

A Pitch for Football
By
Daniel E. White July 6, 2026

When I first connected my young friend with soccer, he was the new kid on his AYSO team, probably around age 6 or 7. I don't know much about soccer, but since he was closer to his own goal, I assumed he was a backfield person, whatever they are called, not one expected to shoot for goals. I did figure, though, that when the ball came close to him, he was supposed to kick it or something.

At one point in the game, he was studying a bug or a dandelion or whatever when the ball rolled past him. His coach gently (as I recall—aren't all youth soccer coaches gentle?) reminded him that there is a time and place for everything and, when standing on a soccer pitch as a game is going on, focusing on the ball rather than aspects of nature would be the right reaction.

During the FIFA World Cup tournament this year, I realized that I have been like my young friend in a way. Apparently, more people on earth watch this kind of football than any other sport. Fans know the rules and, if TV is to be believed, expend great emotion consistent with their team's fate. Comparatively oblivious to this global commotion, I have focused my sports interest on baseball, as you know. Lots of footballs have rolled past me over the years.

Since the start of the World Cup, most restaurants, pubs and taverns I have frequented have had FIFA games on their TV screens. So, I decided to think about football, the version with a round ball. With apologies to my many friends who actually know something about or have played the game, I offer these observations:

1. Football is inclusive. There are essential capacities needed to play the game: to run and to kick. It doesn't matter if you are tall or short, beefy or lanky, fast or slow, male or female, Caucasian or otherwise. If you can run and kick, you can play.
2. There is a boatload of running and a scarcity of scoring. That probably explains why, when a player scores a goal, he or she runs around wildly, arms outstretched, euphoria unrestrained. Everyone else on the pitch is happy to have that brief time of celebration to catch their breath.
3. By a huge margin, running up and down the field consumes the majority of the time available in a game. I used to regard football as an exercise class, offering players opportunities to sprint or jog, zig or zag, control the ball with their feet or pass it. Goals seemed like interruptions. I admire the physical conditioning of the players, doing all of that without many chances to sit down.
4. Like any team sport, the standout players are dependent upon their teammates. Mates make passes that set up shots. They sometimes contest possession of the

ball. Other times they lay back but they always know where the ball is and what possibilities exist for a series of well-executed passes to give the standout a chance to score. That games feature few goals over 90+ minutes of play means that team players are equally adept at thwarting the plans and activities of the other team. Teams share the responsibility of working to make sure that the opponent doesn't score.

5. The rules of the game are the same for every team in every game, the location of the game in the world or the countries teams represent in the tournament notwithstanding. And the application of the rules of play are dependent upon the skills and judgment of the referees (who also must be up to all that running). The quality of play and the outcome of the game are influenced in myriad ways by the two human beings dressed in black whose decisions are not subject to instant replay. They have one chance to get things right but, being human, they can make mistakes. That's part of the game.

I like the idea of inclusivity evident in football. Most everyone of us starts with the essential capacities. Race, gender, nationality, body type, religion, etc. are not, or should not be, factors. If you possess the capacities, you can play. Successes are infrequent. When they occur, they are causes for celebration.

Most of our lives are spent in the routine activities of each day. There are periodic sprints, but we welcome the times we can catch a breath. We are often most effective when we are parts of a team, perhaps having specific tasks but sharing equally in the overall responsibility for the welfare of the team.

Having "rules of the game" is a part of the game of life. Having those rules be the same for every person in every situation, rank or position or nationality or gender notwithstanding, is a good start toward a just society.

My young friend grew up to be a true aficionado of football, knowledgeable about players and teams, partial to a few. I don't think he ever lost his appreciation for bugs and plants and such, especially now that he is a dad with kids I know to be curious. He has probably taken the coach's lesson to heart and figured out appropriate times and places.

During a World Cup game? No chance that ball rolls past him.

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