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## The World Cup and WORLD NEUROSURGERY

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### THE TABULA RASA OF SPORTS

Soccer is called “the beautiful game” for the elegant way it can be played, the beauty of precise passing, and the dazzle created by the phenomenal control players have when dribbling or receiving a ball. It is also a beautiful game because it emphasizes the team as much as the individual. It creates a bond among its players that is close to brotherhood. It is the most played and watched game in the world followed by nearly every person, every country, and every continent.

The real beauty of soccer, however, is that it levels the playing field. It is the *tabula rasa* of sports. It is played by the rich and the poor, by the elite and the nonelite, by capitalists and socialists. It can be played on a well-mown lawn in a stadium that seats 100,000 people, or it can be played on a sandlot, a beach, a street corner, or a patch of grass. It can be played with an expensive, technologically advanced ball or not with a ball at all. An old shirt tightened in a ball-like shape will do, or a soda can, or a newspaper tied into a ball—anything close enough to round to kick about. The goals can be expensive, made of posts, crossbars, and nets as seen on manicured fields in many stadiums, but two field cones, a couple of large rocks, or two shoes can also serve as a goal. Most importantly, the beauty of the beautiful game is that it can be played by everyone with two feet. Height is not a requirement or even an advantage except maybe for heading the ball. Being large or heavy or having a wide arm span is unnecessary. With two feet and an object to kick, the beautiful game can be played.

The crowning achievement in soccer—that is, football, as known everywhere outside the United States—culminates every 4 years when 32 countries come together to play in the Football World Cup. To gain the privilege of competing in the World Cup, the final 32 teams first competed against other countries in re-

gional play. Almost every country in the world participates. After 2 years of elimination play, the 32 teams converge for 1 month in a nation that also has competed for the honor of hosting the World Cup. The 32 teams are divided into 8 groups based on their ranking and by lottery. Each group is made up of four teams that play each other, with the top two teams advancing to play in single-elimination games until a champion is crowned.

### INFLUENCE OF THE WORLD CUP

The performance of a team in the World Cup tournament influences the cultural and social makeup of countries and is also linked to politics. When Brazil failed to win a World Cup, the government launched an investigation. The failure of the Netherlands to win the cup in 1974 and 2010 were defining moments in that nation’s modern history. In his study entitled *Brilliant Orange*, the Dutch doctor, David Winer, wrote, “The defeat in 1974 is the biggest trauma that happened to the Netherlands in the 20th Century apart from its floods of 1953 and World War II.” When West Germany upset Hungary in the 1954 final, David Cohn-Benedict, the former French radical and now member of the European Parliament, told the *New York Times* the following: “After 1945 the Germany identity was broken, and there were two things that rebuilt it: one was economic growth and the other was the 1954 football championship. For the first time the Germans were recognized in the world for a nonaggressive achievement.”

Soccer is passionate, political, and patriotic. It fosters old-fashioned nationalism, which can be admirable, but which also can become extreme. In 1969, after El Salvador played Honduras, the war known as the “Soccer War” broke out between the two nations and left more than 4000 dead. When Algeria beat Egypt 1-0 in a hotly contested playoff game to determine who would go

### Abbreviations and Acronyms

**WFNS:** World Federation of Neurological Societies



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to South Africa, rioting commenced in Cairo and ambassadors were recalled.

There are numerous other examples of World Cup fever. When Italian auto workers were told that they could not watch the World Cup on the job, they went on strike—conveniently 30 minutes before game time. German companies set up office viewing areas to keep employees from defecting on game days. As a country, Brazil shuts down when their team plays; with businesses and schools closed and elective surgeries delayed, so Brazilians can watch the game on TV. The World Cup is the world's most watched sporting event, and it is probably fortunate that it occurs only once every 4 years considering its negative effect on productivity. It is estimated that the German economy (Europe's largest) loses about \$8 billion—or about 0.27% of the gross domestic product—during the 1 month that the tournament is held. Surveys in Britain predicted output losses of \$1.5 billion to \$2.3 billion during the month of the tournament.

Other countries have acknowledged the popularity of the World Cup. In the Netherlands, the entire country's quitting time was moved unofficially forward to 1 PM on a Friday when the Dutch knocked Brazil out of the quarter finals in 2010. World Cup games are entertaining, important, and emotional—especially for people who have played and loved this game and for the many friendships it has helped create. The World Cup brings the global community together as no other sport or nonsport event except maybe the Olympics.

### NEUROSURGERY AND SOCCER

At casual glance, the parallels between soccer and neurosurgery may not be obvious, yet they are there. Both endeavors require years of training and dedication to develop the appropriate skills to perform successfully. In both fields, a prepared mind and body are needed, often combined with luck, to obtain a favorable outcome. Success in both fields requires a certain amount of confidence, a can-do attitude, and endurance. Both endeavors deeply rely on a team approach. The neurosurgeon's success depends not only on his or her individual surgical skills but also on the skills of nurses, anesthesiologists, radiologists, fellows, residents, and colleagues. Likewise, in soccer, success depends on the skills of each individual playing in concert as a team.

Failures—a loss in a game or a postoperative complication—are also experienced by practitioners in both fields. These failures should be used as a platform for improvement, however. The loss or the complication should be analyzed and studied to prevent a similar occurrence. Both fields also offer the thrill of victory—on the field or in the operating room—the reward for many years of training, preparation, and discipline. The rush and excitement of scoring a goal parallel the satisfaction of performing a successful neurosurgical operation in a patient with a complex, challenging surgical condition.

### WORLD FEDERATION OF NEUROSURGERY AND WORLD NEUROSURGERY

Similar to the World Cup, the World Federation of Neurosurgery (WFNS) also meets every 4 years, bringing the global neurosurgery

community together. The WFNS fosters friendship, relationships, and an exchange of knowledge and ideas. As in soccer, there also is a certain sense of competition. As for the World Cup, the site of the WFNS meeting is chosen from many competitive bids several years before the actual event. The site is chosen for its local host and attractions and for what it can do to enhance neurosurgical academics and collegiality. Past sites have included Boston, Marrakech, Sydney, and Amsterdam. The next meeting will be in Seoul.

The official journal of WFNS is **WORLD NEUROSURGERY**. As the World Cup brings together the best soccer teams from six continents, **WORLD NEUROSURGERY** is the forum for neurosurgery across the six continents. The mission of the journal is to establish an exchange of neurosurgical knowledge, practice, and technology through contemporary and innovative journalistic communication for the global community. The World Cup acts as an inspiration and catalyst for soccer players and fans. **WORLD NEUROSURGERY** is an intellectual catalyst for the field of neurosurgery. The World Cup brings together not only 32 countries participating in the event but the entire global community watching the beautiful game. The 2006 World Cup was seen in 214 countries and territories with a cumulative viewership of 26 billion people. Similarly, **WORLD NEUROSURGERY** acts as a forum for global communication for the specialty of neurosurgery by including scientific, clinical, educational, social, economics, cultural, and political contributions. Soccer is the closest thing that there is to a global language and currency. Certainly, it is a unifying force—probably the largest unifying force in the world. The WFNS meeting every 4 years unifies the world's neurosurgical community, and **WORLD NEUROSURGERY** is the platform, the catalyst of that society.

**WORLD NEUROSURGERY** is striving to be the voice of neurosurgical professionalism around the globe. This voice will not be dominated by neurosurgeons from developed countries but will have contributions from all countries; that is, it will be the shared experience and international dialogue that move the discipline forward. Neurosurgeons will learn from each other. Similarly, all countries in the world participate in or, at the very least, attempt to qualify for the World Cup. The game of soccer is constantly improved by learning from other players and other teams, an exchange that improves the discipline overall.

**WORLD NEUROSURGERY** will communicate the excitement of neurosurgery not only by its scientific content but also by being a platform to list training opportunities, advancements, social challenges, financial challenges, and research accomplishment. **WORLD NEUROSURGERY** can help show neurosurgeons how to overcome financial challenges, obstacles to learning, and a lack of technology through the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and suggestions among its global neurosurgical readership. Such global communication also occurs during the 2 years of elimination play and during the months of the World Cup.

### THE WORLD CUP IN SOUTH AFRICA

The 2010 World Cup took place in South Africa. South Africa built five new stadiums from scratch and refurbished five others, even though several will have no tenant after the tournament is over. It





Figure 1. My wife Lynne at the Rose Bowl before the 1994 Brazil vs Sweden game. (Used with permission from Volker K. H. Sonntag.)

is fair to ask whether the \$5.6 billion expenditure can be justified given all the pressing problems that beset South Africa, including depression-level unemployment of 27% and other deprivations that are the legacy of Apartheid. Of course it can be. The former president, Nelson Mandela, was asked why he placed such an importance in rallying his nation behind the national rugby team during that sport's World Cup in 1995, which was also hosted by South Africa and portrayed in the 2009 movie, *Invictus*. Rugby was enjoyed almost exclusively by whites in South Africa, whereas soccer was played primarily by blacks. The country's oppressed majority had just come to power with a long list of needs and persistent hatred of their former rulers. Mandela's answer was that he saw a nation united behind a Rugby team as an important symbol of social reconciliation. This was so, especially when the South African team won the cup for a jubilant biracial crowd.

This year's World Cup in soccer is also symbolic of how far the nation of South Africa has progressed. Despite its persistent problems, South Africa is a vibrant modern democracy. Its citizens are newly energized by the success of getting the country, especially the stadiums, ready for the World Cup. The World Cup has opened up Africa, and especially South Africa, to the whole world, allowing the global community to witness its beauty and mystery and the friendliness and hospitality of its people.

For 2 weeks, my son Stephen and I attended the World Cup in South Africa. We experienced the friendliness and sincerity of black and white South Africans. We always felt safe; there was always a smile for us. The attitude of "we hope you're enjoying our country" was pervasive. The two stadiums where we watched the games were spectacular, rivaling any football stadium in the United States. Hosting the World Cup seems to have brought the country together. It was a cause of celebration, a 4-week period during which fans from 32 countries rejoiced or did not rejoice, shared, learned, or were proud of their nation. South Africa did a tremendous job of hosting the world's biggest sporting event.

#### FOUR WORLD CUPS

I have had the pleasure of attending four World Cup games. The first was in 1994. My son Christopher and I watched the U.S.A. vs

Colombia game in the Rose Bowl. U.S.A. won 2-1. That game was my first World Cup game, and the experience was electric. I remember the fans from Colombia dancing in the golf course used for a parking lot outside the stadium. Many were dressed in their native dress. Excitement and hope were in the air. The game was won by the U.S.A. largely because Andreas Escobar, a center back for team Colombia, inadvertently scored a goal against his own team. Escobar was shot after returning home to Medellín. The reason for his murder is unknown, but gambling losses suffered by drug barons were probably involved. His murder cast a grim shadow over the final match between Italy and Brazil, who won when Roberto Baggio, the celebrated star from the Italian team, missed the penalty kick during the shoot out. The next game, which I attended with my wife, also was played in the Rose Bowl (Figure 1). It was the semifinals between Brazil and Sweden. The festivities before the game were spectacular. The Swedes in their Viking outfits were singing and dancing; the Brazilians in their usual high-octane celebratory mood were dancing the samba and singing, eating, and laughing; they were proud of their team. Brazil won 1-0 on a header by Romero.

My next World Cup experience was in 1998 during a neurosurgical meeting in Germany. I was able to sneak away from the conference to see the group game between the United States and Germany. I went with my cousin from Germany. We had great seats. The U.S.A. was outplayed and lost 2-0. The excitement and patriotism exhibited by both sides were fantastic.

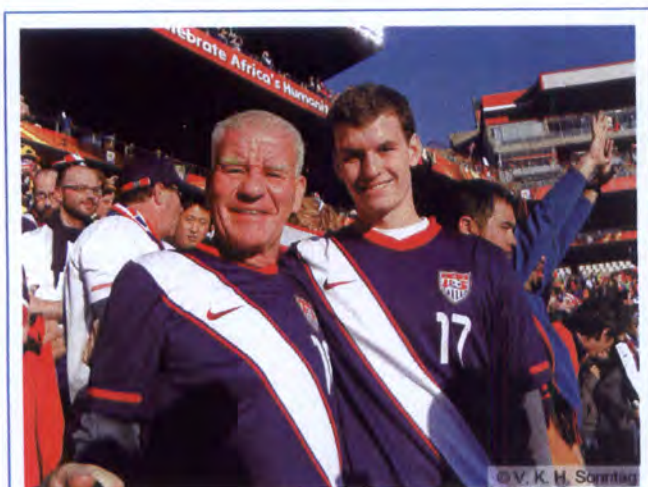
Because of these great experiences, I wanted a more extensive World Cup experience. Consequently, in 2006 my wife and I with friends from San Diego went to Germany for 2 weeks to see three U.S.A. games. What a beautiful 2 weeks it was. The host country threw a party the entire month of the World Cup. If we did not go to the games, we were able to watch them in the official areas (fanfest). Usually the town center or square was set up with jumbo TVs for showing the games. Food and drink were plentiful, and excitement permeated the atmosphere before, during, and after the games. Areas were set up in smaller towns to show the games, and friends were made while celebrating and watching the games.

The celebratory mood was ubiquitous throughout the coun-



Figure 2. Fans before the 2006 U.S.A. vs Czechoslovakia game. (Used with permission from Volker K. H. Sonntag.)





**Figure 3.** My son Stephen and I before the 2010 U.S.A. vs Slovenia game. (Used with permission from Volker K. H. Sonntag.)



**Figure 4.** My son Stephen after the 2010 U.S.A. vs Algeria game. (Used with permission from Volker K. H. Sonntag.)

try—the Germans, their visitors, and guests were rejoicing. The hard days of the early postwar years, the days of the Cold War, and the days of the sometimes painful yet appropriate and long-awaited union of the once-divided country (Die Wende) were over. It was good to fly the German flag and be proud of doing so. Hosting the World Cup was great for the sport of soccer but maybe even better for the spirit and soul of Germany. It was a wonderful 4 weeks. It is now known in Germany as the *Maerchen Sommer* (the summer of fairy tales).

We attended three games. Czechoslovakia vs. U.S.A. was the first. The celebrations started early in the day (Figure 2). On the train to the stadium, the Americans belted out their national anthem, only to be outdone by the Czechoslovakians. The U.S.A. lost that game 3-0 and rightfully so; they did not play very well. We saw the next game, U.S.A. vs. Italy, in Kaiserslautern. The U.S.A. played great with a gutsy performance and tied Italy 1-1. The last game was U.S.A. vs. Ghana. There was a huge celebration before, during, and after the game. Both the U.S.A. and the team from Ghana played well. A bad call, as admitted by all in attendance and later on, led to a penalty kick for Ghana and the U.S.A. lost 2-1. They were out of the finals and went home, but the festivities and the joy of the World Cup continued. Italy won the cup that year by beating France in the final match. A great World Cup celebrating the beautiful game by the teams and fans of all 32 countries showcased the German people and German hospitality.

As I mentioned, I also had the opportunity to attend the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. I went with my son, Stephen, and a friend from San Diego. The 2 weeks we spent there were spectacular. The first game we attended was in the Ellis Stadium in Johannesburg. The U.S.A. played Slovenia. We arrived several hours early to show off our replicas of the U.S. soccer team uniforms and to talk to people, primarily other Americans, about our chances of winning (Figure 3). The game did not start well for the U.S.A., and the team was down 2-0 at halftime. During the second half, it appeared as if a different team had shown up to

play for the U.S.A. and tied the game 2-2. Another goal was scored several minutes before the end of the game. I thought that the U.S.A. had won 3-2, and we had already started to celebrate. The referee discounted that goal, however, for reasons he has not yet explained even many weeks after the game. Consequently, the U.S.A. tied with Slovenia 2-2.

The next game we attended was even more dramatic. U.S.A. played Algeria in Pretoria. It was a beautiful day. American fans and Algerian fans roamed the streets hours before the game, celebrating and shouting their support for their respective teams. The game was very exciting with multiple close-goal attempts, all to no avail. The game ended in regulation time 0-0. Three minutes of extra time were played. During the second minute, Landon Donovan, forward for the U.S.A., made a goal. It was an unbelievable experience being in that stadium 30-40 yards away from Donovan when he made that goal. The game ended with the U.S.A. winning 1-0. Neither the fans nor the players wanted to leave the stadium (Figure 4). Hardly able to believe their good fortune, the U.S.A. went from exiting the World Cup to winning the group with that one goal. They moved on to the quarter finals, which they then lost to Ghana 2-1.

## CONCLUSION

In terms of excitement, patriotism, and enjoyment, the World Cup is an unparalleled experience. It evokes passion, commitment, and skill. Although the game can sometimes spur fans to nationalistic hatred and violence, it nevertheless overcomes that tendency by the joy and wonder that it creates. It is played and watched by every country in the world. It is global; it is the beautiful game.

The goal of **WORLD NEUROSURGERY** also is to be global—to become the forum for neurosurgeons of all countries to share their passion, skill, and commitment for the beautiful art and science of neurosurgery.



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**AUSTRALIA vs. GERMANY.** Germany's Thomas Müller (L) vies for the ball with Australia's Mile Jedinak (R) during the 2010 FIFA World Cup Group D preliminary round match. June 13, 2010, Durban Stadium, Durban, South Africa. Image: © Halden Krog/epa/Corbis.