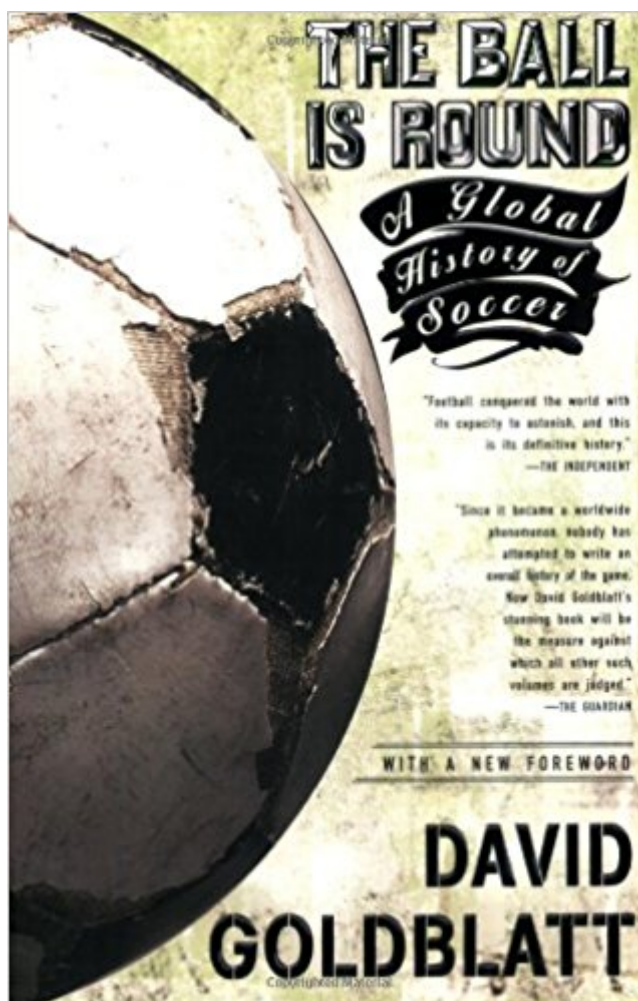


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The Ball Is Round: A Global History Of Soccer



Synopsis

A definitive history of global football. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The definitive book about soccer. With a new foreword for the American edition. There may be no cultural practice more global than soccer. Rites of birth and marriage are infinitely diverse, but the rules of soccer are universal. No world religion can match its geographical scope. The single greatest simultaneous human collective experience is the World Cup final. In this extraordinary tour de force, David Goldblatt tells the full story of soccer's rise from chaotic folk ritual to the world's most popular sport-now poised to fully establish itself in the USA. Already celebrated internationally, *The Ball Is Round* illuminates soccer's role in the political and social histories of modern societies, but never loses sight of the beauty, joy, and excitement of the game itself. Questions for David Goldblatt .com: There's a sentence in the middle of *The Ball Is Round* that to me sums up a great deal of the culture of football. After noting that Pelé had scored nearly a goal a game in over 1,300 professional matches--the sort of stat that would be on every page in a history of one of the major American sports but that is very rare in this one--you write, "This of course tells us nothing about all the goals he made." What stories do football fans tell about their sport and their stars? Goldblatt: Well, in America not only would you be banging on about Pele's goal to game ratio but you would have been collecting statistics in a rational organized manner about his assists--a concept that had only entered soccer statistics in the last few years. The state of Brazilian football statistics during Pelé's career would not pass muster in Cooperstown in can tell you. Bill James would have a

nervous breakdown with hopeless state of the data base. Soccer fans tell a lot the same stories that Americans tell themselves, sagas, epics, heroic tasks, near misses, dramatic comebacks, tales of curious individualists and unshakeable teams, but they are told in a the idioms, genres, vocabulary, and head space of hundreds of different cultures. .com: I have to ask the inevitable question: why hasn't football--rather, soccer--ever taken hold in the United States (despite generations now who grow up playing it)? (And does the rest of the world care if it ever does?) I was fascinated by your comment in the American foreword that you recovered from finishing the book by ignoring soccer for half a year and only watching American sports. What did you notice? Goldblatt: Contrary to the received wisdom I would say that soccer has taken hold in the US, if we look at participation figures amongst women and the young, and while MLS isn't about to challenge the premiership or Serie A for money or glamour it looks like it is now established on a firm footing. If the game can just tap into the rising Latino communities of America it could be pushing hockey for fourth sport. That said it would still be just number 4. Baseball, football, and basketball have now had over a century's head start on soccer and between them created a wider sports culture--of expectations, tastes, and pleasures--that I think sometimes finds soccer incomprehensible (what's with the draws?) or distasteful (all that diving). Soccer had its chance in the USA in the 1920s and 30s when East Coast professional leagues were drawing big crowds but a combination of bureaucratic infighting, the Wall Street crash, and the lingering ethnic associations of the game killed it for two generations. My time with American sports, which I should add is far from over, wasn't planned. After the 2006 World Cup I just couldn't watch any more soccer and there was an awfully big space in my brain where that used to go on. Moneyball by Michael Lewis came into the void and that took me to Jules Tygiel and the great tradition of baseball histories, Ken Burns's long documentary which enchanted me (watched the whole thing in two days) and by the time I had read Roger Angell and stopped laughing, discovered Jackie Robinson, DiMaggio's Streak, and the Shot Heard Round the World it was time to subscribe to NASN and watch the last two months of the 2006 season. If you like the places where culture, society, sport, and history intersect then you're going to like baseball. I'm still working on hockey, in fact I'm still working on seeing the puck, and I'm trying hard to understand football--but I'm finding the helmets, amongst other things, a problem. What did I notice? Where do I begin? After barely thinking about the United States for three and half years the whole modern history of America opened up before me. That's a work in progress. .com: It's hard to underestimate the density and breadth of knowledge that went into this book: politics, culture, and of course football, across the entire football-playing world (which is to say, the entire world). How did you research your vast topic? Goldblatt: The Ball Is Round was, in retrospect, 20 years in the making. I

had wanted to write a world history since I knew that such things existed. In a former life I spent a long time working on globalization and global history and then I made a global atlas of football, so I had plenty of background. After that, I followed Phillip Pullman's advice, "Read like a butterfly, write like a bee." I read a lot, followed my nose and other's advice, scoured journals, libraries and old magazines, studied web sites, visited museums, stadia, and shrines, made contacts in a lot of countries, and begged, bought, and traded information and opinion--oh and I watched an awful lot of football. There were trips to Scotland, Sweden, Serbia, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Greece, Tunisia, Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina not to mention a lot of old games on video and DVD. How did I write it? Fast.

.com: There is nearly as much politics in your history as football--among Argentines, for instance, Peron has nearly as many index entries as Maradona. Why did you not want to write a history only of the players and the games? What relationship do you see between football and politics?

Goldblatt: How could anyone write a history of just players and games and be true to the meaning of soccer? Milan Kundera defended the role of the literary critic by arguing "Without the meditative background that is criticism, works become isolated gestures, historical accidents, soon forgotten." I would say the same of social history and sport. All sports trade on their histories, but tend to offer us at best the anodyne accounts of their own development and meanings at worst they are scurrilous cover-ups and concocted myth. Sport and its audience deserve better. The relationship between football and politics takes many forms--it has been entwined with every conceivable political ideology and movement, every geographical unit and social division, and it has served authoritarian and democratic visions. In the end, football will take on and express the politics determined by our collective choices and struggles, the point for me is to remember that one has choices; to some extent we get the soccer we deserve.

.com: Has modern football become too big for itself, between the tycoons and the multinationals, the giant audiences and transfer fees, the corruption and the endless media coverage? Is there still space for the game?

Goldblatt: I went to see Manchester United last year in the Champions league--a 70th birthday present for my Mancunian father-in-law--and here at the epicenter of the global branding revolution and the foreign takeover and the rest of it I was privileged to see Carlos Tevez take the game by the scruff of the neck and force 21 players and 70,000 people to track his every move--electric. Come to Bristol, England's most underperforming soccer city (half a million people, two clubs, no titles) and tell me there's no space for the game. No one is going to Bristol Rovers to be part of giant audience or a world shaped by tycoons and multinationals. But go they do, and to Bristol City too, teetering on the edge of the premiership and there I find a game that makes me laugh--soccer does pantomime and farce here--but surprises, thrills, and reminds me as part of a living crowd the one thing that

writing a world history really drives home--"we are all just a drop in the ocean." .com: And lastly: who's your favorite for Euro 2008? Goldblatt: It feels really open--so I'm going with an outsider (like Greece at 2004)--Croatia.

"Football conquered the world with its capacity to astonish, and this is its definitive history." --The Independent"Since it became a worldwide phenomenon, nobody has attempted to write an overall history of the game. Now David Goldblatt's stunning book will be the measure against which all other such volumes are judged." --The Guardian"Goldblatt writes with authority, humor, and passion, not least in the accounts of famous or significant matches scattered throughout the book... there is no doubting the worth of David Goldblatt's extraordinary book." --Times Literary Supplement (London)"Goldblatt's magnum opus, at close to a thousand pages, is an ambitious project realized in a most impressive manner. Anyone with a brain and an interest in football will enjoy this book: just don't drop it on your foot." --The Daily Telegraph (London)"Just possibly the most erudite football book ever, yet also a very good read. Goldblatt doesn't just understand the social context of the game around the world; he also has a nose for the best stories. This book is a mindboggling achievement." --Simon Kuper, author of Soccer Against the Enemy

I write this review having read roughly half of this book. But that is enough to write a meaningful review of it for the prospective reader. To begin with, I really anticipated reading this book, as someone who has been a fan of soccer most of my life, albeit in an on and off fashion. I also appreciate long and in depth books, as this one appeared to be. However, I am so far somewhat disappointed in it. The book is a survey of soccer, from its inception as an organized sport, its working class roots in England, to its evolution in Latin America and modern European leagues. This breadth is also what the book ultimately suffers from. It attempts to weave the different strands of sociology, economics, politics, and culture together in one coherent narrative; but it fails, because the weight collapses on itself. It's a very difficult task to find a focus in a book of this breadth. It's more challenging still to find a sociological, economic or cultural thesis that could be backed up by solid research and data. Thus, the result is a meandering narrative, without any focus or overarching theory about anything. The author does touch on certain sociological and political issues and aspects, like the working class roots of soccer in England; soccer in Latin America under dictatorships; and tactical differences between countries and continents as a reflection of culture and politics. The disappointment is that there is no in depth treatment of any of these topics, and the result is that the presentation of these issues is nothing more than a set of cobbled, albeit

interesting, observations. In sum, this book is ultimately a survey of soccer country by country, continent by continent, era by era. The prose of the book is readable, but nothing amazing. Often times I found myself re-reading passages due to the lack of clarity; at other times I felt bored and ended up skimming sections because of the dryness of the topics and/or prose. All in all, this book had a lot of potential and probably would have been better written and more interesting if its breadth was reduced, and its length truncated. However, if you are new to the sport, and looking to learn the basics of the global history of soccer, this book may be for you.

This book is not for the weak hearted. It is a very good and detailed book, but it is such an ambitious colossus that reading it requires great persistence and dedication. It is difficult to just call this a book about soccer. I would argue that it is a book about the world history and sociology of the 20th Century, with football as its central focal theme. Admittedly the book begins in the 19th Century and the first hundred pages of this massive work does not read as easily as when we get towards the 1910's, but the main focus is how football and the world developed and changed together, often with similar parallel forces egging the other on. The book illustrates the spread of Football and how unique factors led to it becoming the sport of the world. The author provides many examples of totalitarian regimes using football as a political tool. He explores how the Fascists exploited football for political gain and how South American military regimes used football as well to promote their own political agenda. At one point late in the book the author makes the link between certain governments use of Football as a tool for "Bread and Circus", much as was done in ancient Rome to control the masses. I felt he made a compelling case for how local populations often were able to keep their own nationalistic hopes alive under oppressive regimes such as Franco in Spain via their allegiance to local football teams. In other cases, such as the Serbs and Croats in the ex-Yugoslavia he shows this latent kindling of nationalistic expression and how it led to the rapid organization of Nationalistic causes in the war in Bosnia in the 1990's. The book also looks at how economic development in local economies can often anticipate both the rise and fall of football achievement in many countries. I was impressed by his discussions of how football time and again is used as an outlet for the political expression for disillusioned youth in many countries as well. In the book we look at the evolution of hooliganism and how "Ultra" groups developed and are funded. The use of drugs and doping in sports is not neglected in this book, but to my eye it's largesse and significance is a bit underplayed. However the spread of corruption in Football is never ignored or dignified. I enjoyed how the author linked the late development of a strong international football display on the world soccer stage in Japan and Korea to societal customs and traditional hierarchies

within their societies. The author expertly explores the role of how television and specifically cable Television has influenced the growth of the sport. The book is not just a book about the sociology of the world however. There is plenty of football to be had, strategy, world cup history and plenty of Champions league, etc to be explored. If you are a Football fanatic (which I must admit I am not), I can't imagine not reading this book.

A fantastic look at how soccer functions in societies all around the world. Historians would do well to spend more time on the pastimes of everyday people as they try to understand the way the world works. Goldblatt does just that.

I bought this book a couple years ago when I first started getting into soccer after moving to Europe. I'll admit that, for someone only just getting into the sport, it can be a little bit tedious at times, especially the more modern sections. In general though, it's a great book. I especially found the chapters on the early history of the sport to be incredibly interesting. Another rewarding aspect is realizing how little even your die-hard sports fanatic friends know about the history of a sport they profess to love so deeply! Next time they get on your back for misunderstanding a technical rule, just throw a few questions from this book at them to put them back in their place!

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