverse corners of the globe the chance to feel like Kings, too.



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Dr. Otávio Tavares

Full Professor in the Federal University of Espírito Santo. Head of the ARETE – Centre of Olympic Studies and Sport. He teaches and conducts research on sport sociology and Olympic Studies. He is the author of four books, 67 academic papers and 51 book chapters.

Email: otavio.silva@ufes.br

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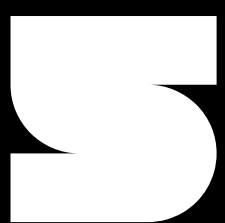
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Sulamita Alves de Oliveira Rodrigues

Master in Physical Education from the Graduate Program in Physical Education at the Federal University of Espírito Santo. She conducts research on sociology of sport with a special focus on eSports and Virtual Sports.

Email: Sulamita.17@hotmail.com

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GOVERNANCE, POLICY & BUSINESS

The World Cup's \$10 billion sustainability blind spot

The 2026 FIFA World Cup begins June 11 with an extraordinary set of credentials: 48 teams, 104 matches, 16 host cities across three countries, an estimated 6 billion viewers, and according to Sports Value's analysis of FIFA's own annual reports, total revenues projected to reach \$10.9 billion, a 56% increase over Qatar 2022.

By almost every commercial measure, this tournament is a triumph. By most credible environmental measures, it is on track to be the most damaging sporting event ever held.

That gap is not just a climate story. It is a business strategy failure. The blind spot is not that FIFA is unaware of its environmental impact. The blind spot is that FIFA does not appear to recognize that its \$10.9 billion revenue model depends on the very audiences whose trust it is eroding.

The Environmental Reality

Research by Scientists for Global Responsibility, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the New Weather Institute calculated that the 2026 tournament will generate approximately 9 million metric tons of CO₂e, compared to 5.25 million tons for Qatar 2022 and an average of around 3 million tons for the four World Cups from 2010 to 2022. Air travel across three countries and 16 cities alone accounts for an estimated 7.7 million tons of CO₂e before a single ball is kicked.

Factor in "sponsorship-induced emissions" and the picture darkens further. FIFA's Major Worldwide Partner for 2026 is Saudi Aramco, the world's largest state-owned oil company, responsible for more than 4% of all historic global carbon emissions, in a deal reportedly worth \$100 million per year. Researchers estimate this partnership could induce an additional 30 million tons of CO₂e in 2026 alone, more than three times the tournament's direct operational emissions. FIFA's own sponsor may cause more climate damage than the entire tournament itself.

This follows a familiar pattern. Before Qatar 2022, FIFA claimed it would be the first "fully carbon-neutral" World Cup. A Swiss advertising regulator said FIFA misled and must refrain from using that claim, ruling it could not be substantiated. Carbon Market Watch called FIFA's climate approach "foul, irresponsible, farcical, and absurd." FIFA is now a named example of greenwashing alongside Keurig and Volkswagen in mainstream business publications. The 2026 tournament is structurally larger and commercially more dependent on high-carbon partners than any before it.

The Revenue That Is Actually at Risk

FIFA's commercial model depends on broadcast rights and sponsorship, both of which depend on one underlying asset: the attention and loyalty of fans, particularly younger ones. That is precisely where the warning signs are already accumulating.

Only 53% of Gen Z identify as sports fans, compared to 69% of Millennials, according to Morning Consult research. These are the people who

will be buying tickets, streaming subscriptions, and sponsor products for the next four decades. A First Insight study found that 62% of Gen Z shoppers prefer to buy from sustainable brands, and according to Deloitte's 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, 25% have already stopped buying from businesses whose values did not match their own. They are not expressing preferences. They are making decisions.

There is concrete precedent for what happens when stakeholder pressure crosses a threshold. BBC Sport reported that FIFA dropped its Visit Saudi sponsorship of the 2023 Women's World Cup after backlash from players, fans, and co-hosting nations Australia and New Zealand, a decision confirmed by Human Rights Watch as a direct result of sustained opposition. The Aramco partnership, opposed by over 130 professional female players, dozens of male players, fan coalitions across Europe, and UN human rights experts, is not a settled matter. It remains a liability with a fuse.

What Genuine Accountability Requires

Sustainable organizations create value across four dimensions simultaneously: reputational value, organizational value, societal value, and economic value measured not just by narrow financial results but by community wellbeing, capital circulation, and wealth creation.

Measured against all four, FIFA's blind spot comes into sharp focus. On reputation, FIFA's sustainability claims have been ruled misleading by a regulator and repeated anyway. On organizational value, the players who are the product are publicly opposing the organization's central commercial decisions. That is internal fracture, not external criticism. On societal value, 14 of 16 host stadiums face dangerous heat levels, and according to World Weather Attribution, a quarter of all 104 matches are scheduled under conditions that pose health risks to players and fans. In some host cities, communities include displaced residents and inadequate infrastructure. That is extraction, not engagement. On economic value, a tournament generating 9 million metric tons of CO₂e while amplifying the world's largest oil company destroys value even as it sets financial records.

Real accountability means binding carbon budgets in hosting agreements, full emissions disclosure including travel and sponsorship-induced emissions, and commercial partnerships that align with stated climate commitments. None of this requires FIFA to abandon its commercial ambitions. It requires FIFA to understand that those ambitions are contingent on the trust of audiences who are watching and increasingly acting on what they see.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup is a spectacular event. It is also the moment when the gap between FIFA's sustainability claims and its reality becomes too large to ignore. Organizations rarely get to choose when that moment arrives. The ones that survive it are the ones that closed the gap before it closed them.



Prof. John Davis

is a Professor of Practice at the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business, Chair of BrandNewView, and Board Member of the Global Society for Good Leadership. He is the author of 11 books translated into multiple languages; his most recent, Radical Business: How to Transform Your Organization in the Age of Global Crisis, was named to CEO Today Magazine's executive reading list.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/johnadavis/>

BlueSky: <https://bsky.app/profile/profjohnnd.bsky.social>

FIFA captured Mexico's World Cup, but fans took it back



Dr. Mireya Márquez-Ramírez

Professor of journalism studies and media theory in the Department of Communication at Universidad Iberoamericana Mexico City. She specializes in comparative journalism cultures, role performance, media systems, news production routines, journalists' safety, media capture, news engagement and sports journalism. She is part of the Worlds of Journalism and Journalistic Role Performance projects and serves on top-tier journals' editorial boards.

Twitter: @miremara

Email:

mireya.marquez@ibero.mx

Unlike previous editions in the country, Mexico's third time as World Cup host was surprisingly hard to access. Tickets were prohibitively expensive, much of the tournament moved away from free-to-air television into cable and streaming services, and the official experience was tightly policed by FIFA's brand protection rules, security cordons and VIP commercial exclusivity. Even the iconic Azteca Stadiums' name was changed twice to fit FIFA's expectations and rules.

In the age of the 'sports-media-complex', Mexico's experience as host was fragmented in its own house, constrained in how it could stage, distribute and inhabit the event. We supplied the streets, symbols, labor, public money and emotional energy, while key decisions about broadcasting rights, branding, access and commercial benefits were captured and centralized by corporate supranational bodies. FIFA behaved less like a neutral sporting organizer than like a self regulating commercial chamber, simultaneously rule maker and rights holder.

FIFA is formally registered as a nonprofit association but runs a highly lucrative and largely selfregulated business. Drawing on state capture and corporate capture concepts, I define 'sports corporate capture' as configurations in which private sports-governing bodies such as FIFA simultaneously regulate and monetise a global sport, control key assets (competitions, rights, brands and infrastructure) and negotiate directly with states and media corporations to extract rents, under conditions of limited statutory oversight and weak democratic accountability. The losers are the public interest, collective enjoyment and the social functions of sport.

In Mexico, this capture strategies materialized in many forms. Around official spaces, brand use was guarded, sponsors were privileged, street vendors and residents were displaced, and Mexico's informal commerce was pushed aside in the name of order, security and exclusivity. FIFA determined who could sell, who could show, who could profit, who could even visually inhabit the event. Amid the burden of having to pay just to watch all the matches, much of the collective pleasure associated with Mexican football and street life, the improvised food stand, the pirated jerseys, the spontaneous street screen, the noisy bar, sat uneasily with a tournament designed to protect the value chain of official rights holders and global partners, in compliance with local governments.

And yet the fans fought back. Beyond FIFA's approved fan fests, more public viewings were set up in city plazas, which restored football as a dense public experience, watched shoulder to shoulder by people who were not sorted by ticket tier, hospitality package or monthly subscription. Socially and politically, they were forms of collective action that reasserted the idea that football belongs in common space. They allowed people excluded from premium consumption to turn the city itself into the stadium

and generated forms of popular culture that escaped the official script.

Viral moments showed Pato Merlin, a duck in a Mexico jersey that belongs to street vendors, suddenly becoming a non official mascot and later an honorary ambassador of the street parties, and the dancing Doctor Simi green-jersey mascots, oversized plush figures from low cost pharmacy chains that have become ubiquitous at concerts, marches and football parties, worked as small acts of cultural disobedience. They joined the fiesta without logos or conventional campaigns, reminding everyone that mascots do not need corporate approval to exist. They made the tournament vivid, strange, local and unmistakably Mexican, redirecting attention from FIFA's careful curated imagery to festive absurdity that cannot be fully monetized or centrally choreographed. Resistance is not always organized as opposition; sometimes it appears as appropriation, parody and excess.

The street celebrations at Mexico City's Angel of Independence made that even clearer. They were not official, and that was precisely the point. People went because Mexicans celebrate football victories and even defeats in the street. The city later doubled security, capped access at the Angel and the Zocalo, banned street vendors and imposed crowd controls after four people died during post match celebrations. Those deaths were tragic, and any serious reading of collective joy has to acknowledge that public euphoria can become dangerous under conditions of overcrowding and inadequate crowd management.

At the same time, enjoyment did not erase what many activists called the World Cup of dispossession. Around the opening match, teachers on strike, transport workers and mothers searching for disappeared relatives protested under slogans like "if there is no solution, the ball will not roll," facing police cordons, detentions and the use of extinguishers and force to clear access routes. For them, fan fests and televised euphoria felt like an anesthetic layer laid over unresolved pension conflicts, structural violence and tens of thousands of missing people, a spectacle that tried to move those struggles out of frame just as it moved vendors and protesters out of the last mile around the stadium.

But the danger and the anesthetic function do not cancel the meaning. If anything, they show the intensity of a public claim that exceeded the event's official architecture. The real fiesta of Mexico's World Cup did not happen only inside Estadio Azteca or within FIFA's commercial enclosures. It spilled into plazas, avenues and digital afterlives, into songs, memes, mascots and bodies, into forms of collective presence that no sponsor deck can fully script. FIFA captured the tournament through rights, brands, exclusivities and managed space. Fans reclaimed part of it through reception, humor, virality and a stubborn insistence on celebrating together.

FIFA and the World Cup double down on growth while existing in sticky crises

How do fans, media, and the general public make sense of the FIFA World Cup? Watching can feel like a clash of emotions as the tournament simultaneously offers a unifying global spectator event while being run by an organization continually confronted with allegations of corruption and other questionable practices. The ensuing tension between these two polarizing views is illustrated in t-shirts and articles proclaiming, “I love soccer but hate FIFA.”

The 2026 FIFA World Cup offered a case study in how the tournament can elicit results ranging from excitement to crisis mode. The tournament broke attendance and viewing records, featured underdog teams winning, all while being played across three countries. But uproars and crises were also present. Before the tournament started, critics argued the average fan could not find tickets to purchase, United States policy complicated VISAs, and fear surrounded the potential involvement of the United States’ Immigration and Customs Enforcement at games. During the tournament more challenges and crises came, arguably the most controversial being President Trump’s call to FIFA’s president, Gianni Infantino, about repealing a U.S. player’s red card. After the Cup, calls came for Infantino’s resignation.

Crisis is not new for FIFA. For years allegations of bribery, corruption, vote scandals, wire-fraud, and indictments have made global headlines. W. Timothy Coombs, a crisis communication researcher, identifies how crises can have a Velcro effect. Stakeholders will assign more blame to an organization in a crisis if the organization already has a negative reputation. Increased attributions of blame increase reputational damage, reduce purchase intention, and increase negative word-of-mouth. FIFA’s past crises, therefore, impact how stakeholders view the organization and the World Cup today. A July 2026 survey found that only 2 out of 10 Americans have a favorable view of FIFA.

Coombs also identifies that it is not just the Velcro effect and prior reputation that impacts organizations. Organizations are also impacted by the type of crisis they are in. FIFA exists in a unique state of crisis because of the types of crises they face and how emotionally stakeholders react. FIFA no longer experiences regular crises. Instead, the organization faces extreme crises as they are accused of things like fraud and work with nations with human rights violations. The resulting media and fan attention feels more raw, more angry, more damaging, and more consistent.

According to researchers like Coombs and Elina Tachkova, two types of crises exist: regular crises and sticky crises. Regular crises are crises that impact an organization’s reputation or profit and elicit low-intensity emotions. Sticky crises, on the other hand, elicit high-intensity emotions, are

more complex, have moral implications, and can span an industry and geographical areas. Sticky crises are far more challenging to address as they typically involve moral outrage and have unique communication demands beyond traditionally used crisis response strategies.

The “I love soccer but hate FIFA” tension exists because FIFA is constantly dealing with sticky crises. The best way to address sticky crises with moral outrage is through atonement, which includes implementing corrective action, expressing concern, and recognizing the moral violation. Doing these things could be a step forward for FIFA to reconcile the organization and its actions with stakeholders.

But FIFA, pulling fans back from the outraged end of the continuum, appears to be doubling down on excitement and spectacle. The 2026 World Cup marked large-scale changes for the tournament and was the first time FIFA used three countries to host. Spanning Mexico, Canada, and the United States, the Cup also featured more teams participating and more games played than ever before. While previous World Cups had 32 teams playing 64 matches, a standard that had been in place since 1998, this Cup featured 48 teams playing 104 matches. The expansion of hosts, teams, and games will likely continue for the next Cup. In 2030, FIFA again will have three host countries, Spain, Morocco, and Portugal, in addition to three opening matches played in Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay to celebrate the Cup’s 100th anniversary. Spanning six countries, the 2030 tournament may also expand to feature 64 teams. According to Infantino, increasing the number of teams to 64 is “definitely an issue that will be examined and discussed in the relevant committees after this World Cup[...]. Every nation should be allowed to dream of participating in the World Cup.”

So, how do fans, media, and the general public make sense of the FIFA World Cup? While they might not understand or come to terms with the competing tensions, most appear to live with the messiness as the tournament remains popular. FIFA will continue moving back and forth between both ends of the continuum from crisis to excitement, with the 2030 Cup poised to be more spectacle and the 2034 Cup poised to be more controversy.

In 2034, FIFA will return to a single host country, Saudi Arabia. Having a single country host, especially one with a history of human rights violations, will contrast the multiple hosts for the 2026 and 2030 Cups and will emphasize the sticky crises FIFA exists in – resulting in the same tensions and encouraging stakeholders to love soccer but hate FIFA.



Dr. Karen L. Hartman

Professor in Idaho State University's Department of Communication, Media, and Persuasion. Her research interests revolve largely around the role of sport in the United States and how language and public relations efforts frame athletes, institutions, and laws. A former Division-I athlete at Furman University, Hartman worked as a publicist in the entertainment industry before going into academia.

Email: karenhartman@isu.edu

Why CONMEBOL strengthened its reputation despite losing the World Cup



Prof. Nahuel Ivan Faedo

is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Business and Communication at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC). His research focuses on women sports journalists, sports media, and the intersection of geopolitics and sport.

Spain won the 2026 World Cup by defeating Argentina in the final, extending Europe's dominance in international football for four years. However, looking at the tournament solely through the lens of the winner overlooks another significant result. Even though CONMEBOL — the Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol — did not win the trophy, it left the World Cup with an improved global reputation.

This might be surprising. Argentina reached another final but could not defend its title, Brazil did not perform well, and no South American team became the champion. Yet, sporting reputations are not built solely on trophies. They grow through consistency, media coverage, and the symbolic value of major tournaments. In institutional terms, reputation can be understood as a socially constructed asset that develops through repeated performances and external recognition rather than isolated results. The World Cup is more than just a competition to find the best team; it is also a platform where football regions reinforce their identities.

From this standpoint, CONMEBOL benefited from how the 2026 tournament was viewed beyond the final result. The confederation showed once again that, despite having fewer resources and facing structural challenges compared to Europe, it remains the only region capable of regularly competing with UEFA—Europe's football confederation—at the highest levels. Argentina's journey to a second consecutive World Cup final was vital to this perception. While Spain ultimately won, Argentina showed that its recent successes stemmed from more than just one exceptional generation or player. Messi's last World Cup captured global attention, but the team's performances also underscored its depth and consistency.

Argentina's consecutive finals reinforced the idea that South American football continues to produce national teams that can compete with the world's best. Repeated high-level performances contribute to reputational legitimacy by signalling that success is sustainable rather than exceptional. CONMEBOL's reputation also grew beyond its traditional powers. Paraguay's elimination of Germany in the Round of 32 was one of the tournament's biggest surprises, while Colombia's quarter-final appearance displayed the region's talent. Brazil's disappointing exit may have drawn criticism, but it also reflected the very high expectations placed on South American teams due to their history.

Comparing with other confederations helps explain CONMEBOL's standing. UEFA again showcased its tremendous depth by producing the champions and several of the tournament's strongest teams. The advantages of Europe are clear: its leagues attract elite players, clubs have more financial power, and their development systems keep producing talent. However, success should also be viewed in relation to opportunity. UEFA comprises over fifty associations and sends more teams to the World Cup, boosting its chances of advancing to the later rounds. CONMEBOL has

only ten members, yet it consistently produces finalists and serious contenders. From a comparative perspective, this suggests a high level of institutional efficiency, as the confederation generates competitive outcomes despite operating with a much smaller resource base.

The 2026 World Cup also reflected a broader shift in international football. The traditional hierarchy is becoming more competitive. Morocco's ongoing progress, Norway's rise, and improvements among teams from Asia and CONCACAF (the North American football confederation) indicate that the gap between established powers and developing nations is closing. In this changing landscape, consistency is even more crucial. As more countries enhance their coaching, development systems, and tactical preparation, staying among the elite becomes increasingly challenging. Reputation, therefore, is not just about winning; it is about the ability to compete under pressure. This reflects the distinction between short-term sporting outcomes and long-term reputational capital, which accumulates through consistent visibility and credibility over time.

Reputation is especially significant during the World Cup since the tournament is both a sporting event and a global media spectacle. Fans often remember stories more than statistics: unexpected victories, thrilling performances, and captivating moments. These stories shape how football regions are viewed. In this sense, media narratives act as mechanisms through which collective perceptions and reputations are constructed and reinforced. A successful World Cup run can enhance a confederation's image with fans, broadcasters, and sponsors, while repeated failures can tarnish it. The tournament is, therefore, a symbolic competition where regions vie not only for trophies but also for recognition.

For CONMEBOL, the 2026 World Cup created many of these narratives. As it was explained before, Argentina made it to another final, Paraguay defeated a European giant, and Colombia continued to establish itself as a growing force. Even Brazil's setback contributed to a broader story: a region assessed by very high standards due to its historical successes. These perceptions have real effects. An international reputation affects broadcasting interest, sponsorship, and global visibility. While club football dominates much of the sport's economy, the World Cup remains the most significant event in shaping views of football's global dynamics.

Although Europe remains the dominant force in international football, supported by superior financial resources and competitive depth, the 2026 World Cup reinforced CONMEBOL's position as its closest rival. While Spain's victory defined the tournament, South America's consistent performances and sustained competitiveness reaffirmed CONMEBOL as the only confederation capable of regularly challenging Europe's dominance, strengthening its international reputation despite not winning the trophy.

VAR is getting smarter – but soccer’s biggest decisions are still human

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system made its World Cup debut eight years ago, yet decisions being made with it are still drawing mixed reactions from players, coaches, spectators, and pundits.

In the early stages of this year’s tournament, fans and pundits generally approved of Miguel Almirón being cautioned for simulation under VAR’s new “mistaken identity” directive. FIFA, however, are being somewhat vague about the incident, presumably keen to profit from the good will whilst tacitly acknowledging that this was actually not an accurate application of the updated law. On the other hand, there have still been contentious decisions. Notably, Lionel Messi was arguably fortunate to escape a red card against Algeria for a studs-first challenge on the calf of Aissa Mandi, Kylian Mbappé was controversially denied a penalty against Senegal having been brought down by Sadio Mané, and many were surprised that the VAR was reluctant to get involved in Harry Kane’s penalty appeal against DR Congo in the knock out stages of the tournament.

Confusion also surrounded Switzerland’s penalty against Qatar, with FIFA’s semi-automated offside system not working and images of the incident not released until hours after the game. Eight years on from its initial introduction, VAR has yet to become the uncontentious, widely-respected decision-making tool that many had hoped. There is an unstated expectation that VAR should achieve 100% accuracy in making correct decisions. After all, the VAR has access to almost every conceivable camera angle and the freedom to take as long as they need to review decisions. In reality, the English Premier League believes that VAR helps lead to 96% accuracy in decision making, compared to 82% prior to its introduction.

This desire for accuracy doesn’t account for the fact that many of the decisions VAR must review – including those mentioned at the 2026 World Cup surrounding Messi, Mbappé, and Almirón – are subjective decisions. Even if the majority of people would agree that a decision should be given a certain way, it remains ultimately up to the interpretation of the referee on the pitch and the team in the VAR suite. On top of this, controversy still surrounds VAR’s intervention threshold of a “clear and obvious error.” Soccer seems to have settled on conflating “clear and obvious” with “egregious” and, as a result, there have been occasions where pundits – and even the panels which review officiating performance after games – have argued that a mistake was made on field but that it did not reach the threshold for intervention.

There is no obvious remedy to this. Recognising that most VAR decisions remain subjective would require something of a culture shift within soccer. An approach replicating the importance that rugby union puts upon what the on-field

referee explains they have seen, or not seen, may be one solution to the ‘clear and obvious error’ problem. However, soccer’s governing bodies have chosen to continuously revise the laws of the game in an attempt to evolve and improve VAR.

A number of amendments to the laws were made in the run-up to the World Cup tournament, most notably around incidents reviewed by VAR, but also in attempts to reduce time wasting and to speed the game up. Some within refereeing circles argued that the aim of these changes was to make VAR smarter, not just better. One such law change was implicated in Cesar Montes’ red card against South Africa. The presence of attackers has been added as one of the denial of a goal-scoring opportunity (DOGSO) considerations and so, with an attacking player unmarked in the penalty box, the VAR was reluctant to intervene. Likewise, Almirón against Türkiye and Piero Hincapié against Mexico became the first two players dismissed for covering their mouths during a confrontation with an opponent, both following VAR checks.

These law changes, and how FIFA would like them interpreted, were presumably a big part of the pre-tournament camp for Team One, FIFA’s collective name for the match officials. For example, another controversial decision, Germany’s disallowed goal against Paraguay for a foul on the goalkeeper, was explained by Pierluigi Collina, FIFA’s head of referees, as the kind of blocking offense that teams had been warned would be punished ahead of the tournament. Even so, it is no surprise that there seems to have been some confusion amongst officials as to their implementation given that IFAB’s own *Changes to the Laws of the Game for 2026/27* document runs to 28 pages. Based on the limited evidence from the World Cup group stage, the jury remains out as to whether these changes have made officiating better. For many spectators and pundits, there are still decisions they don’t agree with and some confusion regarding the law changes and how these are implemented. Referees and players must continue to adapt to these modifications, and domestic leagues will likely provide their officials with their own instructions for interpreting the rules in the new season. The English Premier League has already indicated that it will not implement all the law amendments.

VAR still produces debate, and despite more cameras, clearer protocols, and semi-automated systems, many of the game’s biggest decisions still depend on human judgment. Soccer needs to be clear about what VAR can and cannot do. It can improve decision-making and reduce the likelihood of egregious errors but, in a game of subjective incidents, it will not end the debates.



Dr. Tom Webb

Associate Professor in Applied Global Sport Management, Centre for Resilient Business and Society, Coventry University, UK.

LinkedIn:
www.linkedin.com/in/dr-tom-webb

Email: tom.webb2@coventry.ac.uk



Joshua Gray

Postgraduate Researcher in Sector, Economic Equality and Responsible Finance Studies Centre for Resilient Business and Society, Coventry University, UK

Email: grayj10@coventry.ac.uk

FIFA as the embodiment of corrupt crony capitalism



Dr. Mark Doidge

is a Reader in the Sociology of Sport in the School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences at Loughborough University. He is the school's Sport research theme lead and lead for the university's Sport for Climate Action and Nature research group. His research focuses on making sport an inclusive and sustainable space for all. His research focuses on social activism among football fans, climate action, anti-racism, and supporting refugees. He is the author of a number of books, including Football and Climate Change (2026); Ultras (2020), Collective Action and Football Fandom (2018), and Football Italia (2015).

Email: m.doidge@lboro.ac.uk

Bluesky: markdoidge.bsky.social

The image of FIFA President Gianni Infantino was as ubiquitous as the image of the men's World Cup. Public visibility, including photo-shoots with world leaders, has been a defining feature of Infantino's presidency. This article argues that there is a political reason for this as it illustrates the pervasiveness of crony capitalism, the role of neoliberalism, and its links to corruption.

Since the 1970s, there has been a political consensus that deregulated capitalism is the mechanism to deliver opportunity for all. Milton Friedman argued that deregulated capitalism was the way to introduce democracy into everyday life through economic spending. What came to be known as neoliberalism saw a range of fiscal austerity measures and deregulation and privatization. Others go further and argue that neoliberalism fosters crony capitalism which facilitates corruption.

Crony capitalism is a more corrupt form of what Max Weber called "political capitalism," where the political and economic elite collaborate for reciprocal benefit. Patron-client networks operate to facilitate economic and political power. Crony capitalism is more corrupt as these patrimonial networks see the exchange of favors and money in return for support. Political leaders bestow political and economic favors on those whose support they need to maintain their political position. Political "cronies" are unlikely to tackle the corruption that ensures their political and economic power. Furthermore, neoliberal policies have hollowed out nation states' apparatuses to regulate for good governance or detect and prosecute corruption.

This trajectory reached its current apogee in 2025 with the re-election of Donald Trump to his second term as President of the United States. His ascension was accompanied by several political appointments of personal supporters, including Fox News broadcaster Pete Hegseth as Defense Secretary, whose investment broker enquired about defense-related investments a week before the Iran-Israel-U.S. war. It also included the (now) trillionaire, Elon Musk as unofficial head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). One of Musk's companies, SpaceX has numerous U.S. government contracts. Musk also took the neoliberal ideology further to instruct DOGE to cut billions of dollars from U.S. government and international programs. Various analyses have suggested this will lead to between 14 and 25 million preventable deaths in the next 5-15 years.

Ironically, it was through an investigation by a U.S. state body, the FBI, that brought Infantino to power following the resignation of Sepp Blatter. There is a reason international sports federations are based in Switzerland, the home of light-touch financial regulation. At the time, the U.S. was the only country with the political and economic might to investigate the Byzantine corridors of FIFA. The alleged activities took place on U.S. soil, which gave U.S. authorities jurisdiction to investigate FIFA.

The power of the U.S. ensured that even the Swiss authorities complied. Few would imagine that the current incarnation of the U.S. government or FBI would investigate FIFA for corruption, even if it took place on U.S. soil.

The 2015 FIFA Corruption Scandal highlighted widespread allegations across the FIFA governance structure, but in particular in regard to CONCACAF (the Central American confederation) and CONMEBOL (the South American confederation). The U.S. Department of Justice charged 14 defendants of racketeering, fraud, and money laundering, including over \$150 million in bribes relating to sports marketing companies over 24 years.

This followed two previous FIFA corruption scandals exposing how personal networks were facilitating illegal payments. There were allegations that the 2022 hosts Qatar made illegal payments to achieve the votes. This followed another scandal after the collapse of the media company International Sport and Leisure (ISL) which allegedly gave bribes to FIFA officials in return for winning FIFA's media contracts. These allegedly included former president João Havelange who had connections to ISL through his relationship with Horst Dassler, the former president of Adidas France.

Havelange secured his and FIFA's economic power by increasing the size of the World Cup. More games also means more television and marketing revenue, which grants FIFA more power over the federations who are indebted to FIFA for the revenue. Infantino also increased the size of the World Cup.

Infantino also sought to protect FIFA from U.S. investigation by developing his crony connections with Trump. This includes the widely mocked FIFA Peace Prize, and also opening a FIFA office in Trump Tower. This isn't the only connection between FIFA and Trump Tower. It was exposed during the 2015 FIFA corruption scandal that Chuck Blazer, the former CONCACAF secretary general, was accused of appropriating FIFA funds to rent an apartment in Trump's apartment complex. Developing personal relationships with state actors helps remove the possibility of corruption investigations.

FIFA is a powerful symbol of the ever-expanding growth of crony capitalism. Those with institutional power act as patrons for those for whom they owe their position. Institutional resources are accumulated by those in close proximity to the president. The increasing revenue of FIFA is leveraged to support national federations (and their presidents and boards) who will provide their vote at the next General Assembly. The neoliberal approach to remove state regulation simply means that there aren't the checks and balances to prevent this and ensures the circle of crony capitalism continues.

A man for all seasons? How Gianni Infantino holds on to power

He grows old, he grows old

But clearly steals more time as years unfold

[Adapted from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*],

Courtesy of T.S. Eliot

The Spanish triumph over a nasty, niggling Argentina in the men's World Cup Final restored a sense of European domination of the global game. For FIFA president Gianni Infantino this could undermine his rhetorical dreams that "the FIFA World Cup is a force for unity," as he spluttered on an Instagram post during the men's World Cup tournament. Infantino came into power in 2016 following a stint as General Secretary at UEFA, the European confederation affiliated with FIFA. In FIFA, he represents 211 national football associations that keep him in power as long as the cycles of funding keep pouring his way.

So, for the Swiss FIFA president it's "unity" that counts. Ignore the teams that have packed up and gone home and apologies for the clashes between intense competitors. As Infantino claimed mid-tournament, "when a ball is rolling, billions of hearts beat as one. Humanity's greatest gathering, this is the @fifaworldcup2026!"

But look more closely at Infantino's words. We have no evidence at all that once a game kicks off the billions of consumers of the spectacle will feel as one; conversely, they'll be cursing the opposing player, urging referees to give yellow or red cards to the opposition, roaring on their own teams, and slagging off the other side at any given opportunity. The "force for unity" claim is absurd. It's more accurate to note that when the ball is rolling, the commercial partners of FIFA, global and local, are counting the billions of dollars that are generated by the tournament and congratulating FIFA as its coffers are spilling over—to the tune of \$15 billion USD for this World Cup bonanza.

How can Infantino describe with any credibility that this tournament is, "Humanity's greatest gathering"? It's not really a gathering at all. It's a fragmented, from time to time deeply hypocritical, money-making machine for FIFA. It is a construction of spectacle and commercialism, existing on the basis of global platforms maneuvered with skill and guile by the marketing specialists of FIFA along with sponsors and long-established partners, all keen to display their products and wares to vulnerable audiences across the globe.

The FIFA World Cup is as much a force for hostilities across the world as a "force for unity." Whatever the bogus claims of its avatar-styled president, FIFA's products, profits, and preposterous, projected commercial ambitions must be roundly denounced rather than revered.

Of course, this is Infantino's baby; he will continue to dominate screen messages and platforms that FIFA creates for its top man. He hogs the highlights in the best seats in the big matches, easily spotted by camera men and women

as the well-dressed middle-aged baldie chap who seems so often to be among people, yet alone.

Perhaps he is planning how things might go in the 2030 World Cup. But here's a question: should he by then still be in the FIFA presidential position?

Infantino seems to have been around for a long time since he took the presidency of FIFA in February 2016. FIFA's rules say that a president can only have three terms of office, each term lasting 4 years, 12 years in all. So, 12 years on from February 2016 takes us to 2028—will it be time to go? 2028 will likely not be enough for Infantino. He aspires, for instance, to oversee the men's World Cup of 2030, hosted by Spain, Portugal, and Morocco, with centenary celebration matches in Uruguay (1930 host and champion), Paraguay, and Argentina. How could Infantino not be in on the act for this still-growing phenomenon? A solution needed to be framed to justify his plans.

In December 2022, the avatar's FIFA Council backed the view of FIFA's Government, Audit and Compliance Committee, which announced that his term of service of 39 months between winning the Presidency at the Extraordinary Congress and being re-elected unopposed in 2019 doesn't count as service after all; rather, his 12 years of service should start from 2019, not 2016, which would take him through to 2031. His redefined three terms of office, each of four years, keep him in his position from 2019-2031.

Infantino appears to be getting his way. But sometime, somewhere, some of the FIFA committee members, some of the sponsors even, alongside activist groups and others, could challenge the excesses of the Swiss. Infantino and his FIFA-based acolytes are protected in many ways by Switzerland's financial regime; the IMF hails the Swiss financial system as "large, sophisticated, and of global importance." Infantino sees the FIFA behemoth as a mighty player in that system. But FIFA's man for all seasons, and his associates, are increasingly seen as colluding in, if not explicitly corrupting, a continuing mis-management of the global game.



Prof. Alan Tomlinson

*Emeritus Professor of Leisure Studies, University of Brighton UK. His research has covered the sphere of Sport and Leisure Cultures, crossing interdisciplinary boundaries in studies of the Olympics and the history and politics of FIFA, the world governing body of football. He has authored and co-authored around three dozen books, most recently *What is FIFA For?* (2026, Bristol University Press)*

"X": @AlanTomlinson1

Email: alangtomlinson@gmail.com

Fighting ambush marketing through contracts: The role of ticket terms of use and stadium codes of conduct



Dr. Cem Abanazir

*Lecturer in Law, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester Law School. He teaches and conducts research on sports law, intellectual property law and esports. He is the author of the monograph *Political Expression in Sport: Transnational Challenges, Moral Defences* (2023, Routledge).*

LinkedIn: Cem Abanazir

Email: C.Abanazir@mmu.ac.uk

As the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup expands in the number of teams, matches, spectators and audiences, FIFA's income from its partners (FIFA Website) and sponsors in the lower tiers of FIFA's sponsorship structure has increased. The outlook was so positive that FIFA revised its budget for the 2023-2026 cycle, bringing total marketing rights income to USD 1,786 million (Revised Budget 2023-2026), up from USD 1,424 million in 2022 (Revenue from Marketing Rights). FIFA has changed its approach to ticket terms of use and stadium code of conduct to protect the sponsors' interests during the World Cup and manage the high stakes and the threat of ambush marketing that often occur during high-profile events.

The term "ambush marketing" denotes promotional activities that directly or indirectly create an association with a sporting event by a non-sponsor. The word "ambush" brings to mind combat, surprise, covertness and unpleasantness. Therefore, sports governing bodies that rely on sponsorship income aim to combat ambush marketing attempts. For FIFA, at the heart of this fight and its justification is the claim that the unrestricted ability to create an association with an event would decrease the value of sponsorships and, in turn, income (FIFA Website). The fear of diminishing income is such that FIFA considers "anti-ambushing marketing" activities a priority in its brand protection policy (FIFA Website).

Partners, including Qatar Airways, Lenovo, and Coca-Cola, as well as sponsors such as Anheuser-Busch and McDonald's, pay to create an association with FIFA and the tournament. The partners and other sponsors invest with the expectation of receiving commercial value. They want a return on their investment and, at the very least, expect exclusivity in their respective product and service categories. Then, what if an enterprise or non-profit organization aims to create that association without paying for it, thereby diminishing its exclusivity?

Although it promotes an enterprise or a non-profit organization, it is humans that engage in ambush marketing as individual or in groups, intentionally or unintentionally. Accordingly, FIFA seeks assistance from the law, which, at its heart, is designed to regulate human conduct. In addition to trademark and copyright law, FIFA implements part of its anti-ambush marketing policies by targeting spectator conduct through contracts. As the Dutch brewery Bavaria's ambush marketing at the 2006 and 2010 editions of the World Cup has shown, stadiums and their environs can become a front in such activities (*The Guardian* Website). After all, Dutch brewery Bavaria—ambushing Anheuser-Busch—used ticket-holding spectators to create an association, and in the latter case, the activity took place inside the stadium during a match. To address

this historical threat that could recur, FIFA uses contractual tools such as the Terms of Use and the Stadium Code of Conduct to protect its interests and those of its sponsors.

The 2026 World Cup spans three host countries, three official languages, sixteen stadiums, and a complex web of jurisdictions and legal norms. Each co-host utilizes separate World Cup ticket Terms of Use (Canada; Mexico; USA). However, despite the complex social and legal landscape, the ticket terms of use have a uniform approach to ambush marketing. Under each version, the provisions in the articles headed "FIFA's Commercial and Intellectual Property Rights" define ambush marketing, highlight it, and lay down prohibited acts and conduct in or around stadiums that constitute ambush marketing. In effect, any promotional or advertising activities of any kind, including wearing, possessing or holding promotional or commercial items without the authorization of FIFA, are prohibited. The Stadium Code of Conduct, which is incorporated into the Terms of Use, prohibits any promotional and commercial material (Stadium Code of Conduct).

As with every contract, ticket terms of use set out consequences for non-compliance. Essentially, conduct that FIFA could consider ambush marketing would constitute a breach of contract. Both documents indicate that breaching the rules on spectator conduct and ambush marketing-related contract terms could result in the confiscation of items without compensation, as well as refusal of entry or removal from the stadium. Again, this is an age-old legal dilemma of price and sanction. If a person does not consider the consequences serious enough, they could rationalize them as a price that they are willing to pay. On the other hand, if they are serious, the sanction could prevent the person from engaging in ambush marketing and from breaching contractual terms. Then the question becomes: given the inflated ticket prices and the World Cup's experiential nature, would anyone risk being refused entry or removed from the stadium?

Consequently, in light of its previous experiences with Bavaria's ambush marketing and its fear of a decline in sponsorship income, FIFA took the matter seriously. It incorporated anti-ambush marketing provisions into non-negotiable "take it or leave it" contractual terms resulting in harsh consequences for violating such terms. Essentially, FIFA protected not only its brand but those of its sponsors through non-negotiable legal terms. It remains to be seen whether future editions of the World Cup, including the upcoming tournament co-hosted by Spain, Portugal, Morocco and Paraguay, will these provisions or possibly adopt even stricter contractual measures.

Aleksander Čeferin's imperfect campaign for an undefined presidency

The expansion of the 2026 FIFA World Cup to 48 participating teams has had many critics.

One of the most influential among them is Aleksander Čeferin, the president of UEFA (the European governing body of football), who in a panel organized by Slovenian media corporation Pro Plus in early June said:

'I don't think this is a good decision, because we have many games that are completely uninteresting. Europe had 13 teams at the World Cup in Qatar, now it has 16. This is a small change, while some national teams that wouldn't win a single game in Europe qualified for the World Cup. On the other hand, this allows even such small countries to participate and experience the vibe of the World Cup, which is a big deal.'

The comment prompted mixed reactions, and 13 participating nations from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean released a joint statement to "express their profound disappointment" with Čeferin's complaints and "his characterization of many matches as being 'uninteresting'."

Čeferin's assessment may have been well-intentioned—he acknowledged the importance of tournament participation for "small countries"—but turned out to be imperfect. The Confederation of African Football, which gained five slots compared to the 2022 World Cup, advanced nine of its ten teams to the Round of 32. These "surplus" teams also accounted for some of the tournament's most memorable storylines. Cabo Verde's competitive run included a goalless draw with eventual champions Spain and a Round of 32 loss after extra time to eventual finalists Argentina. Bosnia and Herzegovina's passionate fan following galvanized global audiences and united a country that is dysfunctional by design.

More importantly, the comment was a tactical faux-pas for an often-cited candidate to challenge Gianni Infantino as FIFA President—an option Čeferin has thus far rejected. The organization's Statute allocates one vote per member association. Čeferin, currently a FIFA Vice-President by virtue of his role in UEFA, may very well have alienated most, if not all, of the 16 votes that supported the initial change in competition format, as well as many more who may vie for one of the additional 16 spots floated by Infantino for the 2030 tournament.

If Gianni Infantino is often criticized for his politicization of the office of the FIFA President and the excessive commercialization of the World Cup, Aleksander Čeferin lacked diplomatic tact and foresight when discussing a potential voter bloc—admittedly one that has little incentive to switch allegiances. This is ironic for someone who is routinely identified as a candidate for the highest political offices in his native Slovenia (also rumors he routinely dismisses).

Aleksander Čeferin has thus far ruled out running for FIFA President. In 2024 he pledged not to seek a fourth term as the leader of the European confederation. He later backtracked and may now seek re-election in 2027. His institutional and personal aversion to Gianni Infantino is well-documented. This summer he capitalized on several opportunities to manifest it. After criticizing the expansion of the World Cup and the high ticket prices, he likely orchestrated Omar Artan's appointment as referee for the 2026 UEFA Super Cup days after American immigration authorities prevented the Somali referee from officiating the World Cup. (Which begs the question: Could FIFA's appointment of a Slovenian referee to the World Cup final have been a show of force, using Čeferin's tactics against him?)

Čeferin also skipped the final between Spain and Argentina, apparently to protest FIFA's deferment of Folarin Balogun's one-game ban. Yet, if Čeferin is indeed to run for FIFA President in March 2027, he has not yet offered a structured alternative to the dislikable incumbent. He earned flattering accolades early in his term as UEFA President—which, in hindsight, seem more an acknowledgement of his leadership potential than a reflection of actual accomplishments—and successfully crushed the European Super League initiative in 2021. Yet, under his watch, both foreign and multi-club ownership continue to expand. The record commercial growth experienced during his reign comes in part at the expense of smaller leagues and clubs. He also expressed opinions on sanctioning Russia, Belarus, and Israel which prompted some scrutiny. The two presidents differ in style, but the 58-year-old lawyer from a small European country does not seem to offer a dramatically different program than the 56-year-old lawyer from another small European country 320 miles away.

Calls for the reform of FIFA—from the outside or inside, top-down or bottom-up—are increasingly loud and frequent. Aleksander Čeferin is living up to his claims of not wanting to run for the FIFA top job. Fair enough. He is indeed better positioning himself to run for the fourth term at UEFA he had said he did not want. A true FIFA reformer could hail from one of the nations that were mercifully awarded a spot in the FIFA World Cup in the name of profit. That would free up Infantino and Čeferin to pursue—or not—any political ambitions they may have.



Dr. Simon Ličen

Associate Professor in Journalism and Associate Director of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State University. Originally from Slovenia, he studies the theory and practice of sports journalism, broadcasting, event management, governance, and the intersection of sport, media and society, especially in international contexts.

Twitter: @DrSimonLicen

Email: sbl6178@psu.edu

The World Cup as a Marketplace of Wagers



Dr. Jason Kido Lopez

*Assistant Professor in the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Communication Arts. He researches and teaches about sports media, with a focus on athlete activism and sports-based games, including sports betting. He is the author of *Redefining Sports Media* (2023, Routledge) and *Gaming Sports: Gambling and the Sports Media Complex* (forthcoming, Rutgers University Press).*

During the first of the controversial hydration breaks of the 2026 World Cup, American viewers were shown a FanDuel commercial. Later in the tournament, they saw an advertisement for Kalshi. The World Cup may be the world's most popular sporting event, but for many American viewers, it also reflected a sports media landscape defined by pervasive commercialization, ubiquitous betting promotions, and the growing presence of prediction markets. Together, these developments encourage fans to experience the tournament not simply as a series of matches, but as a marketplace of wagering opportunities. Hydration breaks created additional commercial breaks during matches, but sportsbooks like FanDuel and prediction markets like Kalshi segment them even further by dividing matches into multiple wagerable moments. This has implications not only for gambling-related harms and match integrity, but also for how audiences understand the World Cup itself.

This relationship between the World Cup and betting is hardly new. Soccer is the world's most popular betting sport, and the global betting handle for the 2026 World Cup is expected to approach \$60 billion. What is new is the American betting landscape surrounding the 2026 tournament. Since 2018, many states have legalized some form of sports betting. Eight years later, the market has matured and expanded beyond traditional sportsbooks to include prediction markets like Kalshi and Polymarket. These platforms allow users to speculate on sporting events alongside election results, weather events, and reality television outcomes. Understanding how betting shapes the World Cup therefore requires looking beyond conventional sportsbooks. For example, compare FanDuel, representing traditional sportsbooks, and Kalshi, representing emerging prediction markets, using the Norway/England Quarterfinal match played on July 11, 2026.

Both Kalshi and FanDuel offered bets through menu-like interfaces that organized what can be bet alongside the potential payout for a correct prediction. Kalshi includes a "sports fan mode," which translates its probabilities into the American odds system used by sportsbooks. Although optional, this feature makes the representation of monetary risk on the two platforms remarkably similar.

Both applications' primary representation of the game was a simple choice: who will advance to the next round? They also prominently feature common wagers, including whether regulation ends in an England win, a Norway win, or a tie; whether England would win by more than 1.5 goals; and whether the total number of goals will be over or under 2.5. These bets treat the match as a single contest with a single outcome, even if they focus on different aspects of the end result.

But neither platform stops there. They divide the match into dozens of smaller wagerable moments, inviting users to predict not just who wins, but how the game unfolds. Both applications offered proposition bets, or "prop bets." For the Norway/England quarterfinal, these included whether both teams would score, who would score the first goal, and whether popular players like Erling Haaland and Harry Kane would record a goal. FanDuel offered many more of these wagers than Kalshi, extending betting to tackles, saves, and assists. Instead of one contest, the match becomes dozens of overlapping wagering opportunities.

Prop betting has attracted increasing scrutiny. Player-focused bets are especially controversial because they create the possibility for an individual athlete to manipulate their own stats (such as a recent case in the NBA) and many sports organizations have mobilized against them to reduce harassment from losing bettors (for example, the NCAA and MLBPA). Despite these concerns, both applications offer extensive proposition bets, particularly FanDuel.

FanDuel also prominently promotes same-game parlays, which combine multiple wagers into potentially high-risk, high-reward bets. While parlays have long been part of sports betting, same-game parlays are a more recent innovation that have become profitable for sportsbooks. One advertised parlay, for example, combined Haaland and Kane both to score with Norway advancing. Even someone unfamiliar with international soccer might recognize two of the sport's biggest stars and be drawn to a wager on outcome that is difficult to win.

Although Kalshi recommends far fewer parlays (called "combos"), both applications present the England-Norway match as a collection of smaller betting events rather than a single contest. This logic is not entirely new; fantasy sports, office pools, and informal wagers have long focused on individual moments within games. What is new is the scale and sophistication with which sportsbooks and prediction markets organize these moments into profitable products for mass audiences.

The World Cup has always been a global betting spectacle. Furthermore, prop bets, parlays, athlete harassment, and betting scandals all predate the 2026 tournament. FanDuel and Kalshi, however, bring these practices together within a single interface. Rather than simply offering bets on the World Cup, sportsbooks and prediction markets organize the tournament into dozens of simultaneous betting options. In doing so, they encourage audiences to experience the World Cup not simply as a ninety-minute contest, but as a marketplace of predictions.

A red card for sustainability: The environmental cost of modern World Cup jerseys

An official FIFA World Cup national team jersey can sell more than 3 million units during a World Cup cycle. Every four years, national teams introduce new home, away, and occasionally third colorway jerseys. These designs often incorporate national heritage, community narratives, and meaningful visual symbolism intended to unite players and supporters. The design of a new World Cup jersey typically begins 24 to 36 months before the event. The process is driven by the national team's uniform sponsor and includes research, concept and materials development, prototyping, athlete and federation feedback, wear testing, and manufacturing.

During the 1970's and 1980's, polyester knit transitioned into the preferred jersey material because of its' lightweight, durable, wrinkle-resistant and shrink-resistant, economical, and UV resistant characteristics. It also can be finished with moisture management treatments to move sweat away from the skin and sublimation printed with a wide variety of colors and graphic patterns. Polyester is a petroleum-based synthetic fiber developed in the 1940s, typically made of polyethylene terephthalate derived from ethylene glycol and terephthalic acid. Brands later adopted recycled polyester made from plastic bottles to improve sustainability.

However, polyester is facing growing criticism from an environmental standpoint. Both virgin polyester and recycled polyester shed plastic microfibers, and recent evidence has indicated that recycled polyester can shed more. In research cited by the Microplastic Research Group, recycled polyester sheds 2.3 times more microfibers by weight and roughly 55% more by particle count than virgin polyester, with particles roughly 20% smaller. Given that tens of millions of jerseys may be produced for just one World Cup, this becomes a serious environmental concern shaped by both brand decisions and fan demand. In fact, the fashion industry is one of the biggest contributors of microplastics into our waterways. Product development, production, wear, washing, and disposal, apparel made with synthetic materials like polyester release plastic microfibers that pose risks to animals and human health, accounting for 20% to 35% of all microplastics that enter the ocean.

To address this concern, one possible solution is to reconsider using the materials worn in the earliest FIFA World Cup jerseys worn for the 1930 tournament in Uruguay. These early jerseys were made from cotton or wool fibers, both naturally sourced, making them more sustainable than polyester. In comparison to polyester which is estimated to take 20-200 years to break down after disposal, cotton can biodegrade in roughly 1-5 months, and wool in about 3-6 months under favorable conditions. Despite their biodegradability advantages, cotton and wool do have some performance limitations that originally led brands to move away from their

use. Cotton absorbs about 7% of its weight in water (versus around 0.4% with polyester), so jerseys can become quite heavy when wet, potentially affected player comfort and performance. Cotton jerseys can also dry more slowly, and have lower abrasion resistance, wash shrinkage and shape loss, limited UV protection, and color fading under repeated washing in comparison to polyester. Wool can absorb up to 30% of its' weight in moisture, however it can feel dry due to its' unique fiber structure that is crimped. Wool can also be expensive, difficult to source in large quantities, and be challenging to wash frequently in high temperatures.

However, since the 1970's and 1980's textile engineers have been working on ways to address these challenges. Cotton knits can be engineered through yarn selection or construction or treated with moisture management finishes to move sweat from the skin side of the material to the outer surface for evaporation, helping to reduce weight, cling and drying time. Cotton can also be treated with finishes for better durability, wrinkle resistance, UV resistance, and colorfastness. If Merino wool is used, it inherently has characteristics that are favorable for a World Cup jersey. Merino wool is a superfine natural fiber that is soft next to skin, breathable, moisturewicking and naturally odorresistant. Like cotton, finishing treatments can assist with laundering and moisture management to reduce weight. Alongside these advances in cotton and wool, the broader textile sector is investing in bio-based performance materials derived from renewable feedstocks. These developments suggest that future World Cup uniforms may not need to rely exclusively on petroleum-based synthetics, but could be made from improved natural fibers, bio-based polymers, or hybrid solutions that better balance performance and environmental responsibility.

Materials alone are not enough. The deeper problem is a commercial system built on novel colorways, tournament cycles, and the expectation that fans will replace their jersey whenever a new one debuts. Even low-impact fibers will have a limited effect if that model continues unchanged. Fans can influence this system by demanding fewer kit styles, more sustainable materials, and longer product lifecycles which may put pressure on brands and federations to be more accountable. In that sense, fans could become the most important force for environmental change.



Dr. Susan L. Sokolowski

is a Professor, Department Head of Product Design, and the Founder of the Sports Product Design Graduate Program at the University of Oregon. Her research focuses on performance product innovation, sizing/fit, advanced materials, and sustainability. She is a Fellow of the National Academy of Inventors and holds more than 100 U.S. and international patents.

Email: sokolows@uoregon.edu

Predicting the World Cup champion: Media, AI, and the illusion of algorithmic certainty



Dr. Angel Torres-Toukourmidis

Full Professor at Universidad Politécnica Salesiana, Ecuador, and Editor-in-Chief of Universitas-XXI. He is Coordinator of the Gamelab-UPS Research Group, holds a PhD in Communication and a Master's in Communication for Social Purposes, and has authored more than 200 scholarly publications on communication, educommunication, gamification and digital culture.

Email: atorrest@ups.edu.ec

Every World Cup has demanded an oracle capable of allaying uncertainty: Paul the Octopus discharged that function from his tank in South Africa 2010, followed by Cabeção the turtle in 2014, Achilles the cat as his successor in 2018, and ultimately Taiyo the otter in 2022. By 2026 that figure has been supplanted by an array of Artificial Intelligence (AI) models: Gemini, Claude, GPT, DeepSeek, Qwen, Grok, among others, which journalists and supporters alike interrogate with one and the same question: who will lift the World Cup on July 19th in the United States? The communicational logic remains identical to that of Paul, Achilles, or Taiyo, inasmuch as an external figure is sought to transmute sporting uncertainty into narrative; the novelty lies in the fact that the new oracle bears a technical guise. A closer examination of how these responses are generated suggests that AI-based World Cup predictions are not neutral computational outputs but journalistic narratives shaped through prompting and editorial selection.

La Nación drew on Gemini, grounding it in Opta statistics and market odds, and settled upon Spain, even though Infobae recorded that, in a separate trial, the very same model wavered between Spain, Argentina, and England. Claude, consulted by Olé USA and Página 12, concurred in Spain defeating France. GPT, by contrast, was consulted by AVPasión and La Nación, yielding Brazil as champion, whereas El Cronista directed one and the same prompt at Gemini, ChatGPT, and Claude, which coincided in Spain. DeepSeek, for its part, insistently reiterates Argentina, as evidenced in Tiempo and Decrypt (18%). Such predictions arrive distilled into a single figure within a table.

The crux of this divergence resides in the prompt and in the editorial decision as to which verdict warrants publication. There exists no single answer from the AI, but rather results conditioned by the architecture, the available data, and the wording of the question. The very name of the model operates, moreover, as a seal of authority, seasoning the argumentum ad verecundiam: to assert that “ChatGPT, or Claude, or DeepSeek predicted it” suffices to invest with objectivity a text whose precise formulation is seldom rendered transparent. The consultation of AI thus functions as a reproducible formula that any newsroom may execute in order to manufacture, at minimal cost, a piece of news bearing the semblance of revelation.

This formula has become serial. Decrypt consulted seven agents in order to assemble a ranking, while ScoreGPT pledges to update daily the consensus of six models, thereby converting the forecast continuously updated content; rather than rendering explicit the disagreement among systems, the genuinely informative datum, the coverage resolves it into a single headline-ready

figure. More rigorous endeavors do exist: the “AI Prediction World Cup” run by Financial Times Alphaville pits Gemini, Claude, several versions of ChatGPT, a Goldman Sachs model, and human projections against one another, thereby confirming that these systems are no single, infallible oracle, but rather disparate competitors whose performance varies match by match.

It thus follows that outlets such as El País, Forbes Centroamérica, Debate, Covers, and The Mirror have transformed the AI consultation into a serial formula, low in cost and high in clicks. The phenomenon becomes particularly pronounced when The Sun requested that Gemini act as a “Nostradamus” of the World Cup and dramatize its forecasts England crowned champion, a final against Argentina – the very framing betrays that AI is deployed as a narrative device rather than as sound sporting evidence.

On social media this logic grows radicalized, for it is there that the value of the forecast resides in its virality. Such content thrives by conjoining three ingredients of the highest viral potential: football, the uncertainty of the outcome, and the fascination exerted by AI. A confluence that invites the sharing of prompt screenshots, rankings of favorites, and contradictory predictions among rival fan bases. The authority of the verdict proceeds neither from a transparent methodology nor from a declared margin of error, but rather from the symbolic prestige ascribed to the model: the logo of a recognizable AI alone suffices for the screenshot to be forwarded as though it were a datum and not a conditioned statistical output. In this manner, the platform rewards instantaneous tribal identification over verification, and each act of forwarding reinforces the illusion that a closed answer exists where there is, in truth, but a conversation with a machine.

In closing, it is fitting to dwell upon the communicational dimension of the phenomenon: what the public receives is not the prediction of an AI, but rather its journalistic edition. Between the model and the reader there intercede invisible decisions, which prompt was used, which response was selected, which headline was drafted, that transmute a probabilistic output into a spectacular verdict. Sports media continue to seek authoritative voices capable of reducing uncertainty, and AI provides an endlessly available oracle wrapped in technological credibility. *up*

Adjudicated twice: dispute resolution at the FIFA World Cup

Every World Cup is settled twice. Once on the pitch, in front of several billion people. And once in a far quieter forum: a layered system of tribunals, committees, and arbitral panels that almost no viewer sees, and that can revise on paper what happened on the grass. This second competition has its own rules, its own officials, and its own clock.

Four principles animate it, and they explain most of its behavior. *Specialization*: sport is judged by people who know sport. *Speed*: a competition cannot wait for the ordinary pace of litigation. *Finality*: results must become unappealable, quickly. And *exhaustion of internal remedies*: you climb the ladder from the inside before any court will hear you.

Most football disputes have nothing to do with the tournament calendar. Contract terminations, unpaid wages, transfer fees, training compensation, and agent commissions flow year-round to FIFA's Football Tribunal, principally its Players' Status Chamber and Dispute Resolution Chamber, which apply the Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players and, in 2024/25, resolved cases in roughly 89 days on average. Mediation sits alongside, for parties who prefer a negotiated settlement to a ruling. A party unhappy with the result appeals to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on its ordinary timetable, within 21 days. This is the deep, slow plumbing of the global game. It will be busy in 2026, but it is not what resolves a dispute over a sending-off in the round of 32.

That is the job of FIFA's disciplinary chain. Standing apart from the Football Tribunal are three judicial bodies: the Disciplinary Committee, the Appeal Committee, and the Ethics Committee. During a tournament, the Disciplinary Committee applies the FIFA Disciplinary Code to misconduct, ineligibility, and the heavier offenses; the Appeal Committee hears the internal appeal. But the system is deliberately engineered to keep most grievances from ever leaving the field. CAS will not review a referee's application of the Laws of the Game, nor short suspensions of up to four matches or three months (doping aside). This is the field-of-play doctrine: the principle that an official's in-match judgment is final. It rests on a practical bargain: a match cannot be re-refereed in a tribunal months later, so the jurisprudence defers to the call on the day and disturbs it only on proof of bad faith or corruption, never mere error. What survives to climb higher is the serious material: long bans, eligibility and ineligible-player protests, anti-doping cases, match-fixing.

For those, and only for the tournament window of June 11 to July 19, 2026, the apex appears. As it did at Qatar 2022, the International Court of Arbitration for Sport has established a CAS Ad Hoc Division for the duration of the final competition: a temporary tribunal, seated in

Lausanne and governed by Swiss arbitration law, staffed by arbitrators drawn from the CAS football list, typically hearing appeals by video conference and required to render a decision within 48 hours. It opens only after FIFA's internal remedies are exhausted, and only for decisions appealable to CAS under Article 50 of the FIFA Statutes. Its awards are immediately enforceable and, in the words of the rules, "may not be appealed against or otherwise challenged," subject only to the limited setting-aside review Switzerland's Federal Tribunal exercises over international arbitral awards. The practical consequence is severe and underappreciated: on a 48-hour clock, a team cannot begin building its case when the dispute lands. Evidence, witnesses, and counsel fluent in CAS procedure must be in place before the tournament's first whistle.

The mechanism is a longstop, not a first resort. At Qatar 2022 the cycle's most consequential dispute never reached an in-tournament panel. Chile's and Peru's challenge to the eligibility of Ecuador's Byron Castillo was resolved before kickoff: dismissed by FIFA's Disciplinary Committee, upheld by its Appeal Committee, and then decided by CAS, which confirmed Castillo's eligibility and Ecuador's place while sanctioning the Ecuadorian federation for using a document containing false information. Every remedy was spent before a ball was kicked.

One more channel runs parallel to all of this and answers to none of it. Sponsors and broadcasters, whose money underwrites the event, resolve their disputes through commercial contracts, FIFA's rights-protection and anti-ambush-marketing regime, host-country measures, and ordinary commercial arbitration or the national courts. These forums sit outside the FIFA judicial system and outside CAS, a useful reminder that "dispute resolution at the World Cup" is really several systems wearing one badge.

Assembled, the architecture serves a single objective the public rarely notices: legitimacy delivered at the speed of the competition. The tournament cannot pause for a six-month appeal, and a champion crowned under a cloud is no champion at all. So the system specializes, accelerates, and forecloses; the second adjudication, the one no one watches, quietly guarantees that the first one counts.



Prof. Joshua Gordon

Professor of Practice in sport business and law at the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business and School of Law, and the University's Faculty Athletics Representative. Founder of the Sports Conflict Institute, he is an international arbitrator and mediator (CAS, FIFA, USSF, MLB, USOPC, USATF) serving on the CAS Ad Hoc Division panel for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Email: jgordon9@uoregon.edu

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/joshuagordon](https://www.linkedin.com/in/joshuagordon)

Online Abuse, Diversity and Representation in Match Officiating: Reflections from the 2026 FIFA World Cup



Karan Rai

Karan was appointed as EDI Insights and Research Manager as part of a Knowledge Transfer Partnership between Leeds Beckett University and ProRef in April 2025. The 30-month project aims to develop, monitor and evaluate pioneering EDI initiatives across multiple levels of the professional and grassroots game leading to the development of a more diverse and representative community of officials. Karan has a background working in the Criminal Justice Sector, mainly for the Unlocked Graduates programme where he spent time working as a frontline Prison Officer and worked on a variety of prison reform projects aimed at breaking cycles of re-offending. He is also a Trustee of the National Football Museum and qualified to become an active match official in November 2025

Email: karan.rai@proref.co.uk

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/karanrai94/>



Prof. Daniel Kilvington

is a Professor in Media and Culture at Leeds Beckett University. His teaching and research focuses on race/ethnicity, racism and anti-racism in sport and new media contexts. He is widely published in academic journals, and is author of six books, including *Sport, Racism and Social Media* (2015), *Online Research Methods in Sport Studies* (2019), and *Sport, Media and Discrimination* (2025).

E-Mail: d.j.kilvington@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniel-kilvington/>



Arran Williams

is a dedicated Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) professional with a decade of experience driving transformative change within sporting organizations through EDI initiatives.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/arran-williams-1b797253/>

E-Mail: Arran.Williams@proref.co.uk

The 2026 World Cup has highlighted the growing scale of online abuse in football. FIFA's Social Media Protection Service identified over 7 million harmful and abusive posts this summer, compared with 470,000 in 2022. Racism accounted for around 11% of abusive content, the same proportion as 2022. Although FIFA has not released a full breakdown of this summer's trends, its 2022 analysis found that 13% of abuse was sexist and 12% homophobic, showing the tournament's digital space is hostile for marginalised groups.

While public attention has focused on players, less attention has been paid to match officials and what online abuse means for the future diversity of officiating. Concerns about an officiating "talent drain" are growing, with half of sporting federations reporting that officials are routinely targeted and 90% agreeing online abuse could drive officials away from sport.

VAR has intensified officials' visibility, with decisions scrutinised after matches end. The experience of French referee, François Letexier, demonstrates how quickly scrutiny can lead to personal abuse. Following Egypt's defeat to Argentina, conspiracy theories alleging bias spread online, leading to calls for Letexier's removal. He later deactivated Instagram after becoming the target of abuse, misinformation and antisemitic conspiracy claims. The episode illustrates why FIFA Refereeing Chief Pierluigi Collina has described online hatred towards officials as "a cancer that could kill football".

Online abuse also raises important questions about representation. The reaction to the first all-female refereeing team at the 2022 World Cup demonstrates why visibility cannot be separated from the environments officials enter. In a study of more than 22,000 Twitter posts discussing the team, only 8% of comments were supportive or normalising, while almost 92% contained sexism, exclusion, mockery or insults. These findings suggest that increasing representation alone is not enough if officials continue to encounter hostility once they reach the highest levels of the game.

Representation remains a challenge within officiating. Women accounted for just 3.5% of officials appointed to the 2026 World Cup, while women and ethnically diverse officials remain underrepresented across many domestic pathways. Because World Cup referees emerge from these systems, representation on football's biggest stage is shaped at domestic level. Research highlights the importance of visible role models in encouraging participation among underrepresented groups. When aspiring officials see someone who shares their background or community operating at the highest level, the pathway can feel achievable.

Omar Artan's case highlights the intersection between online harm and representation. Artan's selection as the first Somali referee appointed to a FIFA World Cup was a milestone for Somali football and officials from underrepresented communities. The President of Somalia described Artan as a "symbol of inspiration for Somalis". However, following his exclusion from the tournament after US authorities cited vetting concerns, false social media content

reportedly linking Artan to anti-US posts circulated online. Artan publicly denied any connection to the account, stating that he had never operated an X/Twitter account. Regardless of whether the misinformation influenced events, the episode demonstrates how quickly online impersonation, misinformation and false narratives can become attached to match officials. More importantly, it illustrates how online harms can overshadow significant moments of representation. If visibility helps underrepresented communities see a future within officiating, online environments that distort those moments may weaken their impact.

The experiences of Letexier, Artan and the all-female refereeing team illustrate that online abuse is not simply just an issue of on-field criticism. In each case, hostility extended beyond performance and became linked to identity, representation or wider social narratives. Research suggests online abuse disproportionately affects marginalised groups and can contribute to withdrawal, reduced public engagement and longer-term professional harm. Within officiating, social media abuse has been linked to distress, anxiety, depression and intentions to leave the profession. Together, these examples raise a wider concern: if visible role models help demonstrate what is possible, abuse and misinformation may undermine some of the positive impacts representation is intended to create.

This question is reflected in emerging findings from our Knowledge Transfer Partnership between Pro Ref and Leeds Beckett University, which aims to improve diversity across English refereeing. Our research illustrates that despite many officials actively avoiding social media, they are made aware of it through media reports while family members and friends often forward screenshots of abusive messages to them. Several officials described searching anonymously for comments about their performances, suggesting that simply advising referees to "stay off social media" overlooks how abuse continues to enter officials' lives. Our research suggests these experiences may influence how individuals view their future within officiating. Some young female referees described feeling hesitant about pursuing elite officiating after seeing high-profile female officials subjected to sexist abuse online, while one ethnically diverse referee recalled observing racist comments questioning whether he had been appointed on merit or ethnic background. These experiences raise wider questions about who sees officiating as a place where they can belong and succeed.

The World Cup has highlighted that online abuse is embedded in the environment in which referees operate. As football seeks to improve diversity and representation, a key question remains: can the game attract and retain officials from underrepresented communities if they continue to see abuse, hostility and discrimination directed at those already there? The challenge is not simply recruiting more diverse officials but ensuring the environments they enter encourage them to stay, progress and believe they belong.



6 | POLITICS

Time to abolish the World Cup

We live in Guadalajara, Jalisco's capital and host to four Cup games at the Akron stadium. Its name hidden from view for the duration by authorities bending the knee to FIFA's preferred extractive sponsor Aramco, AKA Saudi Arabia.

Because of FIFA's insatiable drive for "growth," the 'slow violence' of environmental degradation is gaining pace across the football globe. Since 2000, World Cup emissions have ranged between 1.65 and 3.63 million tonnes of CO₂e. Travel is an obvious contributor, while construction accounts for a third of energy use and emissions. Then there is the electricity required to televise, watch, and bet on fixtures. And each person attending the Cup averages between 0.25 and 7kg of waste a day, thanks to fast food and drink.

Mexican authorities spent untold millions of dollars 'on infrastructure, promotion, and logistics to welcome tourists during the World Cup,' with airports remodeled to qualify as 'Aeropuertos FIFA.' Precious little was dedicated to the needs of the local population, at a time when vital public works were being reduced as interest rates soared.

Water is scarce and contamination common in Guadalajara, courtesy of climate catastrophe, poor planning, and inadequate infrastructure, notably purification; these are not the showy priorities of football hosts (the government of Jalisco allocated millions to musical events for the Cup).

The Akron is located at the El Bajío groundwater recharge zone, about 1.5km from Bosque La Primavera (Spring Woods), home to pumas—which are close to extinction—deer, migratory birds, and golden eagles. Along with hundreds of flower varieties, seven fishes, fifty reptiles, and numerous water resources, they are imperiled by redevelopment, spectators, and vehicles.

There are other kinds of violence: 78% of Mexican women involved in football's top flight have experienced assault, and history is laden with stadium brawls. State and para-statal groups subject many people to degrading treatment: 2025-26 saw the brutal clearance of street dwellers and sex workers by authorities desperate to present a purportedly civic face to football tourists and journalists.

Then there is the violence of *narcos* against the disappeared and executed, often with police or military collusion, and struggles between cartels. *New York Times* and *Guardian* videos about such horrors reveal the authorities' obsession with militaristic security to protect visitors.

These occasional themes for liberal fractions of the international bourgeois media are daily concerns for local reporters and activists: 'While some are celebrating goals, others are getting massacred by drones carrying bombs.'

Foreign papers generally buy into FIFA's feel-good propaganda, per the Association's

laughable claim that "Football Unites the World." Pitiful puff pieces proliferate.

Of course, there is always counter-power. 'Más agua, menos mundial' (More water, less World Cup) cry residents. On World Water Day, they marched for 'Agua limpia, no obras mundialistas' (Clean water, not Cup construction).

Readers around the world recognize Panini album stickers—treasured memories of Cups gone by. The mothers of Luz de Esperanza (Light of Hope) reclaimed that design to draw attention to 135,000 disappeared children via images printed on t-shirts and taped to posts, walls, and benches across town, with one word beneath each person's details: 'DESAPARECIDO.' Parents and other activists protested with banners and balloons reading 'Jalisco, campeón en desaparición' (Jalisco, disappearances champion) and 'FIFA, tu mundial es cómplice' (FIFA, your World Cup is complicit).

Every week, Luz de Esperanza and similar collectives dig at informal gravesites where they have received tips that the bodies of loved ones may be found. Risking life and limb in the face of narco violence, perilous abseiling, and arduous excavations, off they go on a seemingly endless quest, including near the Akron, where clandestine burial grounds and a torture house have been found. Not only naming rights and pumas are at risk.

Luz insists 'No somos investigadores ni forenses. Somos familiares que convertimos el dolor en acción y comunidad' (We're neither investigators nor forensic experts. We're family members who transform pain into action and community).

As the event draws to a close, these are *our* World Cup highlights: nature endangered, resources misused, violence ongoing.

Of course, Jalisco is just one state in a worldwide map of authoritarian horrors and colonial-capitalist legacies; incarnate in these Finals, concealed by their rhetoric. In reality, slow and quick violence fuse at football's feet in a 'VIP World Cup.' As the *New Yorker* put it, FIFA is 'a rancid institution.'

So let's abolish the Cup: end it forever, not just when this summer's edition fades away. July 19 2026 can delegitimize football violence and rebirth our beloved sport.



Prof. Adriana Pantoja de Alba.

Profesora Titular, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente. She specializes in the intersections of culture, politics, and economics.

Email: apantoja@iteso.mx

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3492-8565>



Dr. Toby Miller

Profesor Distinguido, Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey. His latest book is Global Sports Go Green—Or Do They?

tobym69@icloud.com

X: [@greencitizen](https://twitter.com/greencitizen)

tobymiller.org

Colombia – Whose shirt is it anyway?



Dr. Peter J. Watson

*Lecturer in the Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies department at the University of Leeds. His research is on the importance of sport in Latin American history, politics, culture and society. He is the author of *Football and Nation Building in Colombia: The Only Thing that Unites Us* (2022, Liverpool University Press) and regularly appears on football podcasts.*

Email: p.j.watson@leeds.ac.uk

Bluesky: @
[drpeterwatson.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/drpeterwatson.bsky.social)

Linktree: <https://linktr.ee/drpeterwatson>

As every four years the men's football World Cup converges with the Colombian presidential election, provided Colombia qualify, football and politics overlap during presidential campaigning. As Colombia's most popular sport, candidates need to legitimize themselves as supporters of the *Selección* (the national team). This usually occurs through speeches and social media posts pledging support and celebrating team victories whilst wearing the national football shirt as an overt indicator of fandom. These messages and media platforms also provide opportunities for political narratives.

In the 2026 campaign, Colombia witnessed a significant footballization of politics, with a resultant politicization of football. The main debate was the use of the national football shirt by the eventual winner of the election, the hard-right Abelardo de la Espriella. Despite hating football and never having attended a game, de la Espriella followed the playbook of former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, in urging his supporters to wear the football shirt at rallies and when voting. His left-wing opponent, Iván Cepeda (also not a known football fan), criticized his rival, claiming that he was "stealing the shirt", a national symbol that belonged to everyone. He also complained to the Colombian Football Federation (FCF), who should be ensuring that the shirt remains neutral. Ramón Jesurún, head of the FCF, eventually gave a public statement agreeing that the shirt was for everyone. The delay in commenting was telling, particularly as de la Espriella's law firm defended Jesurún following his arrest at the Copa América final in Miami in 2024.

A legal case was brought against de la Espriella, but not by the FCF; the judge banned de la Espriella from wearing it for political events. De la Espriella, however, doubled down on wearing the shirt, though adapting the shirt with his tiger logo and his "Firmes por la patria" (Firm for the fatherland) slogan. As a result, the shirt seemed to indicate support for the far-right politician, much as it did in Bolsonaro's Brazil. Many experts saw Cepeda's complaint as a grave tactical error, arguing that it had made de la Espriella voters seem more numerous, and had hardened their resolve to rebel by banning something popular. Cepeda, in fact, quickly adapted his campaign, receiving a shirt himself from 32 organized football fan groups (barras) and tried to contest the meaning of the shirt for the country, but perhaps some damage had already been done.

This is not the first time the Colombian shirt has been politicized by presidents and politicians. Around the 2014 and 2018 World Cups, President Juan Manuel Santos made the shirt a symbol of his peace process with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), even including the message "I am playing for peace" above the number 10 on his shirt. This angered Álvaro Uribe supporters who

also wore the shirt in their plebiscite campaigns against the peace process. Leaders of the FARC also wore it to proclaim their own citizenship during the peace negotiations in 2013 and 2014. As is therefore evident, the shirt, an initially 'empty' national symbol, can quickly become charged with contrasting political messages depending on the wearer and the narratives they produce.

The footballization / sportization of politics did not stop with shirt-wearing. The de la Espriella campaign used *barra* chants as jingles and publicized the support of sport stars such as cyclist Nairo Quintana, baseballer Edgar Rentería, and Olympic gold medal-winning athlete Caterine Ibargüen. Legendary footballers like Carlos Valderrama and Faustino Asprilla and others stars of Colombia's golden generations appeared in an advert in which de la Espriella captained his team to a heroic victory, scoring goals against "corruption", "lies", "FARC", all rhetorically associated with current President Petro and Cepeda. De la Espriella also pledged his support for the women's team after they won the Liga de Naciones, alleging that they too had been failed by Petro. Cepeda, by contrast, almost stood out by the absence of support from sport stars.

This footballization of politics has, in turn, politicized football. The amount of (mostly retired) footballers supporting de la Espriella, may have tainted the national team with suspicions of right-wing tendencies, and not just of the footballing kind; Colombians question how many of the World Cup squad have similar political opinions. Sensibly, none of them have made statements on their politics, though defender Yerry Mina, has previously visited controversial right-wing former president Álvaro Uribe. A viral video in which star midfielder James Rodríguez seemed to ignore President Petro's daughter at a ceremony giving the flag to the team before they departed for the tournament also raised eyebrows, though he quickly dealt with the situation. At the same event, several players were said to look displeased by Petro's speech (he was, naturally, wearing the football shirt. A fake video was even made purporting to show Colombian players celebrating a goal vs Uzbekistan using gestures likened to de la Espriella

Consequently, de la Espriella's divisive politics have affected the symbolism of the national shirt, becoming another venue for national polarization that football has historically been called on to remedy. With the presidency won, the shirt may have served its purpose for de la Espriella, but, as Colombia advanced through the tournament, what fans wearing the shirt signified became a thorny issue.

Players and Politics: The Messi Case

Lionel Messi doesn't speak. He (apparently) doesn't read, he doesn't write, he doesn't watch movies (just TV series), he doesn't visit art museums, he has no known musical tastes, and he has never once quoted a book or an author. In his rare interviews — incredibly rare, considering he is one of the most famous figures in global culture — he says nothing but platitudes. According to those few profiles, his life consists of playing soccer with his kids, video games, and drinking “wine with Sprite.” Even when talking about soccer, he can only produce clichés: “It was a very difficult match,” “The boys played very well,” “We need to play better.” Messi is mute. And boring, to boot.

For Messi, it seems there are no ethnicities or races, no social classes or gender, no powerful or weak, no dominant or dominated. Messi lives in a perfect world, where the only conflict is a harsh foul or a missed penalty. Messi was raised on a script written by the entertainment industry: The perfect star is the one who makes no enemies. And to achieve that, you must keep quiet.

Messi, at the same time, does not experience inequality. He has never been discriminated against, exploited or oppressed: before joining Barcelona at 14, he was that of a white, urban, middle-class child. To expect a political demand from him, even one showing solidarity with his fellow athletes, is impossible: The script does not allow for it. Messi is an individual coached to stay out of trouble.

Quite possibly, this absolute neutrality is precisely what has allowed him to become a global idol, revered by fans in every corner of the planet except one: Madrid, where they will never forgive him for playing for 21 years for their mortal enemy, Barcelona. That is the greatest conflict he has ever been dragged into, and it wasn't even by his own choice: It was just the hand he was dealt — without it ever meaning taking a side on Catalan autonomy, a matter toward which he seemed entirely indifferent.

I couldn't say for sure whether sports stars have overwhelmingly adopted this brand of careful neutrality, though it is highly likely. The exceptions are glaring, precisely because they are exceptional. Those who refuse neutrality usually do so because they have experienced some form of inequality or discrimination.

For example, consider Black European players, or Black players playing in Europe. As often happens with those playing in Argentina as well, they experience the massive, shameless racism of the crowds. Many of them rebel and speak out, denounce, protest, walk off the pitch, and demand change: Cameroonian star Samuel Eto'o, Athletic Bilbao's captain Iñaki Williams, and striker Mario Balotelli in Italy are some of them.

It seems, then, that it is mostly those who experience inequality and oppression who raise their voices against injustice. This can expand into broader politics, as seen with Kylian Mbappé's recent condemnations of both the French far right and advertisements for sports betting and junk food. Mbappé's reasoning supports my argument: betting and cheap food wreak havoc in neighborhoods like the one where he grew up, and the far right is profoundly racist toward the children of immigrants. Once again, the experience is rooted in poverty and race.

The same goes for the Black Brazilian player Vinicius Jr., who plays for Real Madrid and reacts emphatically and publicly to every racist attack. He even forced FIFA to introduce a new rule, known as the “Vini rule,” which penalizes any player who covers their mouth while speaking to another. In February 2026, an opponent covered his mouth, clearly to insult him. Vinicius complained to the referee that the opponent had called him a “monkey,” though no action was taken on the pitch because the insult could not be heard. Later on, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) handed the player a six-match ban, taking the racist abuse as a given. The opponent was an Argentine playing for Portuguese side Benfica, who argued in his defense that he had used a homophobic slur rather than saying “monkey.” Homophobia, according to Gianluca Prestianni — the aggressor in question — was apparently less problematic than racism.

At this point in my argument and examples, it might seem as though political indifference or racism are inherently Argentine traits. It is worth remembering, then, that Diego Maradona is still remembered as a player and a public figure who was deeply committed politically. Similarly, Lisandro Martínez, a current player on the Argentine national team, has continuously championed his working-class roots, as well as his commitment to condemning the crimes of the Argentine dictatorship and his solidarity with human rights organizations. Messi's “neutrality” is therefore not an ironclad law; players can escape it if their class experience or political consciousness allows them to do so.

This is not Messi's case. It is not a matter of awareness or commitment, but of never having experienced difference and inequality. In that context, you can't expect blood from a stone.



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Dr. Pablo Alabarces

Professor of Popular Culture in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and a senior researcher at CONICET. His work explores popular music, popular cultures, and soccer culture, and he is widely regarded as one of the founding figures of Latin American sports sociology. He has published 18 books, among them Futbol and Patria.

Twitter: @palabarces

Email: palabarces@gmail.com

Instagram: @p.alabarces
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Sportswashing and the 2026 FIFA World Cup: The politics of World Cup enjoyment



Dr. Jack Black

*Associate Professor of Culture, Media, and Sport in the School of Sport and Physical Activity, Sheffield Hallam University (UK). His interdisciplinary research spans sport, cultural/media studies, and psychoanalysis, focusing on topics related to online hate, racism, and AI. His forthcoming book is *The Subject of Sport: Exploring Sport's Psychoanalytic Significance* (Bloomsbury).*

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/jackblack

Email: j.black@shu.ac.uk

The 2026 FIFA World Cup arrives as the largest edition in the tournament's history. Comprising 48 teams and 104 matches, the three host nations, including the United States, Mexico, and Canada will, together, present a continental celebration of soccer's expanding global reach. FIFA's own language leans heavily on the promise that football can unite the world. This is familiar mega-event rhetoric, with the 2026 tournament, and previous World Cups, being sold as a temporary suspension of national and international division, indeed, a shared festival in which politics recedes behind the ball. Yet, the more insistently FIFA repeats this claim, the more difficult it becomes to ignore how much political work the tournament is already doing.

Sportswashing is often treated as a problem that belongs elsewhere. Usually, Qatar, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia, where authoritarian regimes use sport to soften the visibility of repression. The 2026 World Cup unsettles this geography. If sportswashing names the use of sport to recast a political actor, institution, or nation in a more favorable light, then it cannot simply be reserved for non-Western states. The concept becomes analytically useful precisely when it can also be turned toward democratic hosts, liberal institutions, and the political economies that make mega-events possible.

This matters because the American staging of the tournament takes place in a political context in which Donald Trump has been unusually close to FIFA and its president, Gianni Infantino. The most symbolic moment came at the World Cup draw, when Trump was awarded FIFA's newly created, "Peace Prize." FIFA described the award as recognition for actions that unite people, while critics questioned both the choice and the opaque process by which it was made. The significance here was not simply that a controversial political leader appeared at a sporting event, it was that FIFA sought to use the World Cup as an image of international legitimacy.

This is where sportswashing becomes more subtle than propaganda. It rarely asks audiences to believe a wholly invented story. Instead, it works more effectively by inviting them to enjoy the spectacle while knowing, perfectly well, that the spectacle is politically compromised. In psychoanalytic terms, this reflects a form of fetishistic disavowal, best expressed as, "I know very well, but all the same." In the case of football, and the FIFA World Cup, we know that football is saturated with money, nationalism, surveillance, inequality, and corporate extraction, we also know that the tournament is used by political leaders to stage their nation's competence, encourage national unity, and foster a sense of prestige and belonging on the global stage. Yet, when the whistle blows, such knowledge is typically held at a certain distance . . .

how else is one to enjoy the football on display?

Certainly, this does not suggest that fans are naïve or morally deficient. The attraction of the World Cup is real. It carries memories, rituals, family histories, national attachments, tactical pleasures, and moments of collective surprise that are, for many, moments which are typically shared with friends and family, whether at the games themselves or watching live at home, or the local pub or sports bar. Indeed, these are not trivial matters which make sport insignificant. Instead, sportswashing is powerful because it attaches itself to what people genuinely enjoy. If football did not matter, then it would have little value as a political resource, and it is for this reason that the same attachment which makes the game meaningful also makes it available for ideological manipulation. Fans are asked to preserve the purity of the event by disavowing the political structures that organize it.

A critical account of 2026 should therefore resist two easy conclusions. The first is the comforting claim that football and politics can be separated. They cannot. The second is the equally comforting claim that, because the tournament is politically compromised, the only ethical response is withdrawal. Boycott may be meaningful in some contexts, but it cannot exhaust the politics of spectatorship. The harder task is to remain with the contradiction. Indeed, to watch, without our enjoyment becoming an alibi for forgetting (or ignoring).

Importantly, this requires asking different questions during the tournament. Who benefits from such images of togetherness? Which political figures are granted soft-focus legitimacy through football's emotional charge? Which social problems are made to appear less urgent because a stadium is full (or not), a flag is waving, or a host city is beautifully presented on television? How does FIFA's rhetoric of unity coexist with high prices, immigration controls, policing, and the marginalization of those for whom mega-events often mean disruption rather than celebration?

A brief answer to the above questions is not to purify the World Cup. That fantasy has always served FIFA well. Instead, the task is to refuse the comfort of knowing better while carrying on as though our knowledge changes nothing. The 2026 World Cup will produce extraordinary football. It will also produce political images, commercial opportunities, and narratives of national renewal. A critical response should hold these together. Sportswashing succeeds when the game gives us permission to forget what we already know.

How mega-events help authoritarians like Putin and Trump

There is an enduring relationship between mega-events and authoritarianism. Consider the 1934 Football World Cup in Mussolini's Italy, where the dictator inculcated fascist ideals via a cult of physical fitness rooted in belligerent nationalism. Consider the 1936 Summer Olympics in Hitler's Germany, where the dictator leveraged mega-event soft power to broadcast positive framings of the Nazi regime, promoting national unity and laying the groundwork for war. Consider the 1978 World Cup in dictatorial Argentina, where Videla's junta exploited the mega-event to mask their crimes against humanity. The dark marriage of mega-events and authoritarians is nothing new.

The Russian mega-event decade fits into this history. A country that not long ago sought integration with the West now wages war against Ukraine and hybrid war against the European Union. Far from the democracy promised at the fall of the USSR, the state has extinguished dissent and executed the opposition. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and 2018 men's Football World Cup were instrumental in these terrible transformations. In substantial ways, the Russian mega-event decade helped transform the country from a fragile democracy into a consolidated autocracy, and Vladimir Putin from President to Tsar.

These dramatic transformations are not limited to Russia, as authoritarian mega-events become increasingly common around the globe. Of particular note is the United States, currently in the midst of its own mega-event decade. It may be that the aspiring autocrat in the White House is following Putin's mega-event model as part of his effort to transform from President to King.

Despite their obvious differences (i.e. – tradition of democracy vs. history of autocracy) Russia and the United States share much in common. Both countries are huge and heterogeneous, wealthy but suffering from outsized inequalities as wealth is captured by oligarchs and elites. They are nuclear powers obsessed with so-called "great nation" status, and their leaders routinely blame failures on traitors and enemies. Until recent consolidation, Russia was categorized as a competitive authoritarian state. Lagging behind Russia but catching up fast, the Trump-era United States has lost ground in all measures of healthy democratic functioning, and is now understood as competitive authoritarian. Both countries have strong histories of fighting fascists even as they share a disturbing predilection for flirting with fascism.

Both nations also have strong sporting histories and, in the context of authoritarian consolidation, both hosted the world's most prestigious mega-events. Identifying the features of authoritarian mega-events as expressed in the Russian experience, we can see alarming parallels in America.

The Leader: In Russia, Putin was the public face of the mega-events, and was placed at the

head of the organizing committees. The mega-events were presented as "Putin's Games," while state-sponsored doping demonstrated the importance of securing Russian victory. In America, Trump was the recipient of the newly-created FIFA Peace Prize, was named the head of the Olympic Taskforce, and has already meddled with the integrity of sport, trying to tip the scales toward an American win.

Soft Power: Russia communicated different messages to different audiences. Internationally, they displayed the country as an equal partner, while nationally they showed recovery from the chaos of the 1990s, demonstrating that Putin can deliver great things. In the USA, the soft power narratives are confused, reflecting internal instability. There is a desire among many to communicate that the country is normal and decent, but from state sources the messages are aggressive and fascistic.

Hard Edge: Underneath the soft power glow, the Russian mega-event decade introduced new security and surveillance technologies that remained after the events, to be directed at domestic opposition. In the USA, mega-events are classified as a National Special Security Event, coordinating security at the federal level and expanding surveillance at the expense of civil rights. Concentrating police powers bodes ill, particularly as ICE paramilitary troops continue their repressions and arrests, brutalizing opposition figures, and executing people.

Grift: In Russia, the mega-event decade was breathtakingly corrupt, siphoning huge sums from nationwide construction projects to distribute in exchange for loyalty. The American situation appears different, since hosting relies largely on existing infrastructures, reducing the opportunities for grift on new construction. Yet the Trump regime is famously self-dealing and corrupt, and it remains to be seen how they will capitalize on the American mega-event decade.

Hosting mega-events during an attempt to consolidate authoritarianism reveals a paradox: the fascist-authoritarian project is built on fearing and hating the world, but hosting mega-events means welcoming that same world. The Russian mega-event decade was a poignant experience for many who – unable to stop their country's descent into autocracy, war, and political isolation – rejoiced in the last gasps of international camaraderie and celebration. For them, the memories remain as a reminder of the "normal" country they could have had. In the USA, the situation is not yet so dire, but each day brings more state instability, more norms shattered, and more institutions hollowed out. As the American mega-event decade continues, it is worth remembering the Russian example. Sporting celebration does not suspend political projects, and indeed may in fact play a role in dismantling democracy.



Dr. Sven Daniel Wolfe

Assistant Professor and Chair of Social and Cultural Geography at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. He is author of More Than Sport: Soft Power and Potemkinism in the 2018 Men's Football World Cup in Russia (2021, Lit Verlag), and editor of The Hard Edge of Soft Power: Mega-Events, Geopolitics, and Making Nations Great Again (2025, Palgrave).

How did the United States use the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup for political ends?



Dr. Kyle R. King

*Associate Professor of English and Communication Arts & Sciences, Penn State Altoona. His research on sport rhetoric, media, and literature has been published in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *Present Tense*, *Communication & Sport*, and *International Journal of Sport Communication*, and he has published reviews and public-facing scholarship at *The Conversation*, *The Common Reader*, *Sport in American History*, and elsewhere. He teaches courses in the sport humanities, rhetorical studies, writing studies, and contemporary literature.*

This essay opens with a key premise: Host nations use sporting megaevents as a political tool for domestic and/or international audiences.

Recently, this phenomenon has been labelled “sportswashing,” a term which dates to 2015 critiques of Azerbaijan’s efforts to host the European Games as a distraction from its human rights record but found its apotheosis in the 2022 FIFA Men’s World Cup in Qatar. Sport sociologist Jules Boykoff defines sportswashing as “a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front.” For Boykoff, sportswashing has both domestic and international audiences, and its history dates to the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, as an attempt to launder Nazism onto the world stage.

I do not want to get bogged down into ongoing academic debates about “sportswashing”: how it is similar to or different from other “-washing” metaphors; how it is similar to or different from other terms such as “sport diplomacy” or “soft power”; or, as scholars working from postcolonial perspectives have argued, whether “sportswashing”—as an allegation—is an imperialist and Eurocentric invention designed to denigrate and Otherize ascendant non-Western nations.

Instead, I simply wish to turn the lens onto my own home nation: How did the United States’ reputation change before and during the 2026 FIFA Men’s World Cup? How did the nation’s leaders attempt to use the World Cup for political purposes?

The Trump administration has not enjoyed a strong standing internationally. A June 2026 Pew Research Report indicated that most nations’ belief in the United States as a credible partner has sharply declined since 2022. Trade tariffs, needlessly cruel anti-immigration policies that have caused tourism to decline, and hostility toward traditional allies demonstrate “America First” ideology. Matching that rhetoric, Trump pitched the United States as a host for future men’s World Cups—but not as a co-host with Canada and Mexico.

Policy surrounding the event seemed chaotic and incoherent. In April, Amnesty International issued a “World Cup travel advisory” cautioning visitors about the risks of visiting the United States. Although an expensive \$15,000 bond requirement for visitors was waived for most entrants in May, after reports that hotels and tickets remained significantly underbooked compared to expectations, the country’s capricious anti-immigration policies continued to make headlines. Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan was denied permission to enter the country to officiate with little explanation, and no Haitian or Iranian fans were granted visas to enter the

country. The United States became the first country to host a World Cup while in an active military conflict with a fellow participant, and the Iranian team was forced into inequitable travel arrangements compared to other teams. The combination of FIFA’s dynamic ticket pricing and expensive U.S. travel logistics has meant that games have primarily been attended by the well-to-do. Eleven U.S. host cities face a collective shortfall of up to \$250 million for logistical expenses, even as FIFA stands to make record profits on the event.

Which is to say: The FIFA Men’s World Cup in the United States looked a lot like the current United States—a “K-shaped” social event that matches our K-shaped economy and K-shaped society.

It was difficult for U.S. President Donald Trump to make political use of the World Cup. Although Trump gladly accepted FIFA President Gianni Infantino’s offer of a “FIFA Peace Prize” in December 2025, he told the New York Post he would not pay the high ticket prices to attend a match. Trump was the rare political leader not to attend his home nation’s matches while hosting the event. Soccer’s purported ideal of cosmopolitan internationalism across social classes does not square with President Trump’s America First political ideology or golf-, football-, and martial arts-focused sporting ideology. Indeed, he counterprogrammed the World Cup with a UFC card held on the South Lawn of the White House for his 80th birthday.

President Trump’s only attempt to get involved on behalf of the United States occurred when he lobbied Infantino to overturn USMNT striker Folarin Balogun’s one-game ban for a red card in the lead-up to their round of 16 match against Belgium. This type of one-on-one favor trading and lobbying, adopted from the business world, is central to what public policy scholar Don Moynihan has labelled “the personalist presidency” of Trump’s executive branch. Predictably, FIFA’s unprecedented overturn of the ban drew accusations of political favoritism, while reinforcing perceptions of Trump as—in the words of sportswriter Rick Reilly, on President Trump’s actions while golfing—the “Commander in Cheat.” As the visual epitome reinforcing perceptions of President Trump as a self-centered leader who lacks self-awareness, the World Cup final concluded with Trump lingering onstage during Spain’s celebrations, as Infantino desperately tried to usher him away.

In short: The 2026 FIFA Men’s World Cup did not change the United States’ reputation abroad or cut through social and political division at home. If anything, it has simply reinforced the perception of Donald Trump as a singular U.S. president, willing to act unlike any of his predecessors.

Leaving more than a jersey: the rhetorical power of the Iranian national football team's letter

In the lead up to the first kick at the World Cup 2026, news media in the United States focused on several political issues. One of the stories making headlines was the role that U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement might play in disrupting the event. And, with the U.S. and Iran embroiled in a deadly military conflict in that country, there were questions about whether Iran would even come to the U.S. to participate. Although the team was one of the first to qualify, on state television in March, Iranian Sports Minister Ahmad Donyamali said, "Considering that this corrupt regime has assassinated our leader, under no circumstances can we participate in the World Cup." But, in April, FIFA Chief Gianni Infantino confirmed that Iran would be participating, adding that, "...of course Iran will play in the United States of America." But, just days before the WC began, Iran was disallowed by the U.S. government from staying in the country. They were welcomed by Mexico where they stayed and commuted to their matches in the United States.

Once the Cup began on June 11, U.S. audiences who sat in front of their screen and watched matches on the Fox television and Fox Sports networks, saw very little in-depth reporting on these pre-tournament political concerns. One story that did garner media attention was a note left in a locker room after a game. The handwritten letter, purportedly discovered by a cleaning crew, was left by Iran's national football team in the locker room at SoFi Stadium after their scoreless draw with Belgium. The note thanked the city of Los Angeles for its hospitality and concluded with a call for "peace, respect and friendship among all nations." The message was significant because it emerged amid the previously mentioned heightened political tensions between the U.S. and Iran, as well as the restrictions that forced the team to base itself in Tijuana, Mexico.

Perhaps one of the reasons the letter drew a lot of positive attention is that, in a media landscape dominated by carefully curated social media messaging, a handwritten letter left in a locker room appears almost quaint. Yet the medium and location are central to the letter's rhetorical power. Using the metaphor of actors performing in a play, sociologist Erving Goffman theorized that individuals publicly perform socially appropriate roles like actors on a stage in front of an audience. Staying with the metaphor, Goffman says we tend to reserve more authentic expressions for backstage settings away from the public. For athletes, the locker room functions as a protected backstage space reserved for candid interaction and team identity. By leaving a public message in this private environment, the Iranian team blurred the boundary between front stage and backstage, inviting audiences to interpret the letter as a more authentic expression than a conventional, formal public statement.

The words on the page were handwritten in blue ink with a few exceptions. First were two red hearts – one above the word Iran in the sentence, "the spirit of iran (sic) remains alive and steadfast." A second heart appeared over the last word in the letter – nations. Two other items in the letter appeared in red ink and were the only political elements in the note: #168 and #minab. These were references to the school bombing at the start of the war.

Prior to the start of each match in this year's Cup, giant flags from the two national teams who were competing were displayed on the field, emphasizing the fact that these events are nation focused. Flag displays at sporting events inherently carry political weight, often serving as powerful symbols of national identity, ideology, or social movements. Unlike a giant flag, the one-page letter was a powerful symbol as well. It became a media event reported internationally and generated goodwill that political leaders often struggle to achieve. The Iranian team lacked formal diplomatic power, but through the visibility provided by the World Cup stage, the letter became a symbolic act of unofficial diplomacy. The post-match gesture can be viewed as a powerful rhetorical performance that temporarily reframed Iran's public image, challenging prevailing political narratives surrounding Iran.

While one line in the letter thanked the city of Los Angeles for its hospitality, conveying courtesy and appreciation, the overall message was far from self-effacing. The opening declares, "From the ancient Persia of thousands of years ago to the civilized iran (sic) of today, the spirit of iran (sic) remains alive and steadfast." It continues, "We came to Los Angeles with pride, competed with honor, and leave with dignity." Rather than minimizing the team's accomplishments or identity, the letter presents the players as confident representatives of a nation with a long history and enduring cultural identity. The rhetoric balances gratitude toward the host city with an unmistakable affirmation of national pride.

The message reinforced values associated with international sport – respect, friendship, and peaceful competition. Unlike many athlete protests that seek to challenge domestic political institutions, the Iranian team's letter pursued a different rhetorical objective. Rather than confronting authority, it sought identification with an international audience through universally accepted values. This distinction helps explain why the letter generated comparatively little backlash despite emerging from an intensely political context.



Dr. Mark A. Mederson

Assistant Professor of Electronic Media at Texas State University. He came to academia after a long career in television and documentary film. His research focuses on media coverage of sports and athletes – particularly athletes and race. He enjoys analyzing media texts to determine how producers have chosen to frame stories.

Football solidarity and Palestinian imagination of liberation and justice



Dr. Nadia Naser-Najjab

Senior Lecturer in Palestine Studies at the European Centre for Palestine Studies (ECPS), Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter. She serves as Director of ECPS and Director of the MA Palestine Studies programme. Her research is grounded in firsthand experience and original data collection, with focus on settler colonialism, resistance, and the lived realities of Palestinians.

Email: N.naser-najjab@exeter.ac.uk

Website: nadia-naser.com

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/nadia-naser-najjab-3000686a](https://www.linkedin.com/in/nadia-naser-najjab-3000686a)

Sport in any colonial context functions as a mechanism of control and exclusion and as a site of resistance. Mahmoud Darwish understood football as a mode of resistance, a symbolic arena in which the “unequal balance of power between Great powers and small States” could be momentarily overturned. When Argentina won the 1986 World Cup against England, Darwish considered that Diego Maradona humbled the arrogance of Britain over the 1982 Falkland Islands war. In his words, Maradona “was bringing the island back to Argentina and calling the attention of the British Empire that it was still resting on the laurels of the distant past.”

For Darwish, football became “an outburst of patriotism,” a form of self-expression for those denied political voice. Football thus offered “a present freedom of expression absent elsewhere, or a sovereignty seeking to maintain its dominance.”

For Palestinians, sport has long been a vehicle for asserting national identity and a form of resisting colonisation and dispossession. In the words of one national team player, “even if we do not score goals, it is enough that we represent Palestine, football unites us as players are from all parts of historical Palestine.”

That sense of unity extended across the Arab world and became visible during the 2026 World Cup, when Egypt’s coach Hossam Hassan sparked regional debate by raising the Palestinian flag after Egypt reached the Round of 16, a gesture celebrated by Arabs and Palestinians but condemned by Israel. Days later, on 7 July, an Israeli strike killed Mohammed al-Wahidi, a respected Palestinian community leader who had been central to relief efforts in Gaza and to organizing public World Cup screenings that brought rare joy to thousands. Many Palestinians and Arabs interpreted his killing as a retaliatory message following Hassan’s public show of solidarity. The match between Argentina and Egypt became a political contest. When Argentina defeated Egypt, Arab spectators challenged the result and accused FIFA of favoritism and racism. These claims, whether grounded or not, placed Palestinian narratives and exposed their endured suffering on the international stage.

Palestinians have faced systematic exclusion from organized sport since the Mandate era, when Zionist athletes established the Palestine Football Association in 1928, joined FIFA the following year, and claimed to represent Palestine while marginalizing Palestinian participation. The Nakba destroyed or colonized existing clubs, expelled athletes, and cleared space for the new Israeli state. After 1967, every Palestinian sporting initiative in the West Bank and Gaza required military orders and permits. Oslo added new layers of fragmentation, movement restrictions, checkpoints, and the apartheid wall and repeated incursions all undermined sporting life.

Since October 7, 2023, the scale of devastation has been unprecedented as stadiums, clubs, training grounds, and the sport headquarters have been destroyed. Yarmouk Stadium was turned into an internment site where detainees were blindfolded

and stripped. In the first two months, Israel killed 85 athletes, including 55 footballers, among them Mohammed Barakat, the “legend of Khan Younis.” On 6 August 2025, former national team player Sulieman al-Obeid, known as the “Palestinian Pelé,” was killed while waiting for food under conditions of severe starvation.

The assault on sporting spaces extends across the West Bank. The restriction on movement is augmented with more than 925 obstacles between checkpoints, gates, and roadblocks. Consequently, the 12,500-capacity Al Ram Stadium, established in 2008, stands closed today. Many athletes are targeted and arrested.

However, and despite these challenges, sport has remained a vital arena of Palestinian resistance. Even in Gaza, amid rubble and displacement, young Palestinians are reclaiming space and agency through urban fitness practices such as street workouts and parkour, acts of defiance, affirming Palestinian presence and refusing erasure. They formed the Palestine Amputee Football National Team and organized The Hope Championship for Amputee Football in November 2025.

Since the 1948 Nakba, Palestinians rebuilt sporting life in refugee camps by forming teams and naming clubs after the cities and villages from which they were expelled, using football to preserve continuity, memory, and national identity. The PLO later formalized this relationship and it also aligned Palestinian resistance with global anticolonial movements that had translated into growing international solidarity. During the 2022 World Cup, fans displayed Palestinian flags, raised “Free Palestine” banners, and refused interviews with Israeli media, echoing the BDS slogan, “Love Football. Hate Apartheid.” The 2026 World Cup has seen similar expressions of solidarity, with supporters condemning Israel’s ongoing assault on Gaza and activists covering an official FIFA sign with a massive banner reading, “Kick Israel out of FIFA,” accusing the organization of sportswashing and violating its own statutes. Palestinian defiance endures through transnational solidarity. Across the world, football teams have celebrated their victories by raising Palestinian flags, chanting in support of Palestine, and dedicating their qualifications to Palestinians. These gestures translate the meaning of collective resistance into the global sporting arena and offer Palestinians moments of recognition, dignity, and hope.

Such acts of solidarity help sustain the imagination of liberation and justice, affirming that Palestinian struggle resonates far beyond the borders imposed upon it. This is why Palestinians in Gaza gather on the rubble or from the tents to watch the World Cup, celebrating the victories of teams that raise their flag or speak their name, finding in those moments a sense of visibility and shared humanity. Palestinian symbols such as the keffiyeh have become global emblems of resistance, transformed into a political statement against oppression and for universal justice.

The Colombian National Team, Political Tensions, and National Identity

Much has been written about the relationship between soccer and nationality. One could say it is the favorite topic of social studies of sports. Soccer can create a kind of symbolic and emotional unity when national teams compete in various types of tournaments. It seems that social, cultural, and political differences are temporarily set aside, and a powerful emotional bond is forged among individuals from the same country. There appears to be no dispute about this. Soccer matches between national teams from different countries foster a sense of internal identity thanks to the external reference point of an opponent.

This seems to be exacerbated during World Cup matches, when emotional fervor reaches levels higher than in any other soccer tournament. It is true that the media, corporate advertising, and governments are effective vehicles for national reaffirmation through soccer. Historical and geopolitical tensions provide an excellent crucible for the expression of nationalism, as well as for alignments and solidarity among like-minded groups from different nations. Emotion and memory form the foundation of national soccer identity, while communication, consumption, and politics serve as its catalysts at various levels and intensities.

The resonant moments of national identity experienced during the World Cup season tend to be fleeting and are merely the flip side of internal tensions. It can be said that in societies with high social integration and low political polarization, the resonance of soccer effectively renews national bonds, whereas this effectiveness reaches its limit in socially and politically fragmented societies. This would suggest that the relationship between soccer and national identity varies according to the level of integration or fragmentation found in a specific society, and that this relationship is often presented as a strategic marketing ploy or a matter of political interest.

Colombia is an example of this. While national soccer identity is promoted primarily by the media and various national and transnational business sectors, the Colombian national soccer team becomes a silent object of cultural and political contention. The presidential election in Colombia takes place every four years and coincides with the World Cup, which means that the symbolic momentum generated by the national team's participation in the World Cup (of course, when it manages to qualify for the tournament) is caught up in social and political tensions.

This has occurred with particular intensity since 2014, when the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos began negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's oldest and most powerful guerrilla group at the time. The negotiations and subsequent peace agreement between the government and this

illegal armed group led to political division among the elites and within Colombian society, and it was with this that the Colombian national team ceased to embody the idea of national identity as it had done during its World Cup appearances in 1962 (Chile), 1990 (Italy), 1994 (U.S.), and 1998 (France).

In the 2014 (Brazil), 2018 (Russia), and 2026 (U.S./Canada/Mexico) World Cups, the Colombian national team's participation provided a framework for the public expression of the political tensions that emerged at that time. During the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the national team's strong performance was framed within the expectations and hopes that a broad sector of Colombian society held regarding the peace negotiations, equating the athletic and moral virtues of the national team's players with the benefits that a successful outcome of the negotiations with the FARC would bring for the country's future. At that time, the Colombian national team became the focal point of the discourse on the future disseminated by a specific sector of Colombian society.

During the 2018 World Cup in Russia, the first cracks in the peace agreement signed two years earlier and the rising number of murders of social leaders and peace signatories toward the end of Juan Manuel Santos's administration were framed within a pessimistic vision of the future of Colombian society that aligned discursively with the Colombian national team's modest results, all of this taking place during that year's electoral process, which would result in Iván Duque's victory. Sectors critical of the peace negotiations and the implementation of the agreements saw the Colombian national soccer team as a useful platform to communicate and seek to impose a specific vision of the country's future course. The Colombian national team's qualification for the 2026 World Cup came amid a deeply divided society following the so-called "social uprising" in 2021 and intense political struggles during the country's first-ever leftist administration, led by President Gustavo Petro (2022–2026). A key development in the 2026 election was that one of the frontrunners for the presidency (and eventual winner)—a critic of the left-wing government and a representative of the country's new right—successfully appropriated the national team's jersey as a symbol of his political campaign and governing platform. Ultimately, it is very possible that, both now and in the near future, the Colombian national soccer team will be identified with that political sector, and that national identity will consist solely of the particular vision of a political faction in power.



Prof. Jorge Ruiz Patiño

*Sociologist and Professor at Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia (Colombia), where he teaches sociological theory. He holds an MA in Political Studies from the Pontifical Javeriana University (Colombia) and a PhD in Social Science Research (Sociology) from the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO, Mexico). His research focuses on the sociology and cultural history of leisure, sport, and tourism. He is the author of *La política del sport. Élite y deporte en la construcción de la nación colombiana, 1903–1925* (2010) and *Las desesperantes horas de ocio. Tiempo y diversión en Bogotá, 1849–1900* (2021).*

Email: jorge.ruiz@unad.edu.co; jorge5ruiz@yahoo.com.mx

Palestine: The 49th Team at the 2026 World Cup



Dr. Jules Boykoff

is the author of *Red Card: The 2026 World Cup, Sportswashing, and the FIFA Greed Machine* (OR Books, 2026) and *Kicking* (Duke University Press, 2026), a memoir about his former life as a professional soccer player and his current life as a critical academic of sport. He teaches political science at Pacific University. On Bluesky: @julesboykoff.bsky.social.

“While watching the World Cup,” legal scholar and public intellectual Khaled Beydoun implored, “do not look past [the] view from Gaza.” Although Palestine’s national team did not qualify for the 2026 World Cup, many people took Beydoun’s advice seriously, coming together to make sure that the ongoing suffering in Gaza was woven through the political texture of the tournament. Not only did they refuse to “look past [the] view from Gaza,” they made Palestine the forty-ninth team at the World Cup.

The World Cup transpired against the grim backdrop of what the International Association of Genocide Scholars, the United Nations, and Amnesty International have all concluded is Israel’s “genocide” in Gaza. Sport scholars have described the situation as “athleticide,” which involves “the obliteration of athletics through the killing, disabling, arrest, or detention of athletes, coaches, staff, officials, and administrators and the destruction of athletic infrastructure and history.” More than 1,000 Palestinian athletes have been killed by Israel since the genocide began, including Suleiman Al-Obeid, known as “Palestinian Pelé.” (When UEFA, the governing body for European football, posted on X, “Farewell to Suleiman al-Obeid, the ‘Palestinian Pelé.’ A talent who gave hope to countless children, even in the darkest of times,” Egyptian star Mohamed Salah clapped back, “Can you tell us how he died, where, and why?” Salah’s post garnered 1.5 million likes.)

At the 2026 World Cup, fans from numerous countries flew the Palestinian flag before, during, and after matches. Although FIFA banned the pre-revolutionary Iran flag inside stadiums, the world’s governing body for soccer permitted the Palestinian flag since it is the official, approved flag of a FIFA member association.

Fans from Bosnia and Herzegovina were in the vanguard of expressing support for Palestine and opposition to genocide. Both outside and inside stadiums across North America, Bosnian supporters chanted “Free Palestine” and “Palestina,” choreographed with thunderous clapping.

“We can obviously relate to what they’re going through, because our country went through it as well,” explained a Bosnian living in the U.S., adding, “We want to see justice for Palestine and for the violence to end. It isn’t in the news as much now, but we want to remind people that the Palestinians are still living through this every day.” Another Bosnian fan noted, “There’s a mutual traumatic experience. I think they’re going through the same things that we went through. So, we’ll never forget them. We’ll always be there for them.”

It wasn’t just Bosnians—with their own genocide still visible in the rearview mirror of history—who advocated for Palestinian rights and freedom. European football supporters from Scotland, Spain, and Turkey also boosted

Palestine, as did fans from Qatar, Iraq, Iran, and numerous African countries such as Senegal, Egypt, and Morocco. When Jordan played Algeria, kaffiyehs were in abundance. “The scarves were everywhere, and with an unmistakable Palestinian accent,” according to the *New York Times*. “Draped on the shoulders of fans, or wrapped around their heads, they were symbols of Palestinian solidarity.” Ahead of the Iran-Egypt match, one fan outside the stadium dressed up as the Statue of Liberty, waving flags for Palestine and Lebanon while demanding “freedom” for both nations.

Egypt coach Hossam Hassan transported this spirit onto the actual pitch. After Egypt’s historic knockout-round win over Australia, Hassan celebrated by displaying a Palestinian flag. Afterwards, he stated, “May God grant them [the Palestinians] victory, may God have mercy on their martyrs...I’m dedicating this victory to the Egyptian people and Palestinian people, those kind and honorable people.”

Hassan also beseeched the world to do more for the Palestinian cause. Ahead of Egypt’s round-of-16 match against Argentina, he said, “If a person anywhere in the world does not feel for the Palestinian people, then they have lost part of their humanity.” The coach added, “Before being Arab, Muslim, Christian or anything else, I am a human being. Through football—the world’s soft power—I want to send a message: please let the Palestinian people live. I ask athletes and journalists everywhere to help deliver that message.” Hassan concluded, “When people speak about human rights, animal rights, and justice, we should also speak about Palestinian civilians.”

FIFA itself could abide this message. Ahead of the 2026 World Cup, FIFA issued two long-awaited decisions on formal complaints made by the Palestinian Football Association against the Israel Football Association (IFA). The first was over the IFA staging matches on illegally annexed land in the West Bank, while the second concerned racist behavior by supporters of Israeli soccer club Beitar Jerusalem FC (whose ultras are infamous for chanting “Death to Arabs” and lines like, “I don’t care how many and how they will get killed / Eliminating Arabs makes me thrilled”). In the former, FIFA essentially—and quizzically—claimed the matter was too complicated while in the latter it issued a weak penalty for the IFA: a “warning,” a trifling fine, and a requirement “to display in its next three A-level FIFA competition matches at home a significant and highly visible banner with the words ‘Football United the World—No to Discrimination’ alongside the Israeli Football Association’s logo.”

Where FIFA fell down on the job, fans, players, and a coach stepped up at the 2026 World Cup, using football as a vehicle for remembrance, for social justice.

Life without the World Cup: Football in Hungary's political transition

On November 16, 2025, at the last game of the group stages for World Cup qualification, Ireland scored a decisive goal against Hungary in the last minute of the game and won 3-2, leaving Hungarian players and fans stunned, as hopes had been high before the game that the 40-year wait for FIFA World Cup participation would be over.

The result sparked immediate debates. Over the previous 15 years, Viktor Orbán's right-wing populist government poured substantial funds into football through various direct and indirect channels. The aim was multiple: qualification to major tournaments by the national team, Hungarian clubs reaching the group stages of European cups, a more competitive national league, improved facilities, increased attendance at league and national team games, hosting high-profile international events, and a strong network of football academies, producing high-level talent and top league players for export.

The state support of sports in general, and football in particular can also be marked by the launch of a public sports TV channel (M4 Sport) in 2015, and the nationalization of the daily sports newspaper, Nemzeti Sport in 2022. These outlets remained supportive of the government all through the 16 years, often comparing the previous, left-liberal government with Orbán's right-wing populist regime in terms of the state subsidization of sports. Indeed, the share of (mainly elite) sport funding exceeded 2% of the annual budget between 2016 and 2020 and remained over 1.5% afterwards (the EU average remained below 1% for the period), and football was clearly the main beneficiary. Therefore, over the 16 years of the Orbán regime, football remained a politically symbolic terrain, where all the good and bad results became interpreted in various ways, especially because Orbán is admittedly an ardent football fan and the ways in which the sport was financed and developed seemed to be based on his personal preference, vision, and individual decisions.

Contrary to previous years, when the regime kept winning elections by great margins, in 2025, the political implications of the football failure became more pertinent, as a strong opposition party with a real chance to defeat the ruling party had emerged, and the 2026 elections were expected to be a closer call than ever. Under such circumstances, World Cup qualification or, at least, making it to the playoffs would have meant not only rational legitimization of the spendings on football, but a feel-good atmosphere much needed by the regime as well.

During the weeks that followed the Ireland game, serious efforts were made to explain the situation to the public, including multiple editorials in Nemzeti Sport by György Szöllősi, editor-in-chief and long-term fan of Orbán, and

notably, a studio debate on M4 Sport dramatically titled, "Is there life after death?," with the participation of a coach/former international player and the Prime Minister himself. Their claims were straightforward. The last-minute slip was a misfortune and had nothing to do with systemic issues in the sport. On the other hand, critics called for structural reforms and personal changes, claiming that the entire subculture was rotting from inside. So, when the final whistle was blown at the Ireland game, the uncomfortable question whether the state money spent on football was well spent, emerged on the public agenda.

In 2026, the months leading up to the parliamentary elections were intense, and the public discourse of sports did not remain intact. Nemzeti Sport openly promoted the petition for the future of Hungarian sport in support of the government and threatened that a new government would pull most of the funding and spend it on other sectors. The outcome of the election is well known: a landslide victory by the TISZA party, echoing in the newsrooms of major international media outlets.

The end of the story could not be more ironic. Although the UEFA Champions League final was hosted in Budapest, it was the new Prime Minister, Péter Magyar, who could sit in the VIP section, while Orbán was gazing on the game from a different part of the Puskás Arena. And, as he was on his way to the U.S. to watch the two semifinals and the final of the World Cup, on July 14, the new two-third parliament majority of the TISZA party amended the constitution in a way that he could never again return to power and MPs with 12 years of service would not be eligible to run at the elections again. Parallel to this, ETO FC Győr, champions of Hungary, were relegated in the first round of the UEFA Champions League by losing to the champion of Iceland, but the editor-in-chief of Nemzeti Sport did not have to explain the loss, as he had been fired from his position a week before.

Now, whether the money spent on football was well spent still remains a question, even if some figures and results do tell a story. But, at least, the professional and the media discourse is liberated, and proper debates can begin, which might after all, help football people surpass the timeless declaration by Ferenc Puskás, "Little money, little football. Big money, big football."



Dr. Tamás Dóczi

Associate professor at the Hungarian University of Sports Science, Budapest, Hungary. His research includes sport and globalization, the relationship of sport and identity, the role of sport in public diplomacy, and the media representation of athletes.

Email: doczi.tamas@tf.hu



Dr. Dunja Antunovic

Associate Professor of Sport Sociology at the School of Kinesiology at the University of Minnesota, USA. Her research focuses on the mediated visibility of women's sports and on cross-national comparisons of international sport coverage.

Email: dunjaant@umn.edu

The changing forms of protest at the FIFA 2026 World Cup



Carole Gomez

Graduate assistant at the Institute of Sport Sciences at the University of Lausanne (ISSUL), where she is pursuing a PhD. Her research examines how international sports federations address gender-based violence, particularly through the lens of harassment and abuse, within their respective sports. She is particularly interested in the development and use of the concept of “safeguarding.”

No two FIFA World Cups are ever quite alike. The 2022 tournament in Qatar was marked by widespread criticism over migrant workers' rights, human rights, and the treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community, prompting boycotts and public protests from football actors and civil society organisations. The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup, co-hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, appears as a striking contrast. Although the international context remains highly complex, protests seem to appear fewer and far less visible. But is it really the case? Rather than fading away, contestation seems to have evolved, taking new forms and involving different actors. While calls for boycotts were largely absent, protests instead emerged through individual football figures, civil society organizations highlighting domestic issues, and institutional actors challenging the governance of the tournament.

First, whereas several European national teams had taken visible positions during the 2022 World Cup (through public statements, symbolic messages on their shirts, or the #OneLove armband), such collective mobilization had largely disappeared by 2026. For instance, Germany, one of the most outspoken teams in Qatar, remained noticeably more discreet, following calls from sporting director Rudi Völler to keep football and politics separate. The silence surrounding the exclusion of Somali referee Omar Artan, denied entry into the United States, further illustrated this shift.

However, political contestation had not disappeared. Three examples could illustrate it. Iran's participation was repeatedly questioned following the launch of armed conflict initiated by the United States and Israel against Tehran on February 28, 2026. After relocating its training base to Mexico, the team encountered visa refusals affecting members of its technical staff as well as restrictions on internal travel before matches. The Iranian Football Federation subsequently announced its intention to file a complaint with FIFA. A second example came from Egypt. Head coach Hossam Hassan appeared on the pitch holding a Palestinian flag, dedicating the victory “to our Palestinian brothers.” During a post-match press conference, he urged the international community not to turn away from the situation in Gaza. Several rounds later, Argentine players reignited diplomatic tensions between Buenos Aires and London by displaying a banner reading “Las Malvinas son argentinas” following their victory over England, recalling the enduring dispute stemming from the 1982 War. While FIFA's Task Force, chaired by Andrew Giuliani, a close ally of President Trump, considered that no disciplinary action was warranted, the British government nevertheless called on FIFA to investigate.

Second, the mobilization of institutions and civil society organizations has been particularly noteworthy. Considering the high cost of tickets, the issue of pricing has become a subject of controversy. Whilst Spanish striker Borja Iglesias,

well known for his public engagement on political issues, has criticized the exorbitant ticket prices, it is above all the mobilization of various institutions that has been interesting to follow. After unsuccessfully calling on FIFA in December 2025 to intervene, Football Supporters Europe (FSE) lodged a formal complaint before the European Commission, accusing FIFA of excessive pricing, opaque and unfair ticketing procedures, and abuse of its dominant market position. Initially pursued within the European legal framework, these claims soon found an echo in the U.S. when the Attorneys General of New York and New Jersey launched an investigation only days before the tournament began, thereby shifting these protests into the courtroom. Equally significant was the important mobilization of the NGO FairSquare, which has closely monitored FIFA's governance for several years. Through its “Reboot FIFA” campaign, the organization called for comprehensive governance reforms and simultaneously filed a complaint before FIFA's Ethics Committee concerning the circumstances surrounding the attribution of the FIFA Peace Prize, awarded to President Trump in December 2025. FairSquare's demands for greater transparency received support from the Norwegian Football Federation as well as from fifty Members of the European Parliament in the weeks preceding the tournament.

Finally, protests were taking place outside the stadiums. Rather than directly opposing the organization of the World Cup itself, they used the tournament as an opportunity to amplify domestic issues before a global audience. Although demonstrations within the United States had initially generated considerable concern, particularly because of fears of clashes involving Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), it was ultimately Mexico that witnessed the most visible protests. In the weeks leading up to the opening match at Mexico City's Estadio Azteca, teachers organized large-scale strikes and demonstrations demanding higher wages. At the same time, Mexican civil society groups continued campaigning for justice for the country's disappeared persons. Among the most innovative initiatives was the production and distribution of redesigned Panini sticker albums, replacing the traditional football players with photographs of missing individuals. This powerful visual campaign sought to attract both national and international media attention to one of Mexico's most pressing human rights issues.

Ultimately, the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup was far from devoid of protest. Rather, it seems to reveal changing forms of contestation. Calls for boycotts (whose effectiveness had been limited in previous tournaments) gave way to more fragmented, diversified, and strategically targeted forms of mobilization. This evolution reminds us that mega-sporting events continue to constitute privileged arenas for political expression, where geopolitical tensions, governance disputes, and domestic social struggles intersect through constantly evolving repertoires of collective action.

Setting the welcome mat on fire

The United States, which co-hosted with Mexico and Canada the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup (FMWC), seemed like an odd location for an international sporting event that would welcome teams from 48 countries given the Trump Administration's approach to immigration. The U.S. had started a war with Iran in February 2026, 25% of the participating countries are restricted from traveling to the United States, and President Trump has been openly hostile towards Muslim majority and African nations for years.

Additionally, the Trump Administration presented an anti-immigrant front on multiple levels, including several lawsuits in front of the Supreme Court attempting to deport legally protected immigrants and to make it harder for refugees to claim asylum in the United States. There were multiple crackdowns on immigrants which included imprisonment in detention camps in the United States and el Salvador and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) occupation of major cities. ICE officers have killed multiple people during deployments in Chicago, Minneapolis, Houston, and Los Angeles. In attempt to increase deportation numbers, enforcement of policies included arresting anyone who looked "foreign", as opposed to targeting undocumented individuals who had committed crimes. Individuals who were legally living in the United States were arrested and detained by ICE. ICE occupations, arrests, and killings led to clashes with neighborhood patrol groups, and the kidnapping of people at their jobs and homes. After two white U.S. citizens, Alex Pretti and Renee Good were killed in Minneapolis in January 2026, athletes representing the United States at the 2026 Milan/Cortina Olympics distanced themselves from supporting the brutal treatment of immigrants, because these actions did not align with their interpretation of American values.

The attention on these actions towards immigrants is in stark contrast to previous major events where hosts have engaged in sportswashing by distracting from negative actions undertaken by their government. Sportswashing uses hosting of major sporting events to hide disreputable behavior under the banner of being good international citizens. For instance, Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics while having some of the world's most oppressive anti-LGBT laws (even a plotline on the popular 2025 television series *Heated Rivalry*). Russia waited until after the 2014 Olympics concluded to invade its neighbor Ukraine. The Qatar 2022 FMWC took place amid massive human rights violations towards migrants in the country. In 2026, instead of positioning itself as a welcoming host, the immigration enforcement and rhetoric of President Trump prior to and during the tournament promoted an environment that was dangerous and unwelcoming towards

immigrants and, by extension, tourists participating in and supporting their national team in the World Cup.

This confluence of anti-immigration actions in the United States sent the message that the U.S. was not a safe place to travel for immigrants or most racialized minorities. Instead of presenting a positive view of the United States, these oppressive practices were magnified during the 2026 FMWC because there were frequent stories of negative treatment of participants, particularly those representing African countries and/or Muslim majority nations. A decorated Somali referee was denied entry to the U.S., an Iraqi player was detained in Chicago for several hours when entering the United States, and more than 40 Moroccan supporters were denied entry after they had purchased tickets and made travel arrangements to attend FMWC games. Most notably, the Iranian team was forced to commute from Mexico to Los Angeles for the tournament because of the ongoing U.S.-Iran War. They were the only team who could not stay near their stadium during the group stage. These examples and more contrast with how nations frequently use major international sporting events as an opportunity to showcase and drive interest in their country through sportswashing. This approach might be unique to President Trump and his authoritarian leadership style, or part of a larger trend by FIFA and other international sports bodies to partner with oppressive regimes, as opposed to more democratic ones. This approach to being oppressive to guests for a major international sporting event raises questions about the humanitarian purpose of these events. While FIFA already wants to expand the number of teams in the 2030 FMWC, does this increase in teams include more protections for participants and fans? If the purpose of international sporting events is to promote international competition, is that possible when participants are treated differently based on their national identity or anti-immigration actions in the host nation?



Dr. Katherine L. Lavelle

is a Professor and Department Chair at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Department of Communication Studies. Her research focuses on national identity, gender, and activism in sport, particularly women's sports. She can be reached at

Email: klavelle@uwlax.edu.

More than a game: Athletes between performance and political communication



Dr. Jana Wiske

Professor of resort journalism and public relations at the Ansbach University of Applied Sciences, Germany. Prior to this she worked as a sports journalist for kicker-sportmagazin for 15 years, covering a range of events including the Olympics. She continues to work as freelance writer and advises in crisis communication and personal branding in sports.

Twitter: @janchen_wi

Email: j.wiske@hs-ansbach.de

“We only want to play football”—this statement has become increasingly common among elite athletes competing on the world’s biggest sporting stages. Yet global events such as the 2026 FIFA World Cup no longer allow players to remain only athletes. Hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, the tournament unfolded in a highly politicized environment shaped by debates on migration, international conflicts, national identity, and global power relations. Press conferences frequently extended beyond tactics or performance, with players expected to comment on issues they neither initiated nor controlled.

Athletes have developed from performers into public communicators whose words—and increasingly their silence—influence public discourse, organizational reputation, and media narratives. Communication has become an integral component of professional sport rather than merely an accompanying activity.

Three cases from the World Cup illustrate different dimensions of political communication in elite sport. The Iranian national team became entangled in geopolitical conflict, U.S. striker Folarin Balogun found himself at the center of allegations of political interference in sporting governance, while Argentina’s players used their global visibility to communicate a political message after reaching the World Cup final.

Few teams experienced more difficult circumstances than Iran. The escalation of military conflict between the United States and Iran shortly before the tournament transformed the team’s participation into far more than a sporting challenge. Security concerns affected travel arrangements throughout the competition. The Iranian delegation was not permitted to stay overnight in the United States between matches and instead had to relocate repeatedly to neighboring host countries before travelling back for fixtures. Sporting preparation was therefore shaped by extraordinary logistical and political constraints.

The political situation also dominated media coverage. Questions about the conflict between the United States and Iran frequently overshadowed football itself, placing players in an impossible position. Any political statement carried risks—both internationally and at home. Criticism of the Iranian government could have consequences for relatives in Iran, while expressions of patriotism risked criticism from Western audiences.

This case illustrates an important principle of crisis communication. Silence should not automatically be interpreted as indifference. Instead, it may represent a deliberate communication strategy under conditions of considerable political pressure. Iranian footballers became political communicators not because they actively sought this role but because geopolitical conflict transformed every public appearance into a political event.

A different communication challenge emerged around U.S. striker Folarin Balogun. After receiving a red card during the tournament, Balogun initially appeared set to miss the knockout match against Belgium. However, the suspension was subsequently lifted, allowing him to play. Several international media outlets reported that the decision of FIFA may

have been influenced by political pressure from the U.S. Regardless of whether these reports reflected the actual decision-making process, media attention quickly shifted from football to questions concerning the independence of sporting governance and the potential influence of politics on international sport.

Balogun suddenly found himself at the center of an international controversy that he had not created. Rather than commenting on the political debate, he deliberately limited his public statements to football, emphasizing his focus on the team while avoiding speculation about the disciplinary decision. His response showed a delicate touch in handling the situation. Instead of shaping the political narrative, Balogun sought to protect both his credibility and his team’s preparation.

Political communication at the World Cup was not limited to situations imposed on athletes. In some cases, players actively used the tournament as a political platform. After defeating England in the semi-final, members of the Argentine national team celebrated with a banner declaring that “The Falkland Islands belong to Argentina.” The message referred to the long-standing territorial dispute between Argentina and the United Kingdom and immediately attracted worldwide media attention.

Although intended as an expression of national identity, the action blurred the boundaries between sporting success and political communication. International media debated whether football should serve as a stage for geopolitical messages or remain politically neutral. Once again the sporting achievement itself quickly became secondary to the political symbolism surrounding it.

Although the situations of Iran, Balogun, and Argentina differ fundamentally, they reveal the same underlying phenomenon: elite athletes increasingly compete in two arenas—on the pitch and in the public sphere. Political actors, journalists, and social media shape communication environments that extend far beyond sport itself. Athletes are expected not only to perform but also to respond appropriately to complex societal issues.

Traditional media training especially prepares athletes for interviews about tactics, preparation, or performance. Contemporary mega-events, however, require broader competencies. Players must increasingly understand crisis communication, stakeholder expectations, intercultural communication, and the political implications of public statements. They represent not only themselves but also clubs, sponsors, federations, and their countries.

The cases of Iran, Folarin Balogun, and Argentina demonstrate three distinct forms of political communication in elite sport: communication imposed by geopolitical conflict, communication triggered by political controversy, and communication initiated by athletes themselves. Preparing athletes for future mega-events should therefore no longer focus exclusively on physical, tactical, or psychological performance. Communication competence, particularly in politically sensitive environments, must become an essential element of athlete education. Only then will elite athletes be adequately prepared for the demands of modern international sport.

Section images:

Section 1:

The field at Azteca Stadium in Mexico City during the opening ceremony of the 2026 World Cup, CC BY-SA 4.0

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Section 2:

AI-generated visual concept / Unofficial FIFA World Cup 2026 VAR room render

Image credit: AI-generated visual concept

Section 2:

Dogs at Polls

Liam McLoughlin, University of Liverpool (<https://x.com/Leelum/status/1808812490135908446>)

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Uzbekistan vs. Colombia match at the 2026 FIFA Fan Fest in Mexico City, CC BY 4.0

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Section 4:

Referee Tori Penso during the FIFA World Cup 2026 Group E match between Ecuador and Germany on June 25, 2026, at MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford, New Jersey, CC BY-SA 4.0

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Section 6:

President Donald Trump speaks with Andrew Giuliani, FIFA President Gianni Infantino, FIFA senior adviser Carlos Cordeiro, and Rep. Darin LaHood outside the Oval Office after meeting with the White House Task Force on the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Public domain

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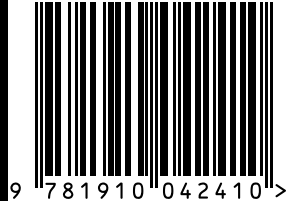
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