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EVERYBODY LOVES A WINNER: SOCCER IN THE UNITED STATES

With an entire nation's pride resting on its shoulders, the Iranian National Soccer Team pushes forward on the counterattack, riding uneasily on a mere one-goal cushion. Iranian striker Ali Daei breaks away from American defender, Eddie Pope, and releases a brilliant through-ball up the middle. With the defensive focus on Ali Daei, midfielder Mehdi Mahdavia bolts through the heart of the ragged American defense and fires the ball clear of goalkeeper Casey Keller. Mahdavia looks past the beaten keeper and watches the ball slice into the back of the net as his lifelong dream is fulfilled.

Mahdavia is a national hero. "Great Satan" has been defeated.

Like a cauldron of water that has been simmering for a good length of time, the fiery Iranian section of the crowd immediately starts to boil. This is not your ordinary crowd reaction at a sporting event—this is a country's moment of absolute triumph. Iranian flags shoot into the air like spears while confetti covers the playing field. It is hard to discern each crowd member's limbs from another's due to the wild celebration that is taking place. In fact, the Iranian crowd has become so incensed with ferocious intensity that every American in the stadium begins to fear for his life. From the viewpoint of an Iranian citizen, decades of mistreatment from the greedy American government—a seemingly indestructible foe that has ignored Iran's political existence for the past decade—are being shoved right back down their Uncle Sam throats. The cauldron reaches a scalding temperature as the water starts to cascade over its sides. A huge white sheet is raised in the air by twenty or so fans. "DOWN WITH GREAT SATAN!!!" it reads. A CBS television camera, broadcasting live to all of America, zooms in on one of these fanatics. His intense expression says it all: *The hell with your "wall of mistrust!" You can kick us around with your stupid warheads, your tanks, your alliances, but what happens when it's just us, you, and God on this holy playing field!? You crumble, you weak Americans! You've ignored us for too long! Now it's your turn to pay attention to us while our team puts you in your rightful place! WE WILL NOT BE PUT DOWN ANY LONGER! WE WILL NO LONGER BE IGNORED! THIS IS OUR MOMENT OF GLORY AND YOU HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO WATCH YOURSELVES BE OUTDONE BY IRAN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY! YOU CAN NO LONGER TURN YOUR HEAD IN OUR MOMENT OF TRIUMPH! DOWN WITH THE GREAT SATAN!!!*

Meanwhile in Madrid, Spain, I switched off my television. I'd seen enough. We were publicly humiliated in front of the world. They outclassed us, outsmarted us, and outplayed us. I began to feel the shame of an entire nation weighing on my shoulders as I left the house and walked through the foreign city streets. I encountered a pay phone and found an unusual comfort in talking to my father, who was back home in America. "Well, the good news here in America is that no one will notice that we lost after tomorrow," he assured me. "I think they're more concerned with pre-season football than with anything else."

After the conversation with my father, I felt relieved. In fact, I started chuckling to myself wholeheartedly as the irony of the situation dawned on me. This was Iran's great moment of triumph, their moment in the sun. Their first World Cup victory against the much hated "Great

Satan” seemed unsinkable...until the unforeseen (at least to the Iranians) took place. No one in the U.S. cared! *When does pre-season football start!?* Who cares about a bunch of sissyboys kicking a ball around every four years? Inadvertently, America had insulted Iran more than ever by flipping them the proverbial “bird” with maddening casualty.

While people in Iran were dancing in the streets, jumping on cars, and blaring disco music out their windows through the wee hours of the morning, American citizens were concerning themselves with the daily tasks at hand and going to bed early after an uneventful day. Obviously, there is a monumental difference between the importance of soccer in foreign countries and the insignificance of soccer in America. Why isn’t soccer a major part of every American’s life, a source of national (or local) pride and cooperation, while it thrives in virtually every other place on earth? Are people unimpressed by the newly formed Major Soccer League, or turned off by the loud-mouthed parents at youth soccer games across the country? Perhaps our nation would be more apt to accept soccer as a women’s sport because of the recent success in the 1999 Women’s World Cup. Who do young American soccer players look up to?

Maybe Americans just don’t like using their feet as much as foreigners do. Or maybe, just maybe these questions can’t be answered until we, as Americans, take a step back, look at the larger picture of soccer as a whole, and accept the fact that we can’t always be the best at everything we do.

“Growing up, who was your favorite player?” I asked Mark right from the get-go. This question—which would seem simple to any baseball, basketball, hockey, or football fan—is much more difficult to answer in the case of an eighteen year-old soccer player from Philadelphia. He glanced upward to the ceiling and tried to find the answer.

Oddly enough, the topic of soccer brought me to the studio art room of Milton Academy where Mark Dilks was putting the finishing touches on one of his paintings. Mark has been playing soccer since age five, and this past fall he was the starting central defensive midfielder for the Milton varsity team. His tall, skinny frame and outrageously curly hair (a hairstyle that could best be described as a cross between basketball legend Julius “Dr. J” Erving and Colombian soccer hero Carlos Valderrama) have made him an unforgettable fixture on the playing field and around campus. After thinking for a few moments, he came up with an answer.

“Well, I’d have to say Pele.”

“Solid choice,” I responded. “Have you ever seen old footage of him playing?”

“I don’t think so,” he said tentatively.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “I haven’t either.”

Mark relaxed a bit, then went on to explain himself. “Growing up, you’d hear how good he was. He was really the only ‘great guy’ in soccer.” Without ever seeing any evidence to support popular theory on soccer, Mark did not have much to look up to when he was younger. Pele was a soccer legend on an *I’ll take your word for it* basis. Focusing more on contemporary players, Mark commented that “Alexi Lalas was cool because of his hair. With him it was purely image.” This too was an understandable response. In the early nineties, Lalas emerged as the first posterboy advocating soccer in America. Touting his bright red hair and goatee, his alternative rock band, and his substantial skills as a central defender, Lalas became soccer’s American ambassador. He appeared in various commercials and promos for soccer related happenings in the U.S.. After a solid showing in the ’94 World Cup, Italian Serie A powerhouse AC Milan took a chance on him and signed him to a one year deal. In Italy, Lalas was consistently outmatched by his opponents and quickly became a scapegoat to many Milan fans. “Yankee go home!” was the most common chant coming from the crowd when he entered the game. After a year on the

bench, Lallas did just that, and later became a pivotal figure of up-and-coming Major League Soccer in his homeland. Upon his return, he was reinstated as the American soccer model while no mention was made of his failure in Europe. When the MLS finally began, it did not take long to figure out that he of all people—among a team of unknowns—was the weak link on his New England Revolution squad. Two years later he was shipped out of New England where he became someone else's new posterboy. But change would not help Lallas as his luck in the MLS remained sour, causing his playing time in the '98 World Cup to be virtually non-existent, and forcing him into early retirement at the end of this past MLS season.

"Are you aware that Lallas announced his retirement a month ago?" I asked Mark.

"No," he replied, surprised. "I wonder why something like that wasn't in the news."

I asked the same first question to another soccer player at Milton, Maggie Lee, who was recently voted MVP by her teammates this past season. She, too, has been playing soccer since age five, but unlike Mark, Maggie has had the unusual experience of being a *female* soccer player in America. In the pre Mia Hamm days it was a bit harder to find someone to look up to.

"In my house the favorite was always Batistuta," she says, referring to Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta. My brother had posters of him everywhere. We even named my cat 'Batistuta' after him."

"Did you ever see him play?" I asked.

"No. It didn't go much beyond the posters," she replied. "For me it was more about playing than watching."

And why shouldn't it have been? In the late 80's/early 90's there was no *men's soccer* to watch (by far the more popular around the world) let alone *women's soccer*. However, something remarkable happened this past summer that would completely change the face of soccer in America. Actually, it would be more correct to say that the 1999 Women's World Cup changed the *gender* of soccer in America.

"It was awesome," were the first words out of Maggie's mouth. Whereas she described other matches that she had attended—including a '94 Men's World Cup first round match, and the Women's U.S. Cup five years earlier—as "cool," the '99 WWC was different: "people cared." What was different about soccer this time around? How was it different from the Men's '98 World Cup? "It was different because the cup was here... Finally the U.S. was winning and not in like 30th place. We could back a winning team." Most importantly, though, Maggie experienced a sense of excitement at these games that she didn't feel on the sidelines even when she was a ball girl for the Women's team a few years earlier. She told me that there was, quite simply, just a lot more fan support than ever before. "I don't remember the '98 [men's] Cup," she tells me. "This time around there was a lot more advertising. There were a lot of girls out there looking for role models."

"Were people coming to these games to watch soccer, or to watch American women be successful in athletics?" I asked her. This was a tough one.

"I know a lot of people who came to watch soccer, and a lot who came because they were women. I also think that people liked the women's games because they were so elegant," she said, referring to the sometimes-outrageous theatrics that take place every time a whistle is blown during a men's game. Perhaps Maggie was on to something. Maybe Americans don't enjoy the constant jockeying of the referee and line judges during a typical men's soccer match. *Why can't soccer players just "suck it up" after each penalty instead of rolling around on the ground like babies? Can America actually embrace a sport where one's acting capabilities can be the difference between a win and a loss? Maggie's statement hints at the notion that Americans*

aren't ready to accept a sport that relies so heavily on officiating. A constantly-moving offside line that is regulated by a line judge, an unseen official game clock that is controlled solely by the referee, and the prospect of winning a game by drawing a foul within the eighteen-yard-box might be enough to drive the American public away from soccer. Perhaps the '99 WWC was different to Americans in that the flow of the game was dictated by the players more than the match officials. But what was even more different about the '99 WWC to people like Maggie was how American media focused so heavily on the Uncle Sam aspect of the competition.

For most Americans, an emphasis on U.S. athletes would not seem like such a big deal. After all, what would women's figure skating be without Yamagouchi, Kerrigan, or Lipinski? The sport would be almost entirely foreign, and therefore indigestible to the American public. But for Maggie, who happened to be born half-Chinese, the '99 WWC not only represented an American triumph, but also an American hypocrisy in that the skills of U.S.'s opponents were often ignored.

"They only talked about one Chinese striker when they had a team full of superstars," she told me. Neither of us could remember the Chinese striker's name even though we had seen her play more than once during the tournament. "When they showed the award ceremony, there was no China. They deserved a lot more credit than they actually got. I mean, they only lost on a penalty kick." From her own experiences as a player, Maggie knew how trivial a penalty shoot-out could be. She was surprised to see how much credit was given to the U.S. after winning in such an unconvincing manner.

Amidst boxes of Women's World Cup Wheaties and Mia Hamm Gatorade ads, one aspect of the American victory stood head and shoulders above the rest: the celebration of defender Brandi Chastain, who scored the final goal that sealed the match for the United States. Her subsequent "disrobing" landed her a starring role on the covers of magazines around the world, while her moment in the spotlight erased the painful memory of having scored an own goal in a previous match. This reversal of fortune raised an interesting question.

"What comes to mind when you hear the names Brandi Chastain and Andres Escobar together?" Maggie shrugged her shoulders and told me that she didn't know who Escobar was. I reminded her of the United States' victory over Colombia in a first round match during the '94 Men's World Cup. During the match, an unlucky Colombian defender shanked the ball past his own keeper and into the net, giving the U.S. a victory that eliminated Colombia from the tournament. A few days later, the defender returned home where he was assassinated by an outraged fan. This is the story of how Andres Escobar lost his life by scoring an own goal.

"That reflects how serious it is in other countries," Maggie told me. "Maybe they care too much. Maybe we care too little. But fortunately we've gotten to a point where we want to watch but not kill anyone either. I think we could be a little more enthusiastic but I'm glad we're not that extreme."

"Do you feel that Chastain was an appropriate choice by the media as the hero of the squad, even though Briana Scurry made the big save to set them up for the win?"

"It's a lot easier to *score* on a penalty kick than to *save* a penalty kick," she agreed. "Yeah, I think some other players deserved it more. Michelle Akers didn't get enough publicity. They could have easily made more of a hero out of her."

"I totally agree with you," I told her. "It just doesn't feel right that Chastain is on the cover Newsweek while Escobar is lying six feet under in a Colombian cemetery. They both made the same mistake."

"Yeah, but Brandi had a second chance. She's the one that people remember from that game—she was the one on TV when they won." Maggie later told me that people seemed to

forget how narrowly the U.S. won in the midst of post-game celebrations and photo shoots. With all of the media attention focused on a jubilant, half-naked Chastain, Americans forgot just how lucky they were to be victorious. “This one coach I had at soccer camp after the Cup said that the U.S. was *by far* the best even though they almost lost to China. That just shows you how little he knows about the game.”

Juan Ramos is one person who has no trouble avoiding the “soccer incompetence” disease that seems to plague coaching staffs across the country. His love of the game traces back to his early years in Puerto Rico, thus explaining his fundamental understanding of soccer from the inside out. A math teacher at Milton Academy, a girls’ varsity basketball coach, and a boys’ varsity soccer coach at Cohasset High School, Mr. Ramos is quite a busy man. From the instant that we started talking soccer, his ears perked up and his voice became quite excited. All of a sudden he seemed more like a twelve-year-old boy with braces than a middle aged math teacher with a graying beard.

“Who was your favorite player while growing up in Puerto Rico?” I asked again.

“Pele,” he responded. This was not an unexpected answer, especially because the last three people I asked had said or mentioned Pele. But when Mr. Ramos said “Pele,” two things were strikingly different. For starters, when he responded, he did not say, “Pele?” as if it were a question, a reference to some unknown character who supposedly played the game pretty well. Secondly, it was not “PAY-lay,” it was “Pe-LAY,” the correct pronunciation of his name.

“Did you ever see him play?”

“Sure I did,” he replied. “I saw him play in the ‘70 World Cup in Mexico. Man, was he awesome! And that was even in his older years!” Finally I had found someone who had seen Pele play. Pele was Mr. Ramos’ inspiration as he played competitively through the age of seventeen in Puerto Rico. The combination of being raised in a country where soccer was a primary form of athletics as well as having had someone to look up to made Mr. Ramos extremely passionate about the game. On second thought, it might be more accurate to say that soccer made Mr. Ramos passionate about life. In 1982 he left Puerto Rico and embarked on what would later become a seventeen-year coaching campaign in New Mexico. Make no mistake about it, Mr. Ramos embodied (and still does today) everything that soccer could become in America.

“I got into teaching so that I could coach soccer.” Mr. Ramos was so dedicated to soccer that he felt compelled to leave his previous life in Puerto Rico and share his passion with a culture that had never taken soccer seriously before. But when he first arrived in New Mexico, he was in for a bit of a shock.

“The skill level wasn’t as good [as in Puerto Rico]. Kids were playing British style soccer without a solid understanding of how it worked.” In general, he told me, their background in soccer was not solid at all. Over time, though, he noticed a gradual progression in skill level and competence as soccer became more commonplace in America. “No question. More and more kids were playing soccer from the start.” However, he still noticed (and still does today) that not enough kids were watching soccer. With nowhere to look to for guidance, many young players still lacked a fundamental understanding of soccer as a whole rather than simply as a local thing.

Prior to my experience in Madrid during the summer of 1998, I had no concept of what soccer was like in any place besides the U.S.. My view of soccer changed instantaneously, however, when I entered the room of my Spanish exchange student. The wall next to my bed—the same wall that I’d stare at for the next thirty nights before I went to sleep—was plastered

with an eclectic mix of newspaper clippings, posters, and various religious symbols that all somehow pertained to the Real Madrid soccer team. There was something about the combination of the three that made the wall peculiar, if not downright haunting. “Amavisca ha sido el mejor,” (Amavisca has become the best) read one article, accompanied by a picture of Amavisca himself sliding on his knees, eyes closed, head tilted upwards, arms extended straight out perpendicular to his body—a picture of a typical celebration after a goal. On both sides of the article hung wooden crosses. Beneath the crosses there was a poster of the entire team before they won the European Championship. Every night before my Spanish counterpart would go to bed he played an audio recording of Predrag Mijatovic scoring the winning goal in the Champions League final. The last words he would hear each night were “¡Campeones de Europa!” And so I would go to bed each night thinking about how different things were in Madrid. *If earth were hit by a meteor shower and the planet was covered in thirty feet of rock*, I thought to myself, *some alien species would land here in a thousand years, dig me up out of this apartment in Madrid, and come to the conclusion that humans were polytheistic peoples who devoted their lives to worshipping the almighty futbol gods*. The funny thing was that the more I thought about this scenario, the more truthful it seemed. After all, soccer determined the country’s state of being day in and day out. When the Spanish National Team suffered a similar fate to that of America when they were eliminated in the first round, it seemed like the entire city became very quiet. They were expecting no less than the best: their first ever World Cup championship. And, to their credit, the team did indeed have a good chance of making it to the later stages of competition...until the unthinkable happened. Being eliminated in the first round was too much for many Spaniards to take tranquilly. I’ll never forget seeing the front page of the newspaper that hit the streets the day after they were eliminated. There were no pictures. No articles. Nothing except for one enormous headline that spanned the entire front page.

**“¿QUÉ HABEMOS HECHO PARA MERECEER ESTO?”
(WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO DESERVE THIS?)**

Mark and Maggie also did not comprehend the importance of soccer in other countries until they went abroad and witnessed it for themselves. When Mark was in ninth grade, his club team traveled to France to play against a French school team over the course of a week. However, this was no ordinary school. Rather, it was a soccer breeding ground that kids went to for the purpose of improving the soccer skills while attending some classes at various points in the day. When the two teams took the field, things got “supercompetitive.” Mark acknowledged that at first his team was battling to earn respect and prove themselves to be more than a bunch of hockey players on a soccer pitch. After showing that their skills were worthy, Mark’s team played the French squad pretty evenly. However, perhaps the most memorable experience that Mark got from the trip was a taste of how exciting soccer is to watch in a foreign country, specifically at a French League match. “The game was sold out, people were crowding everywhere, there was maximum security around the stadium, yelling, screaming, singing...I saw that soccer has a passion that no other sport has.”

As for Maggie, her view of soccer changed dramatically when her club team hired an English coach. As Maggie described it, this coach brought her team the same kind of never-before-seen enthusiasm from England that Mr. Ramos had brought with him from Puerto Rico. “He wanted us to see soccer as a part of life. Up until then I just played and liked it, but when I started playing for him I began to love it.” The high point of the season was when the coach organized a trip to England to play girls’ teams from over there. I asked her how she thought her

team stacked up against the English teams. She replied, "It's almost impossible to be as good as them. It's the *only* game for them. Where we have asphalt basketball courts in the middle of our towns they have asphalt soccer fields." Against the odds, however, Maggie's team made it all the way to the finals of the tournament before losing in a penalty kick shootout.

Interestingly, though, I noticed that in both the cases of Maggie and Mark, neither of them had maintained their broad view of soccer when they returned to America. Mark wasn't up to date on his news about neither the U.S. team nor Alexi Lalas. Maggie was unaware of the fact that the women's national team coach, Tony Diccico, had resigned as head coach after the Women's World Cup. Soccer managed to remain a "playing only" sport instead of a way of life. So, I decided to interview someone young who was on top of the news in soccer around the world. Eric Larrieux is another senior at Milton Academy and long-time soccer player. Unlike any other peer soccer players I've known, Eric prides himself on knowing the ins and outs of the soccer world as well as how to play the game. When he was younger, Eric had someone to look up to in his uncle, who played on an out of town club team. Eric's father (who was raised in Haiti) made him watch soccer on the Spanish channel every Sunday, even against his son's will which often preferred more commonplace sports like baseball. A transformation occurred in 1994 when Eric became obsessed with the World Cup on his own terms, as his "eyes were opened to soccer not only as a game but as a pastime." He studied names, numbers, and game tapes over and over. To this very day he checks the Internet to find out when games are going to be on TV and to get the latest scores from around the world. Eric is also not one to miss an opportunity to vent his frustration about the American ignorance towards soccer.

"In '94 I thought soccer was taking off. But when I look back on it now, I think it was just a temporary thing because it [the men's World Cup] was here."

"What about France '98, especially the Iran game?" I asked.

"That was just disappointing," he replied. "Iran was the team we should have beat. I can't believe we were so unlucky with hitting the post and crossbar."

"Why would you say that the Iran game was the one we should've won? Did you know anything about our chances in the third game against Yugoslavia?"

"Now that I think about it," he said sitting up, "I didn't know anything about Yugoslavia, either. All I really knew about Iran from the media was that we were supposed to be better than them. I guess the television stations just assumed Yugoslavia was better because they were European."

"Do you think that it was unfair of the American media to portray the teams the way they did?" I asked. "For example, did you know that Ali Daei, one of their strikers, plays on one of the better club teams in Germany, or that Mahdavia, the guy who scored the breakaway goal, was voted National Footballer of the Year in all of Asia?"

"TV didn't say anything about that. I guess that's why my dad always complains about Americans being ignorant. I read everything I can find about soccer in my free time, but I know that there's a lot more out there that Americans don't see."

Eric was on a roll, so I decided to move on to something more controversial. "How do you feel about players like Eddie Pope and Frankie Hejduk getting offered to play in Europe after a good showing in '98?"

"I'm glad Hejduk went. He can develop a lot quicker in Germany. The MLS is garbage," he said boldly. I asked him why he disliked the Major Soccer League so much. "The people in charge went about it all wrong in order to please Americans. Shootouts, Western and Eastern conferences, playoffs that last forever, and a clock that ticks backwards...it's just not soccer. It was almost doomed from the start. I mean, what can you do? You can either try to appeal to the

masses or shove something down their throat. Either way there is almost no chance for total success.”

“So do you think there’s any hope for the MLS in the future?” I asked, awaiting a decisive ‘no.’

“Maybe,” he said. “It looks like they’re getting rid of the bad rules this year, which is a start. Maybe if they can convince the whole U.S. [National Team] to play in it, you’d have something. But we can’t keep paying to watch old foreigners who were good five years ago.”

“Did you hear that Joe-Max Moore [a U.S. national team striker, former star of the New England Revolution] is going to Europe and that Lothar Matthäus [a forty year old German defender] is coming to New York?”

“Yup. Doesn’t look like things are changing too soon.”

I don’t disagree with Eric’s pessimism towards the MLS. Something about it was fishy from the outset. As I sat in the seventh row at Foxboro stadium at the Revolution’s inaugural game against D.C. United, I could sense that something odd was about to happen. For starters, there was a crowd of shirtless college kids in front of me wearing fake red beards and wigs as a tribute to the Revolution captain, Alexi Lalas. I asked them why they did it, and their only response was that Lalas was the only player on the team that they knew. Secondly, there was very little crowd noise before the game. Half the stadium was empty, and the other half didn’t know what to do with themselves. What does one do before a soccer game? I mean, in Europe people stand and sing and bang drums and stuff. But what do we do here in America? Immediately after this thought crossed my mind, something remarkable happened as the game was about to begin. Just when the whistle was about to be blown, the crowd finally started cheering. People were cheering for soccer! It was about time! Maybe this whole thing would work out after all! And then the moment of truth arrived. The whistle blew. We were yelling our heads off. “*Soccer is here!*” was all I could think to myself. *I don’t know how it finally got here, but it’s here!* And just as quickly as my hopes had risen, the announcer’s voice boomed over the P.A. system and shot my spirits down in flames. “LLLLLLet’s play soccer!” he yelled in an annoying, used car salesman-like manner. The crowd went silent. The players looked up in disbelief. *What the hell was that? Is this WWF wrestling or something?* The ball was put into play and the inaugural game began...in silence.

While Eric and I haven’t been particularly fond of the MLS, Mr. Ramos feels a little more relaxed about the whole situation. “It’s a start,” he said. “And it’s getting better all the time.” As far as the MLS versus playing abroad is concerned, Mr. Ramos commented that “it’s natural for American players to go overseas. Some of the best countries in the world have many of their players playing abroad.” At the same time, however, Mr. Ramos also notices the lack of enthusiasm surrounding the up-and-coming American league. “ESPN transmits the games, but they don’t put the highlights on Sportscenter. I don’t know how that makes sense. They’re hurting themselves and the league at the same time. I definitely think there’s a conspiracy about soccer in this country.”

Thus said, the future of soccer in America remains in a state of uncertainty. Throughout my journey into the world of soccer, I have slowly seen more and more how soccer has the characteristics of an acceptable American sport. This means, in simplest possible terms, that soccer could be popular in America despite its vast differences from typical American pastimes. Whereas a fan of basketball loves watching Tim Hardaway’s crossover dribble, a fan of soccer can find similar satisfaction in watching a Rivaldo step-over move. Whereas a hockey fan enjoys

watching a Curtis Joseph kick-save, a soccer fan enjoys watching Pete Schmeichel punch the ball out of the goal-mouth. Besides the physical similarities to traditional American sports, soccer also is very similar to newer, more untraditional sports that have become popular for more theoretical reasons. Anyone who watched the American coverage of the '99 WWC noticed that the athletes were portrayed in the same manner that someone like Kerri Strug was portrayed in the '96 Olympics. There were loads of personal stories behind each player—*she wasn't just a player, but rather a mother and a competitor*. Sometimes these stories were exaggerated, sometimes they were true, and other times they were irrelevant. But as a whole, these stories represented the soap opera aspect of soccer, an aspect which actually exists in soccer more than any other sport in the world. In foreign soccer magazines, rumors and predictions are everywhere. Details are never spared. No action ever goes unnoticed. When I think about the ridiculous announcer at the inaugural Revolution game, I think of the WWF and why it has become so popular lately. Is it because of the action? Probably not. Is it because of the make-up? Nope. Rather, its popularity sprouts from the notion that fans want to be engaged in the story. Each character has a history, a list of accomplishments and failures, goals and future conquests. For soccer players in the rest of the world, the media pays specific attention to these details just as they do in the WWF. When Stone Cold Steve Austin enters the ring in a shirt that says "Austin 3:16," people feel connected to something larger than wrestling. There is something biblical about him, something that reminds people of where they come from and who they are, something that makes them stand up and scream at the top of their lungs. I felt the same aura emanating from my Spanish counterpart's wall that was decorated in soccer memorabilia two summers ago, except that his characters were real. This grandeur is what drives people like Mr. Ramos to leave their country and spread their passion around the world. This is what makes soccer beautiful.

In order to make soccer a big deal in America, two major things must happen. First and foremost, there needs to be more television coverage of live soccer matches, both nationally and internationally, all year round. People must realize that soccer isn't merely a "once every four years" sport, and that some of the best soccer takes place in the various club leagues around the world. Soccer is not usually a country vs. country sport. Americans should watch these games and see how excited the fans are. Americans should see how the fans dress in team colors, sing songs, and bang drums throughout the games. Perhaps the addition of a womens' pro league would keep the momentum going in the U.S..

After the '99 WWC, girls across the country have plenty of players to look up to. 90,185 people witnessed firsthand the birth of a team of heroes, while 40 million watched from their living rooms. For boys, however, the story is the same as it has been for quite some time now. The media hasn't been able to portray an American male soccer player in a three-dimensional manner, always compromising something like a haircut for talent, or talent for personality. A few months ago I found myself face to face with a very talented American player who was an unknown to the American public. I was standing in line at Logan Airport when I realized that Joe-Max Moore, the starting striker on the Men's National Team, was standing beside me with his bags. In any other country, huge crowds would gather around a player of Moore's caliber to merely catch a glimpse into the life of one of the futbol gods. In Boston, however, I looked around me in disbelief as I realized that no one had a clue that a living soccer hero was standing among us. Even if people had recognized him, would they have cared? *Does anyone here know who this man is?* I wanted to yell.

The bottom line is that kids need to look up to someone they can count on. At the end of my interview with Mark, I asked him who he would look up to nowadays if he were growing up

in America. Having seen his former soccer hero, Alexi Lalas, retire early after a turbulent career, Mark thought for a minute, and then answered.

“I’d have to say...Cobi Jones.”

“Why?” I asked.

Mark paused yet again. “I guess because he’s got the hair.”

Still, one pressing question remained. Was soccer simply a fad in the year 1999, or will it continue to grow as a part of American culture? Is this the end of the road, or just the tip of the iceberg?

“I wanna say no,” Mark said.

“Yeah, it was a fad. The media went with the masses,” Maggie said.

“Commercials made ’99 a fad,” Eric said.

Even Mr. Ramos, who seemed to have an immediate answer for anything I asked him about soccer, took a minute to think it over. He finally grinned and looked up at me. “God, I hope not.”

As fate would have it, the U.S. faced Iran nearly two years after its 2-1 defeat in the ’98 World Cup for a friendly match at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California. The match was played in front of 50,000 people, most of whom were Iranian. The Iranian squad picked up where it had left off in France, immediately capitalizing on another American defensive lapse as Mehdi Mahdavia put yet another low ball past the keeper to take the lead in the seventh minute.

It seemed like nothing had changed. I mean, we had changed our team almost entirely, now featuring many young Americans who have been playing overseas, but the result at the half was still the same. We hit the post, they scored a goal. They capitalized, we didn’t. Deja-vu began to set in. While I was watching the halftime highlights, a member of the dorm entered the TV room where I was sitting and said bluntly, “why are you watching this crap when playoff football is on?” I guess my dad was right about that football thing back in ’98.

Immediately following the start of the second half, the Americans began to play with confidence. And then, just three minutes underway, American midfielder Chris Armas rifled a point blank shot into the roof of the net. Armas, a newcomer to the national squad, was selected to the team after a sensational season with the Chicago Fire of the Major Soccer League.

Maybe this MLS thing isn’t so bad after all.

The game continued, but no more goals would be scored as the Americans tightened their defense against the Iranian counterattack. While the U.S. had many opportunities to win, the tie was strong enough to earn back the respect they’d lost in ’98.

But for me, the most memorable part of the entire rematch didn’t come during the game, but rather in a quote that I found in the Boston Globe by an Iranian-American commentator named Mickey Mohadjer. Before kickoff, Mohadjer said,

**“This is more than a game. It’s a field of dreams.
For two hours this makes us feel like we are back home—
regardless of the flag, regardless of our beliefs.
This is the common denominator of soccer.”**