

Why does the U.S.A. not produce successful soccer athletes?

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Introduction

In many parts of the world, soccer, or as many call it “futbol”, is referred to as “The Beautiful Game”. The term is credited to an all-time great of the sport, Pelé, who published his autobiography in 1977 titled “My Life and The Beautiful Game”. Indeed, the sport of soccer is a beautiful game, as watching an organized game of soccer can be pleasing to a spectator as the ball is passed from player to player until a goal is scored, which is one of the most exhilarating events a player and a fan can experience. A player does not need any fancy equipment to play and the sport brings about joy and passion to its players and its fans. In fact, many countries where soccer is the biggest sport are third world and other developing countries where children of all ages are introduced to the sport by picking up a ball and simply kicking it around with friends on an open field or in the corner of a street. At least, that was the case where I grew up in Jordan. I was never enrolled in a professional team or received any higher tier training for soccer in my youth, and there were few televised games that I could watch at the time. Yet, the sport brought me delight and satisfaction, introduced me to new friends, and grew my sportsmanship and respect for others.

Any physical sport requires athletic and capable players that can compete at very high levels, and the United States has produced a plethora of talented athletes. Each and every popular sport in the United States has many all-time and current great athletes that dominate the sport in every aspect at the highest level. The sport of basketball has produced great all-time players, such as Micheal Jordan, and current players, such as LeBron James. The sport of baseball has done the same, with Babe Ruth being an all-time great and Aaron Judge being a current great. The sport of American football has many all-time and current greats, with Tom Brady playing until the age of 45! That is not to exclude the 2,976 total olympic medals won by the United

States followed by the Soviet Union with only 1,204 total olympic medals (Morrell, 2022). As obvious, the United States is a big sports country that succeeds at the national and international levels, but one thing is missing for certain. Never was soccer mentioned as a sport at which the United States is even remotely successful at. Other than the success of the women's United States national team at the more recent events of the Women's World Cup, no other success stands out for soccer. As such, this paper looks into why soccer is not as successful of a sport in the United States and what can be done to grow the sport.

The Sports Culture in the United States

Any sport in the world has its teams, its fans, and its communities, and with all of those aspects comes a "sport culture". In the case of "sport culture" in the United States, Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman describe it as "what people breathe, read, discuss, analyze, compare, and historicize; what they talk about at length before and after games on sports radio; what they discuss at the office watercooler; and what comprises a significant quantity of barroom (or pub) talk; in short, what people follow as opposed to what people do." (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). As such, every sport in the United States has its culture, and any individual can be a part of many cultures by following multiple sports at a time. This creates attention around a sport by which its fans are attracted to, and especially in the United States, this is true to a number of sports except soccer. In *Offsides: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*, Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman mention that a bibliography of 4,500 works on sport themes were compiled with only 15 of them being related to soccer. Similarly, it is mentioned that several articles, podcasts, and shows are run on NFL and NBA teams, such as game-day shows, post-game analysis, and the broadcasting of the yearly drafts of new players into the leagues. In

contrast, Brazil, who is one of the biggest soccer countries in the world with 5 World Cup titles to their name, sends hundreds of journalists and camera men to cover every move of the Brazilian national team in the World Cup, yet their national basketball team does not garner that much attention. As such, a sports culture in a country contributes to its success in that particular sport. Consequently, with not much coverage or attention directed towards the sport of soccer in the United States, the country will continue to struggle with success in the sport.

Viewership and Attraction

With the numerous sports relevant in the United States, it might seem difficult for an individual to pinpoint one sport to be their favorite to watch. However, that doesn't seem to be the case, as a poll showed that 37% of the surveyed adults in the United States prefer watching American football with basketball, baseball, and soccer trailing at 11%, 9%, and 7% respectively (Norman, 2018). Correlating with this data is the advertising revenue of each sport's main events at the end of a season, as the NFL playoffs took first place in revenue accumulated in 2014 by reaching a revenue of \$1.233 billion followed by the NCAA's Men's Basketball Tournament (\$1.134 billion) and the NBA playoffs (\$875 million) (Kaylor, 2015). Looking at the total revenue accumulated by each major league around the world in 2020, which includes advertising revenue plus merchandise sales, ticket sales, licensing, and TV deals, the NFL takes first place again followed by the MLB and the NBA with the English Premier League in England taking 4th place and La Liga in Spain taking 5th place (Jesse, 2020). Finally, the most valuable team franchise in 2021 was the Dallas Cowboys (NFL) valued at \$5.7 billion followed by the New York Yankees (MLB) and New York Knicks (NBA) valued at \$5.25 billion and \$5 billion

respectively with Barcelona (La Liga) and Real Madrid (La Liga) valued at \$4.76 billion and \$4.75 billion respectively (Ozanian, 2021).

These data conclude that the overwhelming revenue and value of American football, basketball, and baseball dominates over all other sports, including soccer. Of course, this revenue is only made possible by the community and fans that these sports attract. The reason for this attraction might be because of different factors that are shared between these American sports compared to soccer. A factor is the amount of scoring and points in American football, basketball, and baseball. The average points scored by a team in the NFL in 2022 was 21.9 points (*NFL Season By Season Scoring Summary*, n.d.), 111.8 points in the NBA (*NBA League Average Points Per Game 2021-2022*, n.d.), and 4.4 points per game in the MLB in 2019 (*What Are the Most Common Scores in Baseball? ~ Random Problems*, n.d.). Compare that to the 3 goals per game scored in La Liga and the English Premier League in 2014 (Atkins, 2014), it is obvious that the average American spectator enjoys a sport where the average scoring per game is higher, as more scoring equates to more excitement watching the game. Along with other factors, such as the length of a game in each sport and the amount of advertisement breaks taken, it is fair to say that a more exciting sport with high scoring and flashy commercial breaks would bring in more views in total.

The State of Youth Soccer

A particular saying in the Arabian culture that every child grew up hearing from their mother is “learning while young is like carving in stone”, meaning that learning a skill during an individual's youth is compared to when a stone is carved; it remains there forever. Similarly, the main way that an individual can get attached to a particular sport and its culture and master its

skills is by being introduced to it in their youth, primarily through the ages 8-12 years old. Consequently, the success of the United States in soccer is reliant on the success of the next generations, and that can be achieved through cultivating and growing the mindsets and skills of youth players.

As the recent pandemic has severely halted the progression of youth sports in the United States, Project Play by Aspen Institute compiled data on the numbers of youth players by sport aging 13-17 years old in pre-pandemic times. The number of youth soccer players was registered to be a total of 1.475 million youth players in 2019, with that number trailing both basketball and baseball but beating tackle football and tennis by a small margin. However, soccer was the second highest sport by the number of youth players who decreased participation in 2019 by losing a staggering 741k players while tackle football participants increased by 611k players.

While the numbers of youth soccer players may seem promising for the future of the sport in the United States, the coaching of these players lacks in fundamentals and mentality. Youth coaching in the United States has a severe problem with playing the sport rough and treating it as a wrestling match rather than a strategic chess game. As Hudson Williams in the “The Problem With American Youth Soccer” puts it, there seems to be a sort of “football-ization” of soccer”, with coaches demanding players to play “harder” and yelling in their faces to do push ups after an off-target shot. Also, Williams mentions that “Soccer isn't meant to be played harder. It has to be played smarter.”, which is absolutely true given the fact that most all-time great soccer players are not considered tall, muscular, or big by any means compared to the average NFL or NBA player. Take Luka Modrić for example, a midfielder weighing 146 lbs and standing at a height of 5' 8" who dominated the game in his prime years and won a Ballon D'Or (The Golden Ball) in 2018 for his significant efforts in the 2018 World Cup where he lead

Croatia to the Finals, making it the smallest country by population to reach a World Cup Final. Obviously, it is not Luka's outstanding height or heavy build that allowed him to push around every player he went against on the field, but it is his wit and smarts that allowed him to facilitate the game with passes and dribbling that set up his teammates for success. This pattern of small build but high success on the field is seen all throughout soccer in every league around the world. This shows that youth soccer coaches in the United States should prioritize advancing their players' decision-making skills rather than their physical abilities, which would "de-football-ize" soccer to where it's taught and played similar to other regions around the world.

The Biggest Stage

The World Cup is known around the globe to be the most competitive tournament in all sports, bringing in the biggest soccer stars to represent their countries and bring glory back to their homes. As such, the World Cup brings in the most anticipation and viewership out of all major sporting events, with the 2022 World Cup averaging 3.558 million viewers on FOX Sports across the 64 matches played (SVG Staff, 2023), and that is not accounting for the millions of viewers streaming on other channels. Moreover, FIFA claimed that the 2022 World Cup Final played between Argentina and France amassed a new record of 1.5 billion views (Summerscales, 2023). Most importantly, the group stage match played between the United States and England garnered a viewing of 19.65 million viewers breaking the record for the most watched men's soccer match on television in the United States (*FIFA World Cup Delivering Record-Breaking TV Audience Numbers*, 2022).

These massive numbers of viewership are proof of how much attention is directed to a country hosting a World Cup, which correlates with how much the soccer culture is grown in

that country. The United States is no stranger to that experience, as the 1994 World Cup was hosted in the United States with the Final being played at Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California. The sporting event was one of the biggest ones in United States history, with a cumulative attendance of 3,587,538 (*1994 FIFA World Cup*, n.d.). Moreover, the United States national team advanced to the Round of 16 for the first time since 1930, and playing against the eventual champion, Brazil, broke the record with 11 million Americans watching (*1994 FIFA World Cup*, n.d.).

Analyzing these numbers, it is not a surprise that the United States, Mexico, and Canada filed a united bid to host the 2026 World Cup and were selected by FIFA on June 13, 2018 (*United Bid Selected to Host the 2026 FIFA World Cup™*, 2018). The matches will be played in all three countries with the number of teams being bumped up from 32 to 48 teams and the number of matches from 64 to 80 matches for the first time in World Cup history (*United Bid Selected to Host the 2026 FIFA World Cup™*, 2018.) with the United States hosting 60 total matches across the nation (Garcia, 2022). This World Cup is projected to not only bring in large revenues to these countries, but also largely grow the soccer culture in them by having festivals, watch parties, and large attendance and viewership records. This would bring rise to the much needed soccer culture in the United States for all its fans to enjoy.

Conclusion

Although soccer is the most popular sport in the world, it struggles for top status in the United States, which in turn causes a lack of American players to compete and contribute to success at the highest levels. That is due to multiple factors, such as the weakness of the sport's culture in the United States, the popularity and competitiveness of major American sports, the

most notable being basketball and American football, and the flaws found in the coaching of youth soccer. These factors would not be diminished overnight, but rather, it would take years of persistent attention towards soccer in the country and an advancement in the coaching of the sport on all levels. This is boosted by the idea of hosting a big part of the 2026 World Cup in the United States, which would attract new viewers to the sport by seeing the best players try to win the most prestigious soccer trophy for their countries.

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