

The Biggest Event of The Beautiful Game Is Back!

The 2018 FIFA World Cup is around the corner. The event that lovers of The Beautiful Game—or *o jogo bonito* as they would say in Brazil—have been patiently waiting for kick-off mid-June, and passionate fans from all over the world will turn their attention to the football stadiums of Russia. A total of 64 games will be played over 32 days (June 14 to July 15, 2018) in 11 cities (Yekaterinburg, Kaliningrad, Kazan, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Saint Petersburg, Samara, Saransk, Sochi, and Volgograd), 12 stadiums, and across 4 time zones (UTC+2, UTC+3, UTC+4, and UTC+5) to decide the winner of the tournament among the 32 participating teams. Even the selection process of the official mascot of the 2018 FIFA World Cup provides an indication of the size of the event: More than 1 million Russian citizens cast their votes online over a month-long voting period, and the winning candidate was revealed in a live television show on Russia's Channel 1. The winner: a football-playing wolf that goes by the name of Zabivaka.

Association football, or soccer, is considered by many much more than simply a sport. Liverpool Football Club's legendary manager Bill Shankly once famously said, "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death; I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that." Popular books have used soccer to try to explain the failure of globalization to erode ancient hatreds in the sport's great rivalries; to address the consequences of migration, the persistence of corruption, and the rise of powerful oligarchs; and to defend the virtues of old-fashioned nationalism as a way to blunt the return of tribalism.¹ Data obtained from real-life football matches have been used by economists to demonstrate that incentives can have perverse effects when agents engage in sabotage activities² and to confirm the predictive power of the Nash equilibrium in mixed strategies in game theory, as well as von Neumann's Minimax theorem.^{3,4} Some behavioral scientists and economists, however, consider that The Beautiful Game is willful in its ignorance and ripe for change and that at the center of that change are numbers to challenge convention and invert norms, overhaul practices, and shatter beliefs.⁵

Sport scientists, of course, have also turned their attention to The Beautiful Game. Recent examples are the edited books *Science and Soccer*⁶ and *Soccer Science*⁷ and the special issue on soccer research that the *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance (IJSP)* published 4 years ago (Vol 9, No 3, May 2014), right before the 2014 FIFA World Cup played in Brazil. Although the journal has continued to publish articles on soccer physiology and performance over the past 4 years, the editorial team of *IJSP* have selected and compiled the most recent available research to produce this special issue. Readers will find a wide variety of topics such as integrated periodization for individual and team sports; the impact of soccer training and

match play on sleep, perceived exertion, and wellness; postmatch recovery strategies; players' neuromuscular function and locomotor activities; match performance metrics in able-bodied and cerebral palsy players; and testing eccentric hamstring strength . . . with a smartphone!

Of course, not every aspect of *o jogo bonito* is beautiful. A few months ago, a team paid over 220 million euros for the transfer of a single player (please note for comparative purposes that the award-winning stadium of my team, San Mamés stadium in Bilbao, Basque Country, was built in 2013 for 186.5 million euros . . .). What this means is that football is also very big business, offering ample opportunities for dodgy deals, tax evasion, insider trading, and other dubious, dishonest, or corrupt financial activities. The fans of the winning sides often display massive, joyful celebrations, but unfortunately, the joy of victory, as well as the frustration and anger of defeat, sometimes turns to violent displays of obsessive nationalism and disgraceful hooliganism.

Whether you are fortunate to watch the event live at the stadium, in front of one of the thousands of big screens placed in crowded public parks and town squares throughout the world, or in the intimacy of your own home; whether you have a team to cheer, encourage, support, and barrack for; or you simply wish to enjoy the matches as a neutral lover of the sport, please do so with passion, but also with civility, respect, and sportsmanship. Be humble in victory and gracious in defeat. The biggest event of The Beautiful Game is back!

Iñigo Mujika
Associate Editor, *IJSP*

References

1. Foer F. *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization*. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2004.
2. Garicano L, Palacios-Huerta I. *Sabotage in Tournaments: Making the Beautiful Game a Bit Less Beautiful*. Centre for Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper No. 5231; 2005. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/cpr/ceprdp/5231.html>
3. Palacios-Huerta I. Professionals play Minimax. *Rev Econ Stud*. 2003; 70:395–415. doi:10.1111/1467-937X.00249
4. Palacios-Huerta I. *Beautiful Game Theory: How Soccer Can Help Economics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2014.
5. Anderson C, Sally D. *The Numbers Game. Why Everything You Know About Football Is Wrong*. London, UK: Penguin Books; 2014.
6. Williams AM. *Science and Soccer: Developing Elite Performers*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge; 2013.
7. Strudwick T. *Soccer Science*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics; 2016.