

Thoughts I Had While Watching the World Cup 2006

by Michael "Soccer is OK" Pape

Short of possibly abortion or The Jews, there isn't a subject more divisive in this world than soccer, the world's favorite sport. I'm not going to speculate about the reasons for its popularity right now, because like most Americans this is my first time really thinking about soccer, and that line of questioning seems like it's about 3 levels above where I'm comfortable right now. Give me time. So why am I writing about soccer again?

The Occasion For This Essay

I am fully emotionally vested in the 2006 World Cup, soccer's greatest prize and the earth's most cared-about sporting event. I'm currently watching the cute little African country of Ghana play the big bad Czech Republic, the #2 ranked team in the world. Ghana is up 1-0 early in the second half, but that lead will almost surely not hold. It's at minute 57:15, which means that there's 32:45 left plus "stoppage time," or as I call it, "garbage time." The refs stop the clock for penalties, injuries, fake injuries, and so on; that time is added up and put at the end of the 90 minutes so the clock can run continually. I repeat, they never stop the clock. I can't decide if that's neat or lame. On the one hand, you don't really know when the game is going to end. On the other hand, the clock is always running, which means there are no commercial breaks for a full 45 minutes. This is the kind of thing that makes the game seem so foreign to US viewers, who just know that the clock oddly counts forward and doesn't stop when the game ends. But it's always been done this way, so they sure ain't changing for us wasteful imperialist Americans. Like I said, I can't decide how I feel about it. It's soccer...what can I say?

Last Part of Czech Republic vs. Ghana

64:29 -- Ghana gets a free kick because the Czech D broke down completely. I'll explain "free kick" in a second, but be apprized that after the play, a Czech player got a "red card" for arguing with the ref and was kicked out of the game. On a red card, he cannot be replaced. He's in the eternal penalty box. That means the Czechs are playing 10-on-11 for the rest of the game, which is obviously a bummer for them. A player who looks like Jesus skulks to the sidelines, and the Czech fans want the refs' buns on a platter. Finally, the penalty kick is executed (it's like a one-on-one between a kicker and the goalie where the ball is laid at the edge of the penalty box and the kicker gets one shot), and the ball hits the side of the goal and bounces harmlessly away. The Czechs dodged a bullet there, but they still have the one-man disadvantage and the one-goal deficit.

74:45 -- The Czech goalie (who some say is the "Best Goalie in the World." Of course, they say that about almost every goalie, including the US guy who gave up three zingers to this same Czech team earlier in the week) is under attack from the ebola-like Ghanese (Ghanian? Ghananana?) offense. Since the Czechs are losing, they can't just sit back and play defense. Ghana smells blood.

77:10 -- No. 17 butt-checks an African and gets called for a foul. Less than a minute later, another African is tackled. These Czechs are all over the place, and they can't seem to attack without being called for offsides. In soccer, the offender cannot be behind the defense unless the ball is either in the air or past them. It's a rule that prevents about 10 goals per game.

81:26 -- In Europe, booing is expressed by whistling. Seems like more trouble than it's worth, and what about those people who can't whistle? Save it for the beautiful ladies, everybody. And anyway, it

sounds weird.

82:45 -- Ghana scores, mostly because the Czechs have ceased to play defense. Poor best goalie in the world. 2-0, Africa leads. The Ghanians just sent in a guy nicknamed "ping-pong." He has the pineapple hairstyle of Kid (of "Kid n' Play) circa 1988. Hey, the announcers just said that the President of Ghana promised each player \$20 thousand for each World Cup win. Wow. I guess I won't feel sorry for those guys anymore...they might be able to move someplace nice with that much money. Sun City, here they come.

88:49 -- 11 seconds left, and "ping-pong" just got called for his second straight offsides on a breakaway goal. In between those two stupid mistakes, a Ghanaian (the announcer called him that) defense totally fouled a Czech player in the penalty box, which should have caused a penalty kick, which would have created at least a little momentum for the Czechs going into garbage time. Sounds like a Czech Republic whistling convention up in here.

2:54 of garbage time -- The Czechs take their best shot yet, a screaming line drive that the African goalie has to jump up to block -- it was reminiscent of the Dwight Clark catch that beat the evil Cowboys in the early 80's. They then take their second best shot, but it too is blocked. Looks like we have a new "Best Goalie in the World." The refs then blow the whistle and the game ends, making the last two shots totally irrelevant in retrospect -- there was no way the Czechs could have gotten another shot off if they would have gotten a goal there. Now we know, and feel a little ripped-off. But hey, it's soccer -- what can you do?

After the first post-game set of commercials (like I said, there are none while the game is going on -- the one thing I really like about soccer as a TV sport, and it makes one wonder what the world would be like if all sports were run this way, with the always-upticking clock, garbage time, and no time-outs. You just know garbage time in the NBA would take like an hour, followed by about an hour of commercials. It would also eliminate the iconic last-second shot, meaning Robert Horry's career would have ended in 2003) the feed comes back to shots of the stadium and crowd noise, but no announcers. At one point, somebody starts singing, and then stops when he realizes he's on the air. Hey, if they keep messing up like this I'll watch soccer more often.

So anyway, the Ghana Beans end up winning 2-0, and that makes it time for us to examine what the match (foreigner for "game") means. The teams are in groups of 4, and they play each of the other teams in the group once. That means three games. Ghana was 0-1 before today, and the Czechs were 1-0. They are both 1-1 now. If the US beats Italy, then all four teams in the group will be even at 1-1. This will set up a pair of single-elimination games: US-Ghana and Italy-Czech Republic. You get three points for a win and one for a tie, which means that a win will get you into the next round for sure, and a tie will put you at the mercy of the tie-breakers, which are mystical and unexplainable, just like all tie-breakers. But to get to that scenario, the US will have to win today. That game is coming up next, so put on your star spangled underwear and grab a Budweiser, Coors, Miller Lite, or other domestic beer. No, no, that's right -- Miller is now owned by the Germans. Put that High Life down. Oh just forget it.

"World's Right; We're Wrong?"

Between games I want to point out an article I read in last week's SI by a guy named Steve Rushkin. It's called "World's Right, We're Wrong," and it's all about how US sports consumers are stupid for not liking soccer. It's the kind of reverse xenophobia that's become common in the Bush era, and it's about

half right -- he's right about it not being the boring pointless girly third-world distraction most Americans seem to think it is; but he's wrong about it being a super-exciting near-perfect sport that Americans hate just because we think we're better than the rest of the world. Let's examine his points, or at least the ones I can extract from his sarcasm:

1) **Our attitude toward the World Cup "illuminates many of our least flattering qualities as a nation," such as "breathtaking incuriosity about the rest of the world."** So, we should like soccer so we understand people in other countries? I can't even begin to explain how wrongheaded that is. You can't force people to be interested in some sport by guilting them into it. If you could, the WNBA would be gangbusters right now. So what if our indifferent attitude toward other countries is shown? I thought this was about soccer, the sport.

2) **We don't like to appreciate foreign innovation, so we don't appreciate the head-dribbler.** Yeah, so a guy from Brazil can dribble with his head. Rushkin claims this is a quantum leap forward for soccer, but for that to be true, the majority of players would need to be doing it. It's a bit, a freak show, and it still almost always ends in failure. Soccer is popular because it's remained the same for so long -- not because it's innovative. The point is moot.

3) **We fear the ponytail.** He's right, you know. But we're totally in the right about this. Sports in the US appeal primarily to men, and only women could like a man in a ponytail. We invented a term for a guy like this, remember? "Sensitive Ponytail Guy." Ponytail=loser, as far as real men are concerned. Someone needs to re-watch *Singles*.

4) **Related to 3), Soccer is viewed as a game for pansies; However, soccer players are "fitter" and "more concussed" than pros in other sports.** Whenever you're referring to a sports player-man as "fit," it's not a compliment. Personal trainers are fit. *Richard Simmons* is fit. And "more concussed?" Think about it -- every other shot is with their heads. Of course they get head trauma. Maybe soccer players would seem less girly if they didn't all look like wannabe fashion models who spend hours on their hair. Another suggestion: stop playing dead after every collision. It's pathetic and everybody hates it.

5) **It has the best names of any sport.** Which is better: Ronaldino or Boubacar Aw? I thought so. College basketball, still the king.

6) **We don't care about the world.** Well, the world *does* hate us, and it's become a chicken-egg thing at this point. Which came first, the hate or the lack of caring? I don't know. As for the attempted guilt trip, see no. 1).

7) **Soccer is great! Watch a bunch of highlights, and you'll see!** You could claim any sport's greatness by only watching highlights. Usually, highlights just mean bad defense. Plus, NBA guys do way more amazing stuff every game, and they're not really even trying most of the time.

He concludes with the statement: "If you don't like soccer, you don't like sports -- you only think you do." This is exactly the kind of thing that turns people off. Again, you could totally say that about any sport. "If you don't like high-school lacrosse, you don't like sports." See? The truth is, most sports fans like some sports better than others. I agree they should keep an open mind, but if they decide that soccer sucks, do they have to also decide that American football and baseball and basketball and hockey also suck? Perhaps we Americans have developed specialized tastes (from watching people dunk, hit people, and blast homers) that ancient low-scoring soccer can't hope to satisfy. Perhaps we

actually *are* different from the rest of the world, and everyone should be ok with that. Perhaps we're both right. Perhaps we should examine:

The Wrongness of Outright Dismissal

The World Cup is a wholly unique sporting event in our world, and only the Olympics can claim to fan the flames of national pride like this soccer tournament does (and the Olympics are about 1/10th as intense). The fans are absolutely insane, and on top of that global politics provides tons of (actually-, not fake-) fascinating human-interest stories for every team. Take Iran, for example. Yes, on the surface, we in the US would like to see them fail, but in Iran the hard-liners who want to turn Israel and America into smoking corpses *also* hate the soccer team and all it represents. It stands to reason that if the Iranian soccer team does well, the relative moderates will gain support, and that's good for everyone. And there are a bunch of considerations like this, from players being murdered for kicking the ball into their own goal (as has happened in Columbia) to players in Ghana being awarded huge sums of money for a win. Clearly, this event means more to the fans and participants involved than any other sporting event in the world, and that makes it fun.

And while scoring is indeed a rare occurrence, the game of soccer is not boring if you understand it well enough. Yes, most of the excitement ends in utter failure, but it's still filled with more ups and downs than any other game besides possibly its icy counterpart, hockey. The players are fantastically skilled and constantly doing amazing things with the ball and their feet. It's definitely not just a bunch of virile-looking and hairy men running around aimlessly -- that kind of talk comes from ignorance, not observation.

The Correctness of Conditional Ambivalence

That's not to say that the World Cup is the bee's knees; There are grains of truth in all the American criticisms of it. Let's examine some common ones, and the soccer freaks' responses:

"Nobody Scores" vs. "Baseball and Football games go for hours without scores, as well."

First of all, the way football and baseball are set up, the higher the game's score, the longer it goes. That means a 1-0 baseball game will take over an hour less time than a 9-8 HGH-fueled hit-festival. As I said, all soccer games take 90 minutes plus garbage time, and the clock never stops. An hour of no scoring in football is a quarter-and-a-half; in baseball, it's about half the game. In soccer, it's 2/3 of the game, and remember the clock has been ticking that whole time. This makes an hour of scoreless futbol seem like a constant string of failures, which is exactly what it is. Players miss passes, miss shots, commit drive-killing penalties, and miscalculate angles over and over again. The rules for offsides are pretty clear, and yet Ghana and the Czech Republic just combined for about 25 offsides in one game. This killed 25 possible scoring chances. At times, it seems like the goal is covered by a clear plastic sheet. This is unacceptable. Plus, when somebody says your sport is boring, don't use baseball as a contrary example. Everybody knows baseball is boring, but we're stuck with it.

"Nobody Likes It" vs. "It's the Most Popular Game in the World."

This seems to be the main issue between the pro- and anti-soccer factions. Nobody here likes it (and in fact expressing affection for soccer will get you ridiculed among most hard-core sports fans, as if you just said you liked the -ick- WNBA), and everybody (and I do mean everybody) "out there" does like it. Billions of foreigners can't be wrong, can they? Well, they grow up with it as part of their national

identity. It's not our fault we fell in love with Football Sundays and people in pads hitting each other. It's not our fault that compared to our version, World Cup futbol looks somehow both wimpy *and* graceless. And it's certainly not our fault that we can't get excited over a 1-1 tie where somebody's faking a foul every 30 seconds. Yes, the World Cup is fantastic drama, but it's also extremely weird-looking to our American eyes. Both sides of this debate need to step off and realize that the other has a point, before I get cranky. Oh, wait, the game's starting...

US vs. Italy

The national anthem of Italy sounds like an opera. As the US anthem starts, there is a loud cheer, and all the US players have their hands over their hearts. It's amazing to see that sung in an event where it actually means something. There are a ton of US fans there, hoping against hope that Italy can be defeated today. The Americans have never beaten Italy before. Let's see if these red, white, and blue underdogs can pull a Ghana and even up this group.

The first thing I notice is that the Italians are dressed in blue. Don't they know what colors the Italian flag has? Are pizza places going to have to get blue boxes now? What gives? The US is dressed in white shirts and midnight-blue shorts, and look vaguely like cruise-ship workers.

The announcers are distressingly American. Soccer should always be announced by either dry British queens or anybody speaking Spanish.

2:00 -- The US gets its first offsides penalty. How hard is this game, really? Come on. And what does it say about a sport when a major defensive tactic is running the wrong way in an effort to cause an offsides penalty?

6:00 -- The Blue Meanies get a weak shot off against Kasey Keller (sp?), who the announcers call "The Greatest Goalie in the World." I swear I'm not making this up.

7:45 -- This is why nobody scores in soccer. The US just had a looping kick into the penalty box that Landon Donovan couldn't get to. The ball bounced out of bounds with nobody touching it...oh, the US just failed again. Failure failure failure. I hate soccer.

10:02 -- The US has had a number of good scoring chances that they are doing nothing with. A typical play consists of a guy on the side kicking it to the middle of the box where there are seemingly 20 blue guys waiting for it, heads a boppin'. But the Italians can't even get it past midfield, so I guess that means something. Or more accurately, nothing. 0-0.

14:02 -- The US keeps stealing the ball from the Italians, but then running into the impenetrable Italian D. A US player was fouled in the little circle above the penalty box, which causes a penalty kick that the Italians try to block while covering their genitals. Guess what? The US fails again.

17:05 -- I just saw Reyna (a US failure) kick the worst pass I've ever seen. He looked like Antoine Walker throwing it into the stands. Yuck.

20:20 -- Another US failure leads to a Yellow Card for the US's Pope. The Italians in the stands start singing some lame Italian song.

21:45 -- Italy scores a goal in response to what was clearly the Italian Goal Song. The US was going to

try to draw the Italians offsides, but predictably Pope failed and paid for it with an Italian "header" goal. The US is 0-14-1 in World Cup play when the opponent scores first. Should I turn the game off now?

26:45 -- A super-gay goal off the Blue Meanie Christian Zaccardo's shin ties the score at 1-1. That's right, they couldn't score, so they had to use the body parts of the Italians. What a good Christian that guy is. I hope he doesn't get murdered. Think about that: You get on the World Cup team for your country with dreams of being a hero, and you score a goal for the other team. That's pretty messed up.

27:47 -- Derossi of Italy gets hit with a red card for Dikembe Mutomboing a US player's face with his elbow. It's the first real-looking foul I've seen in this World Cup. 11 vs. 10 the rest of the way, baby. All of a sudden, the World Cup has opened way up for these American failures. Can they manage to succeed despite themselves?

33:33 -- The announcer just said that for security purposes, the only team bus that doesn't have the team name on it is the US bus. Well, by a very short process of elimination, wouldn't the terrorists be able to figure that out? I'm just sayin'.

34:50 -- Italy sends in a guy nicknamed "The Snarling Dog." Can't wait to see where this goes. The entire Italian team looks like guys you'd meet in a seedy bar. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

35:10 -- The referees mess up an offsides call and probably cost Italy a goal. When soccer rains, it pours. The fans' whistling can be heard all the way in Brussels.

39:00 -- Reyna just fouled the Snarling Dog, then they hug. Since all these guys play for (and get paid lots of money by) European club teams, they all seem to know and respect each other. Where's Ivan Drago when you need him? Did the Soviets even play soccer?

41:20 -- The US almost hit a 35-foot laser goal. The ball bounced off the top of the net. Even with only 10 Blue guys on the field, the US cannot get a close shot. As an aside, how come there aren't more black players on the US team? The only one I see is Pope, and he stinks. That probably explains it, actually.

44:00 -- Mastroeni (a US player, oddly) is given a red card for tripping. It's a crap call. What is this, the NBA? The announcer calls it a "make-up call," and the faker who was fouled is carried off on a stretcher, only to get up 5 seconds later. I hate soccer.

After garbage time of 2 minutes, halftime begins. It is 1-1, and each team is absurdly down to 10 players. I'm not sure if that'll mean more goals or less goals in the second half. Clearly, the US just has to keep aiming for Christian's shin, because they're a bunch of girls who can't score themselves.

46:00 -- Pope gets a red card, the announcer says the refs should be fired, and everybody is stunned. A swarthy-looking Italian gets a penalty shot with the nut squad in front of him. Announcer: "All these people paid good money to see this game, and the referee keeps kicking people out." The US fouls did seem lame compared with the Italian Elbow. I hate soccer.

48:49 -- The US is up in fouls, 20-7. They appear to be totally getting jobbed. But then again, I don't know anything about soccer. With all the whining, I feel like I'm watching the NBA playoffs again.

51:45 -- Carlos Bocanegra (another US player, amazingly) almost returns Christian's favor by heading a ball off the top bar of the US goal.

54:10 -- The US is getting totally angry at the refs after every whistle. They've been given a ready excuse by the red cards -- time will tell if they use it.

56:18 -- I've heard a lot about the greatness of the US's Landon Donovan, but he looks like just another dude out there. Reyna just passed it to him at a weird angle, and Donovan acted as if he was too good for the ball. Plus, he looks like a college freshman, albeit one that works on a cruise ship. Oh, he just kicked it out of bounds again. Sign this guy to a huge contract, Linchester FC United.

61:00 -- An Italian just slapped the ball with his hands, but there was no call. The announcer says that it was inadvertent. We didn't have that exception in high school gym class, that's all I know.

61:42 -- A guy with Jesus hair is back for the Italians. The US just sent in another black guy, one that had a horrible game against the Czechs. Will we have some sort of redemption story here?

62:30 -- Landon Donovan makes a great play that almost results in a US goal. I take everything I wrote at 56:18 back.

64:10 -- The black guy scores a goal, but McBride of the US is clearly offside. Redemption abated, everybody get back to their seats.

66:44 -- It seems like the US is playing with more guys than Italy, not the other way around. An Italian leaves the game with cramps or something, and the game is momentarily even. Oh, he's limping back. This guy is taking fakery to a whole new level.

67:50 -- A blue guy almost shoots the ball into the side of the goal. Another Blue guy, Laquinta, or "The Inn," lies around like he got fouled. This happens a lot. I hate soccer.

69:40 -- An Italian gets a yellow card, and the announcer says the call wasn't warranted -- again. In the ensuing scrum, the black guy almost gets another goal.

72:00 -- The Greatest Goalie in the World makes a great save. Did you know he lives in a 1000-year-old German castle? Weirdo.

74:50 -- Playing with 9 guys, the US is getting tired. Italy still looks outmatched though. These guys are supposed to be a powerhouse? The announcer just said the refs "blew the game" again. I guess FIFA doesn't pay the announcers' salary. We need more announcers like this.

78:00 -- The US has a lot of guys with great 1-on-1 skills. They're totally schooling the boys in blue on the outside. Black Guy just had a breakaway, but was tripped. No foul. Go figure.

81:41 -- Everyone on the field is exhausted, and every time somebody threatens they are tripped. They aren't calling anything now. ABC just showed a feed of people in Times Square watching a giant TV that's presumably showing the World Cup. Everybody looks cold, and nobody's cheering. Not exactly an advertisement for soccer.

85:00 -- Black Guy has another chance, but fails. Don't these guys get tired of failing all the time?

C'mon, cruise ship workers, score one of your own goals. Italy has had several chances to score here, but either Greatest Goalie or offsides or blue ineptitude have ruined each one.

87:55 -- "The Inn" misses by a mile. That guy stinks. Put the Snarling Dog back in, Italy. This is some boring soccer here. Looks like they're playing in slow-motion. Actually, it looks like your typical NBA regular season game.

89:43 -- The announcer says, "The crowd is just itching for some activity." I thought these players were supposed to be fit.

:55 of garbage time -- Black Guy just reaches up and hits the ball with his hand like an idiot, and they actually call it. Redemption aborted. Better luck next "match."

1:30 of garbage time -- The US goalie kicks the ball downfield and no US players chase it. Coming back, Keller makes a save. Looks like it's time to look neutral, because this thing is going to end in a tie.

3:00 of garbage time -- Black Guy runs downfield with the ball, but ends up falling down like a dork as the game ends. The Italian fans are singing a song that sounds like the Pet Shop Boys song "Go West" or the praise song "Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart." I don't think it was either one of those songs, though, since they aren't especially gay or thankful right now.

Back in the studio, Brent Musberger is telling us that the ref who gave out the red cards was previously suspended for "irregularities" and kept out of the 2002 World Cup. One of the analysts, a former soccer tool, says that there are "two kinds of referees -- bad ones and worse ones." He follows that with "Players win games, coaches lose games, and refs ruin games." Spoken like a true player. I guess this gives them something to talk about, since the last 20 minutes of the game was mostly players halfheartedly running towards the ball and kicking it out of bounds. I hate soccer.

For the USA soccer team to avoid total obscurity and make the second round, they have to beat Ghana and Italy has to beat the dirty Czechs. It's just that simple. I personally just hope they score a goal.

--2006