



## Soccer vs Baseball: Sports or Philosophies of Life?

Benedetta Grasso (June 16, 2010)



Once the less followed sport in America, now soccer is all over the news. What are the cultural aspects behind the choice of a country's favorite sport?

Soccer, soccer, soccer. Since the World Cup started, it's all we can talk about. Who will win? Which country do you support? How patriotic are you?

Europeans don't need something as extraordinary as the World Cup to talk about soccer, but it's strange to hear the major US networks, newspapers, the most famous comedians and talk shows dedicate more and more time to soccer.

This is obviously a media-centric event, much like the Olympics, but it's also true that the trend is changing. Soccer, the most unpopular game in the US for years, has now gained a form of respect, an attention that encourages Americans to know more about it, whether by looking up to certain players or by practicing and playing it from a young age.



Still though, baseball remains the national sport and as many Americans like to point out, this pedestal is about something bigger than the game itself.

The first day the World Cup started I turned my TV on ESPN and there it was: two hours of college baseball. In Italy, meanwhile, every single channel had something on the upcoming soccer matches.

And that brings us to the eternal debate. Why is soccer not popular in the US? Why is sport perceived so differently in the two countries?

Year after year, we hear the same things said over and over, the same inevitable comments on both sides. Raise your hand if you have never heard an Italian (or a European) say: "Baseball is the most boring game in the world. Nothing happens. There are too many rules, too many pauses". Or an American say: "Soccer is pure anarchy. Soccer is a simplistic game, it's something for kids and little girls".

It's fascinating because the way a country approaches sports reflects other aspects of the culture and shows what the prioritized values in society are.

It can become a political thing or a matter of ethics.

In fact, a few decades ago - and still today in the most conservative circles - soccer was considered deeply "un-American", a game that stands for "enemies", "third world" countries, like the South American neighbors, and which displays typical "un-American" characteristics.

The comedian Stephen Colbert recently joked about this in a monologue comparing baseball to soccer. In baseball you have the complexity of rules and various phases- seen in a positive and negative light. There are "time ins and time outs", a sense of pace, safety and the reassurance that you are guided through the game. There is a deep need for the ritual, songs like "take me out to the Ball game", movements and specific moments ("kiss-cam" or cues given by music) in which the audience is supposed to react a certain way.

Soccer stadiums have their rituals too, their slogans, their songs, but they are more spontaneous and less universal. They are not always the same.

What's even more intriguing is that these kind of comparisons are often made not only in the field of sport. Take a graduation ceremony in the United States: it's exactly the same feel, a beautiful ritual which comes at the end of a more guided and supervised academic career compared to the more spontaneous and independent academic career that you can pursue in Europe. At the end of college in Europe there are wild parties and celebrations but not a universalized ritual. Both are equally fun and meaningful: they simply reflect a mentality that goes beyond the sports field.

Then again, soccer is grassroots passion, technique and strategy. Its supporters argue that it's "the real sport," a sport where you sweat, you run, you are one with your team. A sport that, yes, little kids and girls can play easily, but that through the great champions shows what genius, grace and practice can mean...

Another big difference is the audience participation. Most Europeans are shocked when they walk into a baseball stadium and very few people are actually watching the game: there's eating, there's drinking, chatting, looking around for friends, roaming into the hallways of the stadium with a hotdog in your hand.

Most important, in some moments there is a strange silence, or a low background buzz. And then in the old continent, you have a heated game, fans who barely eat or drink because they can't take their eyes off the field. They constantly, non-stop, show their support to their team. Not just one yell or one song, but 90 minutes of uninterrupted chants, cheering and shouting.

There is the national anthem, something that in Italy you only hear during the World Cup, while in



the United States is used to open each game. Americans (most of the times, at least) really mean it when they are singing with a hand on their heart and hats off, while for Italians the anthem is sort of a joke. It's true Italians are less patriotic. But in a way, it's crucial to remember how they have been much more deeply united by a sport than Americans. In the past decades it was soccer and the World Cups Italy won (as in 1982) that unified a country, bringing it together more than any political law. Everyone feels Italian when Italy plays, the rich, the poor, the little kid and the old man. It's the people's game, not just the national sport.

There are some who argue that with baseball, and even more with US football, the violence is symbolized through the game or it's contained within it - like in a gladiators' match - but doesn't spread through the fans and hooligans, who cathartically experience it but don't practice it. This is sort of a pretentious statement, although it's undeniable how much more violent sports' fans are in Europe, when soccer in itself it's not a violent sport and compared to football has less physical contact.

Sports are linked with politics, economics, the way you are brought up. The slogans in the soccer stadiums in Italy reflect the latest news, the political parties linked to the team, the financial investments involved... racial or religious prejudices find their way into the chants. In the US there's a detachment from politics, which could mean a "cleaner," more neutral stadium. But it also reflects a general disinterest and apathy.

Italy puts a huge emphasis on soccer: little kids could tell you every single player, minor little details, an infinite number of data and facts on a team or on a tournament better than they will ever know History or Geography. An American kid does the same with baseball or basketball or football, although having more options in terms of sports and a huge country to grasp, there's probably less that he will know.

The Italian paradox, though, is that in school, at least, there's barely any sport or any possibility of practice. P.E. is a couple of hours a week, its' almost a long "recess" where nothing is really taught. In Italy kids don't get scholarships for sports and they are never trained for it in school. P.E. is regarded as a minor subject - most high-schools barely consider it for the final GPA. You can still play soccer but in small tournaments or leagues outside of school.

On the other hand, with the dedication that American schools put into sports, and into treating athletes like students, giving baseball the same importance of Math, even if soccer might never be the most popular sport in the US, you might find a kid who has played it a billion more hours than a European one...and isn't that ironic?

Finally, there is one big issue that always comes up when this debate arises. How can there be a sport where at the end of a match no one wins? Well, the question posed often by Americans regarding soccer games ending in a tie, sometimes shows a little ignorance, because a soccer match even when it ends 0-0, still gets a determinate amount of points to the team that could benefit it or not. But the problem is not really that: it's in the satisfaction of seeing someone winning or losing, it's in setting things straight.

America is about big numbers, matches that end with double digits: there's nothing more American than vastness, largeness, greatness and "setting things straight".

Sports become once again political, social. One could even go as far as saying that, on the one hand, soccer is very direct, populist, and allows for equal opportunities. On the other hand, baseball is the epitome of representative democracy, in which you pass things, base after base.

As far as winners and losers are concerned, it's funny how, at every US presidential election, Italian newspapers or Italians in general are always incredibly shocked at how quickly the candidate who loses disappears from the political scene. Of course, McCain and Kerry are still active in politics, but once the match is won, one winner remains, while in Italy, politics drag in that grey area of those who can still block things from getting done, regardless of their title. Can sports be a lesson for politics?



Obviously these are all big generalizations, but they prove once again that sports are not simply sports and that the next time you criticize or comment on a baseball or a soccer game, you might look at how many interesting implications there are in choosing between hitting a ball with a bat or kicking it with your foot.

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