

# National(ist) Pastime



“Do sports really matter?” asks Richard Reeves in his syndicated column. He then goes on to make fun of us Europeans for taking sports much too

seriously in general and football’s World Cup in particular. Coming from an American, this I find a bit rich, because no matter how one cuts it, there are only two sports-mad nations on this planet. America is one of them, the other is Australia.

No, what Reeves should have written was that come World Cup time, we sophisticated Europeans go bananas and leave such unpleasant topics as Iraq and American failures in foreign policy to the bores and snake-oil salesmen who got Uncle Sam involved in the first place. This last point is quite important. During normal times one looks for Iraq news and the latest rumors coming out of Washington. But the average person has as much influence over policy and what transpires in the nation’s capital as I have in Hollywood.

Politicians, especially in Europe, have disdain for the common man. They are not truly democratic in their beliefs. They know that if there were a free vote on many matters, Europeans would vote for all sorts of unenlightened measures: the restoration of the death penalty, for example, and in a lesser way the withdrawal from the European Union.

In other words, the governing class tells the people what is good for them, and in turn the governed are permitted to think that their votes count. They do not and never have except when blood is spilled.

But come World Cup time, everyone has a say. Let me quote from the *Kenya Times*: “Africa’s last hope was extinguished with Ghana’s 3-0 defeat at the hands of Brazil. The emphatic victory teaches Africa a cruel lesson. The continent’s teams are yet to catch up with

their European and South American counterparts.” Bravo *Kenya Times*, say I. When was the last time an African newspaper or politician did not blame an African defeat in sports, or in any other matter, on imperialism and the big bad West?

There is something very great about football. Everyone except North Americans plays it and loves it. The real reason they do is not patriotism but nationalism, the latter considered a dirty word by the kleptocrats who rule us from Brussels.

Tribalism comes alive at World Cup time. The politicians don’t like it, so they blow smoke by calling it an extension of politics by other means. Yes, football between nations is the closest thing to

**AN ENTIRE PEOPLE BEING LIBERATED FROM THEIR PAST BY A FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT CAME TOGETHER TO ELEVATE A MATCH INTO A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE.**

war, which was the original extension of politics by other means. I watched Germany defeat Argentina in overtime and saw the Argies do exactly what they did in the Falklands back in 1982. They scored first, just as they did back in ’82 when they occupied the islands, then proceeded to dig in and play defense. Eventually the Germans scored and won the match, just as the Brits won back the Falklands when the Argentine army dug in and was picked off by gunners with night-vision weapons. Then and now, riots followed defeat.

Mind you, I forgot to mention the remarks of the stuffy and rather silly *New York Times*. “The masters of soccer

have never managed to straighten out the culture of violence and deception at the core of the game nearly as well as the four major leagues in North America have done.” (Players dive pretending to be fouled in order to gain advantage.) As always, the *Times* is not only wrong, it is ridiculous. The reason soccer has not caught on in North America is that bad players play it, and the game’s much too tame. Someone should send George Vecsey to a European school to learn what soccer is all about.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Americans don’t like to kick a ball but like to throw it through a hoop, run with it, or hit it with a piece of wood. We Europeans like to kick it and while we’re at it, kick a little bit of our opponents. And another thing. When nations play against each other, they become the real thing. An entire people unite, as the Germans did here this month. An entire people in the extraordinary throes of

being liberated from their past by a football tournament came together to elevate a match into a spiritual experience. The roar that went up when the German team came out to face Italy was taken up in every city, town, village, and hamlet across the country.

A European country will win the cup, which gives me great pleasure. Germany hosting the cup was the political symbol not only of German reunification but the collapse of Communism. This was the popular expression of one-nation unity. Bravo, Europe!

Reeves and Vecsey, stick to softball with the girls on Sunday morning and leave the diving and the violence to us. ■

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