

Reflections on the World Cup

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In 2018 the World Cup will be held in Russia and the buzz around the world is one of ecstasy, particularly for young countries that qualified for the first time, like Iceland and Panama. With World Cup fixtures, the Netherlands and the United States, failing to qualify for the final stage, there is talk of major change in both federations. The United States, in particular, had been making important strides in recent Cups, making it to the second round routinely. This setback will undoubtedly make U.S. Soccer come to terms with the reality that major changes need to be made in order for the team to return to the world stage, especially as the U.S. has submitted a joint bid (with Mexico and Canada) to host the 2026 World Cup.

Recently, I heard a network announcer ask his colleagues, “Do you remember the first World Cup that you saw?” It was interesting to hear recollections on what is generally recognized as the greatest sporting event on earth. Here are my own earliest recollections, and how they have shaped my life.

The first World Cup that I watched was the 1966 event hosted by England (the last one televised in black and white). The Cup introduced me to “El Rey” Pele (Edson Arantes do Nascimento) from Brazil, the “Black Panther of Mozambique,” Eusebio from Portugal, and the Charlton brothers, Jackie and Bobby, from the eventual winner England. I remember sitting on the living room floor of our house in Mexicali and hearing the announcer continually mention the name “Charlton.” As days went by and England advanced, it dawned on me that there were two Charltons, Bobby and Jackie—gradually, I was able to distinguish between the brothers.

Because of these soccer personages, I dedicated my nine-year-old life to becoming a professional soccer player. To me, the word “professional” simply meant I would one day be on television myself.

In 1966 Mexico had a great goal keeper named Antonio “La Tota” Carbajal. La Tota was performing in his fifth World Cup, and at the time, I didn’t realize how significant and monumental his achievement was. La Tota became my hero, and my childhood love for net-tending began. I wanted to score goals like Pele and tend the net like La Tota. For the next two years, I honed my skills as

a finisher and keeper in the streets of Mexicali—I learned quickly how to dive, roll, and bounce up in goal, as well as score goals like none of my peers.

In 1967 and 1968, I played my first two years of organized soccer (using the term *organized loosely*). On weekends, we showed up to play for the local neighborhood team—we never practiced. Our training ground consisted of recess pickup games, and daily afternoon games in the dirt streets and fields of my Mexicali neighborhood, La Colonia Cuhutémoc.

A significant event happened during my first year of organized soccer. When school started in September, 1966, my two older brothers, (twins Jose Luis and Juan Francisco), who were sixth graders, went out to play soccer at recess. I remember this as if it was yesterday. Recess began with selecting teams and I quickly invited myself to be chosen. The leader of the group that I wanted to join was called El Chiro, a nickname. I can't remember what his real name was, you see, we all had nick names back then. Mine was Sapó (Toad) but that's a story for another day.

When it came time to choose teams, Chiro and the older boys told my brothers that only sixth graders could play. Since I was in fourth grade, I didn't qualify. However, I didn't give up. For two weeks, I stood by a volleyball net pole and watched them play, always asking beforehand if I could join. I was denied. Yet I knew I could play with those guys, if only they would give me a chance.

My patience and perseverance paid off when the last day of the second week of play, one of the goalkeepers didn't show up for school. Insistently, I asked my brothers to tell their friends to let me play. Reluctantly, El Chiro said that I could but I would have to play as a keeper only. I agreed and the rest of the year, the position was mine, like Lou Gehrig and Wally Pip.

The first organized soccer team that I played on (in 1966) was called *Relampago* (Lightning Bolt). It was organized by teenage neighbor Daniel "El Moicano" (The Mohican). We all wore T-shirts with a lightning bolt on the front and a number on the back, both hand-drawn. My second team in 1967, *Oro* (Gold), was better organized and it carried the name of a professional team from Guadalajara. Our uniforms were yellow-dyed tees with blue painted numbers.

In the spring of 1968, I made the U-12 Mexicali All-star team. The game took place at the local municipal stadium, El Necaxa. I played striker and goal-tended. We played on grass for the first time. And for the first time . . . I felt

like a pro. Several hundred people were in the stands, but to me it felt like thousands.

Those were my last days in Mexicali. During the summer of 1968 my mother brought us to the Fresno/Clovis area to live with my grandparents. But I will never forget the 1966 World Cup and how it changed my life.

Following are personal reflections on subsequent World Cups (WC), which are not only important events for me personally but have widespread social, economic and political implications globally.

1970: The WC was hosted by Mexico. I was bummed since I was attending middle school in the U.S. I was even sadder since Clovis, the district where I went to school, did not have soccer at the pre-high school level. I would not play soccer for four years. I watched The Cup from my grandparents' living room as Pele and company dismantled all of their opponents on their way to a third World Cup championship thus keeping the Jules Rimet Trophy permanently.

1974: I was a sophomore in high school, playing on the varsity team with best friend Mike Neves. The WC was hosted by West Germany. Mike actually had no knowledge of the World Cup or what it meant to the rest of the world, as was the case with most American youth at the time. One day in spring, Mike mentioned that his dad, who was in the military, was stationed in West Germany. My eyes lit up with excitement. I told Mike that he should ask his dad to fly him to West Germany to watch some of the games. Mike, being the oldest and his dad's favorite, made the petition, which was accepted. He then traveled to Germany to see a few WC matches. Ultimately West German captain Franz Beckenbauer lifted the Cup for his country after defeating the Netherlands in the Final.

1978: I was a sophomore at Fresno Pacific at the time and the host Argentina was not a favorite. The Netherlands, with clockwork orange and practicing total football, were one of the favorites, even though they did not bring their iconic player Johan Cruyff. Brazil was also a favorite with a brand of football dubbed "The Beautiful Game." Argentina reached the Final although there was controversy about their victory against Peru. They went on to win the WC in overtime, after the Netherlands hit the crossbar late in the game that might have given them their first WC Championship. It wasn't to be and Argentina, with Mario Kempes "El Matador", went on to capture their first World Cup.

1982: I had just returned to Fresno after playing professional soccer for the Los Angeles Aztecs. I was preparing to enter a Teacher Education program and embark on a first coaching experience as Assistant Coach to Ben Norton at Fresno Pacific. Spain was the host of that World Cup and there was much excitement. Argentina had a young rising star in Diego Armando Maradona. Brazil had assembled a group of players reminiscent of their 1970 team, which is considered the best World Cup team. Leading up to the Final, Italy came from nowhere, to surprise Brazil in the second group stage, beat Poland in the semis and then defeated West Germany in the championship match. A young Paolo Rossi, was the star of this tournament after being banned from Italian football for two years prior to the WC.

1986: This is the year that FIFA awarded the Cup for a second time to a host nation. Mexico hosted the Cup after not qualifying four years earlier. This Cup was significant for me since I had planned to attend with friends Ken Fox and David Ramirez. David was my roommate in college and Ken, from Vancouver B.C., was the goalkeeper for Fresno Pacific's 1978 team, during a season that will forever be embedded in my mind. Fresno Pacific took a 17-day tour to the Midwest that year then came home to host a tournament and beat eventual NCAA DII national champion, Seattle Pacific. We also defeated Fresno State 1-0 in overtime. I scored the goal. Our last match was a winning championship game against CSU Long Beach in the Southern California Intercollegiate Soccer Association. This was Fresno Pacific's first championship soccer team. But I did not attend the World Cup in Mexico because of summer school teaching responsibilities. David and Ken went but came home early due to David's sudden illness due to Lupus complications (he died two years later). Although Argentina went on to win the World Cup over West Germany in 1986, and Diego Maradona scored the most remarkable goal in the history of the Cup, I will remember this tournament as the last one seen by my best friend in college, David Ramirez.

1990: This was the World Cup that was the weakest. There wasn't a single team that I looked forward to seeing with any sense of high anticipation. Argentina had Maradona, but Brazil didn't have a famous name on their roster. Italy, the host, relied on a forward, Salvatore Schillaci, from a second division team who ended up being the leading goal scorer of the tournament. Argentina tarnished the tournament with allegations that they gave tainted water to

some Brazilian players during an injury time-out. Argentina went on to win the match 1-0 on a late goal by Claudio Caniggia from a pass from Maradona. Watching this Cup it became clear to me that life is carried out at various levels of comportment when much is at stake. Germany went on to win the Final over Argentina on a controversial penalty call by Mexican official Edgardo Codesal. Andreas Brehme converted the penalty to help West Germany lift the Cup.

1994: This was a Cup to remember. It was hosted by the United States for the first time under the condition that they have a professional league in place by the time the WC started. Major League Soccer did not actually begin until 1996, two years later. But FIFA gave the U.S. an extension. All matches were played at NFL and college stadiums. I bought tickets for two matches for my family. I first took my son Orlando, 10 years old at the time, to see Brazil vs Cameroon, at Stanford Stadium. I'll never forget that day, because he was at summer camp with his 6th grade class. I went' early in the morning to Sonora to pick him up at the camp site and together we drove to Palo Alto to see the match. My first live World Cup match with my oldest. By this time, it was clear that Orlando would follow a life path that included soccer. He was an All-Star player at the Roosevelt Youth Soccer League, and had a passion for the game, like I did back in Mexicali. With my whole family, we then attended the U.S. vs Romania match in Pasadena. It was exciting to watch the match but it was also so hot that the field temperature was around 130 degrees. Many people, especially older people, tried to get into the Rose Bowl's stair tunnels to get some shade. It was madness as young people would not move for the elderly or for children. Several people were given medical assistance due to heat exhaustion.

The 1994 Final was between Brazil and Italy, two historic winners with three Cups each. Brazil eventually won on penalties with players like Romario, Bebeto, Dunga, and Branco. A significant highlight of this World Cup and the most memorable was when, during Brazil's training camp, leading to their group stage in Palo Alto, they played a friendly match against El Salvador in Fresno. I had the opportunity to be a part of the staff that worked the game with an all-access pass. My family and I met most of the Brazilian stars. One significant member of that team, overlooked by fans and the media at the time, was 17 year-old Ronaldo Nazário de Lima, later dubbed The Phenomenon. I was able to see the match at ground level standing by one of the corner flags. I could not believe the speed with which the Brazilians moved the ball, the

perfection of their passes, and force they used to strike the ball from any angle. They played instinctively. All of them seemed to know what the other person was going to do before they received the ball. At least, it seemed that way. It was the first time I was able to truly appreciate what professional soccer, at the highest level, was all about. I still have the player cards signed by each member of the team. Soccer, for my family and me, went to another level after this live World Cup experience.

1998: Two years prior to the World Cup in France, professional soccer returned to the U.S. via the Major League Soccer (MLS) league. The inaugural match was played in San Jose between The San Jose Clash and D.C. United. I bought two tickets for the match to take Orlando to see this historic event. I saw some familiar faces from the local soccer scene. A good friend and former teammate in Fresno adult leagues, Levon Baladjanian, was now a FIFA official and one of the assistant referees at this match. After the game, Orlando and I met then U.S. National Team coach Steve Sampson, who is currently at Cal Poly.

The 1998 games were a fantastic affair as France was the originator of the idea of holding a World Cup. Brazil with their rising star Ronaldo were impressive. France with Zinedine Zidane defeated Brazil 3-0 in a match that the rising star Ronaldo played while he was ill. It is rumored that Nike sponsors urged him to play anyway since he had a multi-million-dollar contract with them. During the match, Ronaldo was not the player he had been leading up to the finals. But there are many conspiracy theories.

2002: This was the first World Cup hosted by two nations, South Korea and Japan. It was also the first time the WC had been hosted by a country outside Europe and the Americas. Brazil reached the Final against Germany. With Ronaldo at his best, Brazil won handily over Germany, whose best player was its goalie Oliver Kahn.

The 2002 WC pitted the United States against Mexico in the round of 16 with the United States winning 2-0 with a goal from a young Landon Donovan. My heart was torn in this match because I wanted Mexico to win but knew that a U.S. victory would be good for soccer here. I am aware of where I live and what my job is. It was good for all of us. Mexico is a neighbor that regularly fills stadiums to capacity. With 40 million people of Mexican descent in the U.S., the Mexican Federation has done well to promote matches with the

Mexican National team on U.S. soil. The Federation earns millions of dollars as a result. In essence, Mexico has a home field advantage in both countries, even when it plays in the United States against the U.S. national team. No other country in the world has this privilege and condition.

2006: Germany hosted the World Cup for a second time since winning in 1974 and it was assumed that they would win again having placed second a record number of times since 1974. However, 2006 was a low point for player development in Germany, which had fallen as low as #20 in the FIFA World Ranking. The most memorable moments happened in the Finals when Frenchman Zinedine Zidane head butted Italian Marco Materazzi for making derogatory comments about Zidane's sister, resulting in Zidane being ejected from the match. Had Zinedine kept his composure in a match that was tied 1-1 at the time, France may have won their second Cup in eight years. However, this ejection allowed Italy to take the match into extra time and win in penalties, giving Italy their fourth World Cup trophy. Germany's coach, Jurgen Klinsman took the host team to a significant third place finish.

2010: This World Cup was a celebration for the ages. It was the first time the Cup had touched African soil. Unfortunately, it was later discovered that the decision to make South Africa the host had been influenced by millions of dollars in payments. The original vote winner was Morocco. Delegates from the South African Federation offered bribes to FIFA officials to change the vote. This was the beginning of the end for scandals dealing with corruption within the world governing body of soccer and its president Sepp Blatter. The event also marked the first time that the host nation was eliminated from the tournament in the first round. It was also the first time a European team had won the Cup outside of the European continent. Spain defeated the Netherlands 1-0 in extra time to solidify Spain's claim to the best soccer team in the world. With the core of their starting team being from Barcelona FC and a sprinkling of players from Real Madrid and other clubs, Spain proved that they could finally lift the Cup. With seven of the eleven starters coming from Barcelona, Spain showed the world why Barcelona's current team might be considered the best club team in history. Andres Iniesta scored the winning goal in extra time that allowed Iker Casillas, Spain's captain, to hoist the Cup.

2014: The World Cup finally returned to the country that had won it the most times. Five times Brazil had hoisted the Cup, but never on its own soil. When

Brazil first hosted the World Cup in 1950, it built the biggest stadium in the world, the Maracana (in Rio De Janeiro), with a capacity of 200,000 spectators. During the last match of the 1950 World Cup against Uruguay, it is estimated that over 210,000 people were in attendance. Brazil, only needing a tie to be crowned World Cup champions for the first time, lost to Uruguay 2-1, however, after giving up the lead. That match will forever be labeled “El Maracanazo,” meaning the biggest failure in Maracana.

For the 2014 World Cup, the Maracana was rebuilt--- upgraded and down-sized --- to a capacity of 77,000 with modern seating accommodations for every spectator. It was hoped to be a time of redemption for Brazil. The tournament was indeed marred by controversy over fiscal issues and various FIFA controversies (for example, building state of the art stadiums that were rarely used after World Cup events. In Manaus, for example, a huge stadium was built for 330 million dollars. Once the tournament was over, the use of Arena Amazonia was limited). Still Brazil had every hope of reaching the final. Germany had other plans and in the semifinal Brazil fell, in embarrassing fashion, 1-7. Whether or not it was worse than the Maracanazo, only time and history will tell. Will it be remembered as the second Maracanazo? Brazil then lost the match for third place to the Netherlands 0-3 making the 2014 World Cup a failure for the host country that had once dubbed soccer “Jogo Bonito, The Beautiful Game.