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## FOR THE LOVE OF SOCCER

BY KEN PENDLETON

Soccer has been dismissed by American critics for a number of reasons: There is too little scoring; it doesn't make sense to rely on your feet when you can use your hands; and then there's the alleged lack of masculinity, especially in comparison to sports like American football.

There is some truth to these allegations. No other sport that is popular in the U.S. regularly results in zero-zero outcomes. A game without goals is perceived as a day without sunshine. It's a lot easier to catch or throw a ball with your hands than it is to trap and accurately kick it with your feet, and soccer certainly isn't as violent as its gridironed cousin. In fact, the rules, however liberally applied, make it clear that physical contact should be kept to a minimum.

There is, however, another way to look at the exact same set of facts.

Most goalless matches are hard to watch, but the problem is not the lack of goals; it is the lack of willingness to take the risks necessary to score them. Soccer is like boxing: Every time you try to land a punch, you expose yourself to a counter-attack. And sometimes you have matches, whether in boxing or soccer, where neither side has the guts to expose defensive vulnerabilities. Conversely, the best matches occur when both teams have the confidence to take initiative and trade blows.

Furthermore, the relative lack of scoring in soccer means that most matches are close. I would be willing to bet that most Ducks football games are effectively settled midway through the third quarter, which is why so many fans never return from a halftime drinking binge — this is rarely the case in soccer. Most matches are settled by the odd goal and you feel genuinely gleeful the few times your team is winning by a wider margin, because it happens so rarely.

The fact that players, besides the goalkeeper, cannot use their hands also adds to the tension during matches. You expect a basketball player to catch a ball with his hands if it's passed 30 feet, even if he is being covered tightly, but it is much harder for a soccer player. This is why low-quality matches are harder to watch. The basic constituent parts of play — controlling a pass, dribbling, passing and shooting accurately — are much harder to master. This is why soccer seems more disjointed than, say, basketball, but it also makes you appreciate the few teams, most notably Barcelona, who are able to make something so difficult look so easy. There is another upside to using one's feet: The ball can be kicked farther than it can be thrown, and it can be made to bend dramatically using the inside or the outside of one's foot. Combine all these elements and you can understand why goals scored in soccer have a richer aesthetic quality than points scored in any other sport.

Finally, there is the issue of the supposed lack of manliness. I say supposed because soccer can be pretty rough. The form that violence takes can range from the inadvertent but inevitable kick on the shin to ruthless, injurious aggression. The bottom line is that soccer, like baseball and basketball, is a contact sport that sometimes degenerates into a collision sport.

The differences between these three sports, on the one hand, and football and hockey, on the other, is that brutal bodily contact is not inevitable. Now, if your standard for manliness requires high-speed, bone-jarring, bell-ringing, slobber-knocking impact, then you are quite right to condemn soccer and these other sports because they don't sanction such carnage. But all these sports, especially soccer, do strike what might be described as a healthy balance between balletic grace and physicality.

This is well illustrated by the fact that the best player in the world, Lionel Messi, is 5'7" and weighs around 150 pounds. He could never succeed in football or hockey, or even basketball or baseball, but soccer is still a game that places as much, or more, of a premium on skill as it does on physical stature. That may be at odds with the American definition of masculinity, which is based on the ideal that bigger must be better, but the rest of the world does not share that view — which is why soccer is the world's game.

Ken Pendleton earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the UO in 1998, but his first love, for better or for worse, is sports, and in particular soccer. He currently teaches courses on sports and society in the Competition Not Conflict program, which is part of the UO Law School.