

Soccer and the Vicarious Thrill of Nil-Nil

by G. Murphy Donovan (July 2014)



[“Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it’s much more serious than that.”](#)

– Billy Shankly


Americans call it soccer. Europe and the developing world call it football. Semantics is just the start of the confusion. Although the foot is only one of two appendages that might be used to strike the ball in soccer; hands can only be used for clearing nasal passages, package adjustments, and obscene gestures. The head plays a pivotal and often decisive role in “*futbol*.” This is not the same as using your head, as in playing intelligently; this is using your head like a bat, to strike the ball. The “header” is just one of few uses for the frontal lobes.

Head butting an opponent is not legal in soccer, yet often decisive nonetheless. The post-millennial World Cup was decided by a head butt, not a header – again, keep in mind that neither involves use of the hands. Unlike hockey, punching an opponent is considered bad form in soccer – unless you’re in the stands, where fist fights are ubiquitous. Nonetheless, a head butt on the soccer pitch can be like a “grand slam” in bridge or baseball.

The 2006 Cup [match](#) between France and Italy in Germany was illustrative. Regulation play ended in a tie (1-1). Suddenly, the scoreless tedium of an “extra time” was relieved when Zinedine Zidane (sic) of France leveled Marco Materazzi (sic) of Italy with a head butt to the solar plexus. (EU soccer moms are addicted to alliteration).

The world’s most watched sport was then reduced to striker practice after Zee Zee was tossed from the game – and French café society. Italy exacted sweet revenge by winning the match in a “shoot-out.” Lethal rhetoric is the elevator music of all sport.

The French may be known for their bad manners, but their aversion to actual combat is legendary. Reducing the World Cup finale to a “shoot out” in 2006 may have been one irony too many for francophones.

European *futbol* shenanigans are being upstaged by Latinos in 2014. Serial vampire Luis  Suarez, erstwhile forward for Liverpool and star of Uruguay's national team, has been tossed again from tournament competition for biting. Nonetheless, Luis returned to Montevideo to a hero's welcome. According to the Latin Press, Suarez was victimized by the racist "English" speaking press. Apparently, attacking your opponent like a Stromboli is, as with bull baiting and chicken fights, a tolerable cultural idiosyncrasy. The more bizarre sideshows of soccer are often relieved, however, by poetic justice. Uruguay, without Luis, was eliminated by Colombia (2 to 0) on 28 June after Suarez got the boot for biting off more than he could chew in Brazil.

Many national teams play football, but few play well. Soccer is the definitive imperial support. Just seven countries, four in Europe and three former Latin colonies, dominate the sport; although as many as 200 national teams qualify every four years. In eighty years, the same seven praetorian teams have monopolized the Cup, a group that includes England, the game's inventor.

Almost everywhere English footballers appear, their fans contribute a riot or two in the stands. English partisans have rescued the [hooligan](#) from the dustbin of 19th century history. "*Houlie*" is Gaelic for a kind of wild Irish party where alcohol is certain and bloodshed is likely. The Irish never care much about the merits of an argument, as long as it ends in a fight. The modern hooligan is a Brit fan who uses soccer as an excuse for a sustained punch up. Who would have thought that the English would ever make the Irish look good?

Much ink has been spilt on the subject of soccer violence in the cheap seats. Yet, sports mayhem is not restricted to the British. Italian rival spectators must often be separated by razor wire and carbines. Soccer fans were hiring personal [body guards](#) in South Africa last time around. FIFA finally got it right in 2014; a Brazilian favela is the ideal venue for soccer. In places like Rio, the riots precede – and follow the matches.



The link between the ballet-like game of soccer and fan violence is puzzling. Rationalizations abound. Boredom is the most obvious explanation for spectator mayhem. Twenty two men with oversized thighs, underdeveloped shoulders, and thick skulls chase a volley ball up and down a pitch for 90 minutes and the score is often zip-zip. In contrast, a basketball game will often see over 100 goals – and a game of hoops never concludes with a tie.

In soccer, nil-nil is a thrill because nobody loses. In such cases, *futbol* is a lot like T-

Ball. Then there's the tie game where no one loses either, yet the fellas seem to savor the joy of scoring – without actually winning. In tournament play, tied teams are awarded a goal apiece anyway. Go figure.

Soccer appears to be the perfect political metaphor for the European Union (EU) and the non-aligned. And American leftists have taken the game to a new level with "[scoreless soccer](#)," a game where score keeping, winners and losers are banished lest some kid come to see competition or performance as a good thing. Ironically, parents and politicians might be clueless or non-aligned, but football fanatics are not.

Indeed, nil and tied scores might explain why fans often feel compelled to take matters into their own hands. Any large gathering of seething partisans will often reach a critical mass when fan expectations are unrealized on the pitch. A soccer eruption is often ignited by the sight of heavy breathing, the scent of testosterone, the taste of alcohol, or the repressed angst of ancient tribal animosities.

The homoerotic voltage generated by twenty two men running, sweating, and posturing – but not scoring – is second only to a [bull fight](#), where several gents dressed for the *Nutcracker* torture and kill livestock to amuse "Hispanics." Soccer players often reinforce stereotypes after the rare victory by removing their clothes and collapsing in a wet pile of man hugs and writhing bodies.

Female players often stage similar rites, but no one seems to notice. For lady footballers that lack of upper body development might be more of a handicap. In contrast, it's hard to imagine Tiger Woods peeling off anything on the 19th green or Peyton Manning dropping his knickerbockers for the fans after a winning touchdown.

And surely there's a price to be paid when there's more action in the stands than on the field. The chariot [riots](#) of ancient Constantinople provide a cautionary tale. Then as now, opposing teams were identified by special colors. The emperor Justinian was rash enough to let his bias be known by throwing some "green" riders in jail.

Imprudence was just one of Justinian's flaws; he married a harpy, raised taxes, passed unpopular laws, and pandered to Persian zealots across the Bosphorus. Any similarity to any living politician is strictly coincidental.

On 13 January 532 AD, green fans rioted in the Hippodrome and the melee quickly consumed the city. Most of the town, including the great cathedral, was torched. When the greens again convened, to crown Justinian's rival, Byzantine legions under [Belisarius](#) stormed the

Hippodrome and slaughtered 30,000 sport's fans. Today, Justinian is known as "the great" not just because he was a poor loser, but also because he was an early inspiration for sporting mayhem and Detroit-style urban renewal.

Those who celebrate international sports seldom recall that the original Greek Olympic Games tested military skills. And most modern sports are direct decedents of later Roman blood sports. The vestiges of guts and gore still thrive in the EU and among the non-aligned. Bull fights, dog fights, chicken fights, public beheadings, stoning, flogging, snake charming, coon hunting, [noodling](#), and soccer are still wildy popular.

Indeed, the Afghan soccer stadium built with US tax dollars during the Clinton years was subsequently used for the public executions of uppity girls, blasphemers, apostates, and men with proclivities. The *Taliban* allowed sweets and fresh fruit, but no adult beverages, to be sold at these weekly entertainment spectacles.

As with many public amusements, the prospect of decisive, if not terminal, violence is the spice that fires all sport. And so it is with *futbol*