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TOBY MILLER

Where Next? Football's New Frontiers

Football is more popular than Jesus and John Lennon combined. One in every two living people, we are told, watched the 2010 men's World Cup on television.¹ More than ever, football is a universal currency, a lingua franca – the common ground of culture. In the words of the prominent US journalist Dave Zirin, 'Soccer is the great global game: the closest thing we have to a connective cultural tissue that binds our species across national and cultural borders'.² Go anywhere in the world with a ball under your arm or a ripping sporting yarn next to your glass and you'll never walk, sit or stumble alone.

We are accustomed to such shibboleths about the universal popularity of the game. But are they true of the three countries that account for much of the world's population, knowledge, armaments, wealth – and sport: the United States, China and India? These are crucial sites for a sport that claims ecumenicism/hegemony. Why have they resisted football's appealing blandishments and seemingly inexorable march? And what about virtual frontiers – the likely impact of new media technologies on the game's future? Will football's geography and means of reception both change markedly as gigantic countries and innovative genres enter the field of play?

Conversely, one might ask why the growth of football's popularity, whether spatially or textually, is even an issue. Can't a sport simply emerge and exist organically? The answer is sonic and onomatopoeic. The sound of football is no longer the whoosh of a ball rippling a net. It's the ker-ching of an international cash register.³

Bosman and Beyond

Consider the wealthiest and most powerful part of the world game: European professional football clubs. Once small city businesses, for much of their lives, they were run rather like not-for-profits, drawing upon and representing local cultures. By the 1990s, many had been commodified and made into

creatures of exchange. In the course of this radical transformation, they fell prey to fictive capital, becoming sources of asset inflation used by rentiers to service other debts through the cash flow of television money and gate receipts, at the same time as their *embourgeoisement* solved a policing problem for states about what to do with the public and its passions.

Many factors produced these phenomena, notably the game's globalization, governmentalization, commodification, televisualization and position within the New International Division of Cultural Labor (NICL).⁴ Multiple stakeholders are committed to football's expansion, from managers and players to network executives and institutional investors. An example of this change is the shift in the NICL that derived from the midfielder player Jean-Marc Bosman's appeal to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) against his suspension in 1990 by the Union Royale Belge des Sociétés de Football for seeking a transfer overseas. Bosman's case was based on the right to freedom of movement for European Union (EU) workers. The Court decided in his favour five years later. Facing the threat of fines from the European Commission, in 1996 FIFA discontinued rules restricting the number of foreigners who could play. Within a few months, cross-European player mobility increased sharply, and a gap in talent between wealthy teams and also-rans widened.

At the same time as the Bosman decision, huge amounts of money became available to football as television was deregulated across Europe, new communications technologies and consumer electronics proliferated and elite competitions maximized their media exposure. In the decade from 1990, European football rights costs grew by 800 per cent, during a period of minimal macroeconomic inflation. The amounts paid to televise the sport may seem large, but they are risible when compared to producing drama or even original news and current affairs because most development costs and star salaries are borne by the sports themselves rather than TV stations. In addition, securing rights to popular leagues is a popular means of securing subscribers to new services such as cable and satellite.⁵

As in the Bosman case, these economic developments are not solely the result of market forces. They also reference the world of states. For example, during the first five years of the English Premier League, which commenced in 1992, 60 matches were televised each season; by 2006, the number was 138. As Sky television cordoned off more and more games, the European Commission expressed concern about lack of competition for coverage. This opened the way to Setanta, a satellite channel that sought to expand beyond its limited diasporic home in Irish pubs around the world to private homes around the British Isles and the United States. Setanta and Sky paid £2.7 billion for UK and international rights between 2007 and 2010, a deal

that was ultimately shared with Disney's ESPN when Setanta overreached and collapsed.⁶

Football is also a crucial component in the new kind of corporate citizenship avowed by capitalists who want to smell nice. Corporations invoke citizenship ideals to describe themselves while principally pursuing their economic interests. This is part of a restless quest for profit unfettered by regulation, twinned with a desire for moral legitimacy that is based on doing right while growing rich through a respect for law and a desire to meddle. Two hundred and fifty-five public, private and mixed projects of international development utilized sport in 2008 – a 93 per cent increase over five years. A high proportion involved corporations, frequently via astro-turf – faux grassroots – organizations such as the Vodafone Foundation. Using football permits corporations to act as if they were governing agencies operating with the public good in mind, even as they heighten North-South imbalances, promote their own wares, commodify sports, distract attention from their environmental and labour records, and stress international/imperial sports over local ones.⁷

The wider point is this: for football clubs, national associations and international organizations, growth has become a watchword. So when considering where football goes next, the powers-that-be will not only ponder introducing goal-line technology, tweaking the rulebook or presenting the game to a smart-phone world. Their political-economic priority will be selling the game in sizeable and affluent territories.

India and China

Why has India, with a population of over a billion people, never appeared in the World Cup finals? Why is its national team ranked in the hundreds internationally? How can a sport that was hugely popular and successful in the early days of Olympic football, and attracted over 130,000 spectators to the 1997 Kolkata Derby between East Bengal and Mohan Bagan, not produce players of international note?⁸

If it is a mystery why a sporting nation so influenced by British imperialism, and whose national league can be traced back to the 1880s, hasn't embraced football, it is unlikely to remain so for long. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates annual growth of India's GDP at 8.7 per cent.⁹ That figure is as interesting to FIFA as scorelines at the Bernabeu or the San Siro. It is stimulating numerous studies and anecdotes seeking to explain and improve football's profile.

Indian TV audiences for the 2010 World Cup were disappointing. The average viewership for live games was 1.5 million, with a peak of 5.6

million. Audience reach plummeted 53 per cent from 2006, and the national broadcaster Doordarshan did not feature supporting programmes such as magazine shows. The country does now have a television network dedicated to football, Ten Action+, which covers the principal European leagues and may have been a marketing factor, along with other Asian broadcasters, in Spain's decision to play La Liga games at earlier hours. Ten Action+ sees the national football audience as very particular in regional and linguistic terms – it is urban, English-speaking and hence middle class, with potential expansion to include the mofussil. The domestic league suffers from inadequate stadia, the absence of major teams in key areas such as Delhi and the predominance of cricket.¹⁰

The triumph of cricket as India's defining sport derived from a complex field of media deregulation, televisual investment, middle-class expansion and satellite innovation, which it managed more effectively than other sports.¹¹ For football to compete, it needs to control this constellation rather than accept being crowded out.

Another statistic that's likely to catch the eye of FIFAcrats is the IMF figure of 10 per cent annual growth in GDP for China.¹² Hence the governing body's fantasy of an East Asia dominated by football.¹³ Arguably the last great footballing frontier, China has hinted that it may bid for the World Cup in 2026. In 2010, Wei Di, head of the local Football Association, boasted that China had the venues and the rail network needed to host a big event and that the FIFocracy was positive.¹⁴ China's TV ratings for the 2010 World Cup saw an average live match audience of 17.5 million and a peak of 66 million. Audience reach was up 17 per cent on 2006, which represented an additional 48.5 million viewers. Regional broadcasters became involved for the first time and there was more non-live primetime coverage.¹⁵

Thus far, however, crime is limiting the development of football in China. Match-fixing and gambling – the latter is illegal – and rampant at the highest levels of administration and, allegedly, among referees. Of course, these are tendencies and problems everywhere, but the Chinese public and state have exhibited intense irritation with them and claim the issue is systemic rather than occasional. There have been repeated attempts to reform management of the game, including high-profile arrests and the formation of a China Anti-Football Gambling Alliance.¹⁶ Critics also point to the absence of promotion to young children, 'a soccer tradition less pronounced than that of Europe', and struggles between commercial leagues and state sporting bodies, such that the state socialism of Olympic training is incompatible with the managed capitalism of cartel clubs.¹⁷

The Chinese FA says the number of players fell from 500,000 in 2000 to 50,000 in 2011. In 2009, it launched a schools promotion across dozens

of cities, the 44 Cities Project, but the schools were slow to cooperate. In addition, there is a lack of city venues. In 2011, a large real-estate concern committed to sponsor an elite youth academy, but this came just weeks after major corporations had fled the sport due to its corrupt image, and China Central Television was reconsidering coverage of the national league.¹⁸ So the patchwork of civil, state and commercial bodies involved paints a complex picture of this most desired of commercial fetishes.

The United States Problem

Let's consider in detail now the object of FIFA's desire since the year dot, the world's lumbering, tumbling empire – the United States. We'll find that the future has already arrived – in fact it's been here quite a while. Football is massively important in that country, across the spectrum from cultural signage to economic investment. But this fact is largely denied by the bourgeois media, macho nativism and reactionary academia.

During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the glossy lounge-lizard magazine *Vanity Fair* ran a blog called 'Fair Play'. In best Derridoidal style, the editors printed the word 'soccer' with a deconstructive line across it – suddenly subject to erasure by 'football'. Nike, McDonald's and Coca-Cola saw the World Cup as a much bigger deal than the Olympics. Coke's biggest promotion yet was at the 2010 tournament. It included a deal with YouTube whereby viewers across 17 languages and 120 nations posted their goal celebrations. Anheuser-Busch and Visa were heavily involved, too: the Visa Match Planner smart-phone application provided scores and retail information, articulated to the tournament. MTV ran spots around the world with the tagline 'We understand why you aren't watching MTV'. ESPN Deportes, Disney's US Spanish-language TV sport channel, didn't have the rights either, but it dispatched 25 reporters to South Africa to realize the promotional campaign '*90 minutos no son suficientes*' (90 minutes aren't enough), troping the duration of matches to indicate the importance of background and synoptic material.¹⁹ This all looks like a mature market where football is a leading light.

But the sport receives fewer column inches, phone-in rants and breathless commentary than the nation's staples of professional men's sport: ice hockey, 'American' football, baseball and basketball. Explanations for football's ambivalent stature in the United States vary, but many local accounts, whether scholarly, journalistic or political, rely on a potent brand of amateur intellectualism and reactionary theorization that celebrates a putative 'American exceptionalism' that supposedly makes US sport an export rather than an import culture.

The concept of exceptionalism began as an attempt to explain why socialism had not taken greater hold in the United States. It has since turned into an excessive rhapsody to Yanqui world leadership, difference and sanctimony. So we encounter claims made – in all seriousness – that ‘foreignness’ can make a sport unpopular in the United States, and the media will not accept practices coded as ‘other’.²⁰ We even have academics telling us that because basketball and football are both played in the air and involve goals, they are too similar for people to follow syntagmatically and must instead be paradigmatic alternatives, and that US sports do not connote nationalism in the same way as football (Mandelbaum, 2004 and 2010). Perhaps the most appalling instance of ‘American exceptionalism’ was provided by the Reaganite Republican Jack Kemp, who derided football before Congress as a ‘European socialist’ sport by contrast with its ‘democratic’ US rival.²¹

The *Village Voice* denounced football thus: ‘Every four years the World Cup comes around, and with it a swarm of soccer nerds and bullies reminding us how backward and provincial we are for not appreciating soccer enough.’²² During the 2010 World Cup, this anti-leftist xenophobia saw Glenn Beck, one of the right’s pitchfork men in the bourgeois media, refer to Barack Obama’s policies as ‘the World Cup of political thought’. He advised listeners that ‘the rest of the world likes Barack Obama’s policies, we do not’ and ‘we don’t want the World Cup, we don’t like the World Cup, we don’t like soccer’. Convicted Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy derided the game on his talk show because it ‘originated with the South American Indians’ and asked ‘Whatever happened to American exceptionalism?’ His guests from the coin-operated Media Research Center said it was ‘a poor man or poor woman’s sport’ that ‘the left is pushing ... in schools across the country’.²³

The Latin@ Factor

Football has always been popular in the United States – but the key is that its popularity lies with people whose interests have not been important for mainstream sports marketers, newspapers and so on – for example, the Bolivians and Salvadorans who crowd into DC United games in the Barra Brava section. So impoverished are many football fans that, for example, Los Angeles has perhaps 200 unaffiliated amateur adult leagues with half a million players who cannot afford to join the national system. Almost 6 million women and more than 8 million men play regularly, two thirds of whom are adults. Because football is loved by an unusual cross-class alliance of very poor, working-class Latin@²⁴ immigrants and relatively affluent, college-educated white parents, it is complex to research and promote.²⁵

Of course, anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Latin@ feelings can run very deep. When the United States and Mexico contested the 2011 Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) Gold Cup final in Pasadena before 93,000 people, the presentation of the trophy was made in Spanish. Tim Howard, the United States goalkeeper who plays in the English Premier League, erupted: ‘CONCACAF should be ashamed of themselves. I think it was a [expletive deleted] disgrace that the entire post-match ceremony was in Spanish. You can bet your ass if we were in Mexico City it wouldn’t be all in English.’²⁶

These prejudices run against the economic interests of both the country and the sport. Internationals between the United States and Mexico in the United States are run by Soccer United Marketing (SUM), a subsidiary of Major League Soccer. SUM connects touring Mexican teams with US sponsors such as Coca-Cola, Home Depot and AT&T, which rely on this marketing to target Latin@s. Conversely, the United States Soccer Federation, which runs the national team, is conflicted. To make money, it hosts matches in California or Texas in order to attract Latin@ crowds. To encourage nativist support when matches are qualifiers for major tournaments, it is tempted more by New England and the Midwest.²⁷

Regardless, the numbers all point in one direction. During his time with the Los Angeles Galaxy, David Beckham won three Teen Choice awards over native athletes.²⁸ Visit YouTube²⁹ and recall the winning penalty of the Women’s World Cup final in Pasadena in 1999, attended by 90,000. Or wind forward to Los Angeles 2009, when 93,000 turned up to watch Barcelona and saw Beckham score,³⁰ then on to the 60,000-plus who attended 2007 expansion team Seattle’s last home game of 2011.³¹ The play-off rounds of the 2006 and 2010 World Cup finals both drew larger US TV audiences than baseball’s World Series. And there were more citizens of the United States at the South African tournament than of any other country apart from the host.³²

The clouds have grown heavy and thick around elderly, inadequate ways of understanding the US sporting market that obey the simp(eria)listic dictates of ‘American exceptionalism’. Average attendance at the 1994 World Cup, held in the United States, was just under 70,000 – the highest ever in any country. Television viewership for the 2006 World Cup was up 90 per cent on 2002. And when television and radio rights to the 2018 and 2022 World Cup tournaments went up for sale, Fox bought the Anglo version and NBC’s Telemundo the Spanish for a combined US\$1.2 billion, more than twice the previous amount. Telemundo’s principal rival among Spanish-language broadcast networks, Univisión, frequently the top-rated

TV station across all languages, out-rated Anglo competitors in 2010 with its coverage of a US-Mexico international match, which 60,000 attended. Since 2005, the United States has had English- and Spanish-language TV networks dedicated to football, covering leagues in Britain, Germany, Asia, Africa, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Australia, Latin America – and the United States (men's and women's from 2009). There are numerous podcasts, radio shows, fans and players.³³

The niche cable and satellite station Fox Soccer Channel attracts men aged 18–34 with annual household incomes over \$75,000 ('Fox Soccer', 2008). The hint as to how it identifies viewers to advertisers comes from its TV commercials, which are about regaining and sustaining hair-growth and hard-ons, losing and hiding pimples and pounds, and becoming and adoring soldiers and sailors. In 2007, the matches it covered drew between 50,000 and 70,000 viewers; four years on, the average was 100,000. In 2011, the station's biggest-ever ratings for an English Premier League game amounted to 418,000 viewers and 285,000 households, while 954,000 watched a US-Mexico fixture.³⁴ The ratings for English matches are mostly achieved very early in the morning (in much of the country) and nowhere near prime time anywhere. The Champions League final of 2011 set a ratings record with 2.6 million watching, Fox Soccer and Fox Deportes were attracting ever-larger audiences and it was an obvious move to shift these programmes to stations available to everyone. Fox decided to show English Premier League games on its broadcast station, including a live match on the day of the 2012 Super Bowl.³⁵ The future for football in the United States was headed in one direction – consolidation of long-standing tendencies denied by gormless nativists.

Old, Middle-Aged and New Media

This chapter has focused on television as both a source of numbers to indicate football's popularity and as an evolutionary force in the game's changes. That emphasis has largely excluded old media, such as newspapers, and new media, such as the internet. The emphasis on middle-aged media (TV) does not derive from the author's age, however. Television remains crucial to the way football is run and the way it is watched. But this is because TV itself is changing in productive ways. Technological and legal transformations are siphoning sports away from broadcast and onto cable, satellite and pay-per-view. And powerful teams and leagues are establishing their own televisual networks: Manchester United, Benfica, Barcelona, Middlesbrough, Olympique de Marseille, AC and Inter Milan, Real Madrid and Chelsea boast channels, inter alia.

Among members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 52 per cent of TV households received only broadcast signals in 1995. By 2002, that number had dropped to 37 per cent, as cable in particular proliferated. Synchronized moving images and sounds can now be sent to and received from public spaces, offices, homes, shops, schools and transportation. The devices include TVs, computers, smartphones, tablets and personal digital assistants. The networks vary between broadcast, satellite, cable, telephone and internet. The stations may be public, private, community or amateur. The time of watching is varied, from live to on-demand. These technologies increasingly transgress the boundaries and policing established by nations. The spread of some transmission systems is very limited – perhaps 2.5 million homes worldwide had internet television in 2005 – but others are on the move: cable and satellite channels in the OECD almost doubled between 2004 and 2006. In 2008 there were 1.1 billion TV sets in the world, with 43 per cent receiving signals from broadcast and 38 per cent from cable.³⁶ Television is more diverse, more diffuse, more popular, more powerful and more innovative than ever. Our spanking new flat-screen TVs will soon be tossed cavalierly away if the next generation takes off – sets from Sony, Samsung, LG, Toshiba, Sharp and Panasonic, with streaming movies and Yahoo!/Intel widgets for internet connections with information about weather and stock prices, or Blue-ray players that access the internet. The lesson of new technology remains the same as ever: as per print, radio, and television, each medium is quickly dominated by centralized and centralizing corporations, despite its multi-distributional potential. This centralism is obviously less powerful in the case of the internet than technologies that are more amenable to being sealed off.

The idea is laughable that audiences using several different communications technologies while watching TV are more independent of, for example, commercials. No fewer than a third of sports audiences who send instant or text messages while viewing refer to the commercials they have been watching, and almost two thirds have greater recognition of those commercials than people who simply watch television without reaching out in these other ways to friends/fellow-spectators.³⁷

Dedicated sports cable stations such as ESPN use interactive TV for such as ‘My Vote’ and ‘My Bottom Line’. These adjuncts to conventional television-watching uncover more and more data about audience drives in the name of enabling participation and pleasure in watching via new media add-ons. Internationally, ESPN has sought to purchase broadband portals that ensure global dominance and now owns Cricinfo, Scrum.com, and Racing-Live.³⁸ People who watch TV on different devices and via different services are watching more, not less, television. Television still dominates as

the mode of production, distribution and reception. A shift to internet dominance will only come with massive, dependable, fast, high-resolution screens capable of comfortable use by households together. Which will essentially be televisions.

Is Growth Good?

Let's finish by turning an eye to the notion that growth in football is good anyway, by examining the impact of the sport's globalization on the environment. The World Cup is of particular concern. FIFA boasts that it

is dedicated to taking its environmental responsibility seriously. Issues such as global warming, environmental conservation and sustainable management are a concern for FIFA, not only in regards to FIFA World Cups™, but also in relation to FIFA as an organisation. That is why FIFA has been engaging with its stakeholders and other institutions to find sensible ways of addressing environmental issues and mitigate the negative environmental impacts linked to its activities.³⁹

From solar-powered stadiums to free public transportation, the 2006 World Cup featured a 'Green Goal', which claimed to make the event 'climate-neutral' by saving 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide via climate-protection projects in India and South Africa.⁴⁰ But the data excluded international travel, part of the difference between environmental audits that focus on one country rather than a wider ecological impact.⁴¹ Environmental audits of global events are meaningless if they don't look at travel and the media.

Because the claims made about the 2006 tournament rang hollow, FIFA set up an Environmental Forum. Its task has been to 'green' stadia, training grounds, accommodation, amenities and so on, in accordance with the UN Environmental Program. For the 2010 tournament, South Africa used biogas from landfills, wind farms and efficient lighting, and proudly proclaimed that nine teams had their jerseys made from recycled polyethylene terephthalate bottles. Coincidentally, these teams were themselves sponsored by a major sporting goods company, which remorselessly promoted its good deed.⁴² The 2014 tournament in Brazil will supposedly be played out in green stadia.⁴³ But beware greenwashing, since post-event calculations disclose that the South African World Cup carbon footprint was twice that of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.⁴⁴

Such initiatives do not confront the real issue. Mostly fuelled by European tourism, the 2010 World Cup had the largest carbon footprint of any commercial event in world history: 850,000 tonnes of carbon expended, 65 per cent of it due to flights.⁴⁵ The Cup's environmental initiatives did not address the unsustainability of air travel, where the very prospect of corporate media

Table 15.1. *Predicted environmental impact of 2010 World Cup*

	Component emissions (tCO ₂ e)	share (%)
International transport	1,856,589	67.4
Inter-city transport	484,961	17.6
Intra-city transport	39,577	1.4
Stadia constructions and materials	15,359	0.6
Stadia and precinct energy use	16,637	0.5
Energy use in accommodation	340,128	12.4
Total tCO ₂ e	896,661	
Excluding international transport		
Total tCO ₂ e	2,753,250	100
Including international transport		

Source: Republic of South Africa et al. (2009).

publicity and public-image beneficence depend on environmental despoliation. This is a step too far – or too close – to take. It would signal serious intent for media organizations, sports and states to diminish the worst carbon footprint in the world outside the Pentagon's.⁴⁶

Before the 2010 finals, the South African and Norwegian governments conducted a study of the likely environmental impact, coming up with the data in Table 15.1.

Those responsible knew the implications. The South African government generated tender documents inviting competition to offset the flight footprint, but issued no contracts.⁴⁷ The externalities of tourism and foreign currency were always going to outweigh such concerns.

One can argue that both these aspects – air travel and media electricity – are beyond the jurisdiction of FIFA or governments or fans. To which I can only recommend the wisdom of Kissy Suzuki as offered to James Bond in *You Only Live Twice* (Lewis Gilbert, 1967): 'Think again, please.' FIFA and local organizers strike deals with airlines, airports and media organizations. That endows them with power and responsibility alike in ways that are much more important than tourism or football. And fans must be aware of their own complicity in this travesty.

Plutocracy Rovers v Footocrats United

FIFA's growth evangelism is problematic. Given the fervour accompanying the organization's self-anointed omniscience and omnipotence, it comes as no surprise that the doctrines of economic growth that it follows have religious origins. When the Trinity was being ideologized within Christianity, something had to be done to legitimize the concept at the same time as

dismissing and decrying polytheistic and pagan rivals to the new religion's moralistic monotheism. Hence *oikonomia*, a sphere of worldly arrangements that was to be directed by a physical presence on Earth representing theology's principal superstition, the deity. God gave Christ 'the economy' to manage, so 'the economy' indexically manifested Christianity.⁴⁸ When FIFA arrogates to itself the right to make and break laws, to buy and sell territories, and to pollute the world, it is invoking just such magical origins and justifications. We should not be in thrall to this self-anointed elect's control of football's future, especially when it is deeply connected to commercial dictates and surveillance. In Zirin's wise words:

only in a world so upside down could 'the Beautiful Game' be run by an organization as corrupt as FIFA and by a man as rotten to the core as FIFA President Sepp Blatter. Only Sepp Blatter, whose reputation for degeneracy approaches legend, would hire ... Henry Kissinger to head 'a committee of wise persons' aimed at 'rooting out corruption' in his organization.⁴⁹

FIFA and its fiefdoms are painful hangovers from the amateur good-old-boy networks that ran the sport before its wholesale commercialization, at the same time as they represent the ultimate in contemporary commodification and governmentalization, with transparency a word rather than a rule. The world of football relies on obsessive desires to know and control players, competitions and audiences, in keeping with this bizarre blend.

A few clubs are increasingly powerful and the majority increasingly fragile as financial pressure to win slots in the Champions League intensifies because of TV money. This sets management of the game on several possible collision courses with ruling associations. For example, FIFA's committee on club football features representatives from Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, South Africa, Egypt, Ivory Coast and Honduras and almost no one from teams that provide major World Cup players or characterize the sport globally. And of the \$3.7 billion that FIFA received from the 2010 World Cup finals, just \$40 million went to clubs.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Michel Platini, head of UEFA, claims to stand against greedy clubs, corrupt FIFAcrats and crass commodification, saying, 'We are the guardian of European football. Our role is to protect the game from business.' In 2007, Platini wrote to each EU head of state asking them to help deliver football 'from the rampant commercialism which assails it'. This was a direct criticism of the EU's attitude to football – the EU regards it as basically a business (see the Bosman case) – and of the English Premier League's norms. Platini spoke of the need to 'defend the European sporting model based on financial and social solidarity between rich and poor'. The Premier League's chief executive/creature of the wealthy, Richard Scudamore, retorted that Platini's arguments 'don't

rise much above the view of people in the corner of the pub'. Platini replied: 'I prefer to speak as a guy in the pub than the assistant referee Scudamore was.'⁵¹ Platini is introducing financial fair play rules, 'which will force clubs in its competitions to break even' from 2011, albeit with caveats.⁵² And he speaks as one of the world's greatest players, as opposed to an English shopkeeper.

For now, the power to shape football rests very much with European leagues, FIFA, UEFA and television stations. With European teams overstretched financially by increasing salaries and competition to qualify for UEFA's lucrative trophies, clubs being bought up by new money from the United States, Russia, Asia and the Arab world, and China and India confronting their code's corruption and inefficiency, the landscape is likely to change. Global plutocracy may unsettle corrupt footocrats as much as pre-capitalist fans.

Rationalization and centralization will surely chart football's future, albeit leavened by the very pulsating, passionate energies that are its *raison d'être* to control and channel, and that so engaged Weber in his wish to answer and confound Marx's interest in

foul and adventures-seeking dregs of the bourgeoisie ... vagabonds, dismissed soldiers, discharged convicts, runaway galley slaves, sharpers, jugglers, lazaroni, pickpockets, sleight-of-hand performers, gamblers, procurers, keepers of disorderly houses, porters, literati, organ grinders, rag pickers, scissors grinders, tinkers, beggars.⁵³

Those leftover people, in our corners, *favelas*, underpasses and streets, are also and equally the future of football. They are not niche-channel cable subscribers or frequent-flyer business-class passengers. But it is their world, too.

NOTES

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Figure 15.1. Lionel Messi of Barcelona celebrates scoring their third goal at the Camp Nou, Barcelona. UEFA Champions League – Barcelona v Arsenal, 8/3/2011.
Credit: Colorsport/Dan Rowley.

JED NOVICK

The Game-Changers: Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo

Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. The two best footballers in the world playing for the two best teams. On the face of it, they're yin and yang. Ronaldo is Real Madrid personified: arrogant, muscular, proud, strong. Messi (Figure 15.1) is his mirror image at Barcelona: stylish, dignified, gracious, principled. Madrid bought Ronaldo for a world record fee from the next biggest financial beast in the football jungle. Messi was taken on by Barça when he was 13. He was small and delicate and had to be treated for growth hormone deficiency. (His treatment cost £500 a month, a bill Barcelona were prepared to pick up and River Plate, his local team in Argentina, were not. It wasn't a bad investment.)

Ronaldo/Messi. Madrid/Barcelona. The king's team and the people's team. These are the great rivalries of our times, thrown up almost too perfectly, reflecting, if not exactly the struggle between good and evil, then something not far off. Maybe we'll characterise it as the battle between muscle and romance. Of course it's romantic fiction, but without that, what is football?

Enter 'Cristiano Ronaldo arrogant quotes' into Google and you won't be short of reading matter. At the time of writing (November 2011) the search engine came up with 2,160,000 results in 0.15 seconds.

'It's surely because I'm good looking, rich and a great footballer. They're jealous of me. I don't have any other explanation,' said Ronaldo after receiving jeers and chants in Croatia when Real Madrid played Dinamo Zagreb in September 2011.¹ 'I am the first, second and third,' he said in November 2008 when asked to name the three best players in the world. He conceded that Messi, Kaká and Fernando Torres were 'good candidates', but believed he had surpassed all of his rivals for the FIFA World Footballer of the Year and Ballon d'Or awards. Later in the same interview he said: 'Oh, I'm ready for harassment (from women). I'm used to that.'²

We could go on, but the point is made. The problem is this: he's right. He is good-looking and rich. He is a wonderful footballer. In January 2009, he

was crowned FIFA World Footballer of the Year for 2008 to go with the Ballon d'Or he had won a month earlier.

In July 2009, Real Madrid paid Manchester United £80 million for his services, nearly £30 million more than the game's next highest transfer fee – also paid by Real Madrid, when they signed the Brazilian Káka from AC Milan for £56 million weeks earlier. In the 2010–11 season, he scored 53 goals.

The question is not whether Ronaldo is arrogant but why he isn't more arrogant. And the answer to that question is the same as the answer to why he hasn't won either the Ballon d'Or or the FIFA Footballer of the Year award since 2008. The answer is Lionel Messi.

'He Makes the Incredible Routine'

Born in Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina, in 1987, Messi is, by any measure, the player of the moment. There isn't a superlative that hasn't been attached to him. Forget for a minute journalists and commentators. Sir Alex Ferguson: 'Messi is amongst the best ever.' Pep Guardiola: 'Messi could be the best player of all time.' Xavi: '[Messi is] the player that will be the best in history. Leo will break all the records. I don't even want to compare Messi to anyone else – it just isn't fair. On them.'³

In January 2012, he became only the fourth player to win the Ballon d'Or three times (joining Johan Cruyff, Marco Van Basten and Michel Platini). He received more than twice as many votes as the runner-up – Ronaldo. He was also named FIFA World Player of the Year for the third successive time – and no one, not one of the illustrious names you can read about in the pages of this book, has achieved that. He's been top scorer in the Champions League for the past three seasons. In 2010–11 he scored 53 goals in 55 games.

The numbers, though, tell only one side of the story. There is, as Sid Lowe wrote, 'the intangible sensation: the control at speed, the softness of touch, the variety in his play, the vision, the simplicity, the mastery of the tempo, where stopping is as important as starting, the sheer, jaw-dropping ridiculousness of it. The relentlessness of his brilliance; he has made the incredible routine.'⁴

As with all the great players, one of the keys is balance. Only 5 feet 7 inches, he has a low centre of gravity and covers the ground quickly. There's a sense that even when he's standing still, he's leaning forward. The ball seems tied to his feet and he has, as Richard Williams put it, 'a similar gift for what Argentinians called the *gambeta*: that sinuous high-speed dribble that carried Maradona to his famous second goal against England in Mexico in 1986.'⁵

He's nominally a centre-forward but plays more as a 'false nine' – or, as an earlier generation would have it, a deep-lying centre-forward à la Nandor Hidegkuti. The acid test for Messi will be on the international stage with Argentina. He probably has two World Cups left and what happens there will determine his place in football history.

The stats are off the scale. Real won La Liga in 2011–12 and beat Barcelona at Camp Nou for the first time in over a decade. In the same season, Messi hit 73 goals, the most yet in a single European domestic campaign. Meanwhile, Ronaldo took his total to an astonishing 160 goals in 155 games. Possibly tongue-in-cheek, he later claimed he was 'better than Messi and Real Madrid is better than Barcelona', though he added: 'You can't compare a Ferrari and a Porsche, because they have different engines.'⁶ The Clásico on 7 October 2012 ended in a 2–2 draw. Each scored twice. 'Put in the superlatives yourselves,' Guardiola said of Messi, 'I'm running out.' It's true, but it's equally applicable to both.

'They are very different footballers and very different characters,' said the former Barcelona striker Eidur Gudjohnsen. 'It is incredible the standard that they are setting. They have taken the game to a different level, reaching standards that very few of us have seen anyone reach. It is so hard to say one is better than the other, but Messi narrowly has the edge. I have never seen anything like him. We'd be lucky to be watching one of them. To be entertained by both is a blessing.'⁷ The rivalry between the two is like nothing seen before in football, more akin to a rivalry between two heavyweights. The biggest names, the most potent brands. (As a curious aside, figures published in 2012 show Messi and Ronaldo as only the ninth- and tenth-best-paid players in the world, on 10.5 million and 10 million Euros a year respectively).⁸

It's entirely fitting that a book such as this should end with Messi and Ronaldo – the two best players of their day. They're why we love the game and tolerate its ills – their skill, their talent, their beauty, their strength. Some we love, some we don't, but the soap opera is part of the appeal, too. And countless millions of us get to watch. We're fans. So before you put the book down and go to bed, let's just remind ourselves of the words of Danny Blanchflower, the former Spurs and Northern Ireland captain: 'The great fallacy is that the game is first and last about winning. It's nothing of the kind. The game is about glory. It's about doing things in style, with a flourish, about going out to beat the other lot, not waiting for them to die of boredom.'⁹

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