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**Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman:
Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism**

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Introduction

A DEFINITE trend toward cultural convergence has been one of the main aspects of globalization. In the course of the twentieth century, especially among countries of the advanced industrial world, a set of common icons has developed that have become part of what we call Western culture. While this has been true on all levels, elite as well as mass, this commonality has been particularly pronounced in what has come to be known as popular culture. Whereas this cultural convergence has to a considerable degree coincided with America's rise to political and economic prominence in the twentieth century—thus comprising part of what has been termed “Americanization”—it would be erroneous to see this development as purely a one-way street in which an all-powerful America imposes its cultural icons on the rest of the world. Any visit to the United States, where wine drinking, coffee culture, sushi, and other aspects of the European as well as the Far Eastern culinary worlds have become commonplace from coast to coast, demonstrates that global culture—though featuring American items—is far from identical with American culture. Moreover, important pockets of popular culture exist that have remained completely resistant to any kind of Americanization in the course of the twentieth century. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the crucial world of mass sports. In this area, Europe and much of the rest of the world took a different path from that of America. Indeed, it is our contention that in the area of sport as culture, the differences between the United States on the one hand and much of the world on the other remain more persistent and noticeable than the similarities.

To wit: whereas both male Americans and Europeans of a certain age (between twenty-five and sixty-five), occupational and employment-related profile (university professor, researcher, social scientist, publicist, student), status (relatively highly educated, urbane, cosmopolitan), class (middle and upper middle), lifestyle, and milieu (urban, “postmaterialist”),¹ of a certain habitus and in possession of particular cultural capital² (well-read consumers of high-brow media—both domestically and internationally—well traveled and well connected), all follow the same, or very similar, events, watch the same movies, read the same books, follow the same academic debates, listen to the same music, have very similar, if perhaps not identical, consumption habits. In short, though they share a common public persona, lifestyle, and preoccupation in much of their daily lives of work and leisure, there seems to be one major exception to the surprising commonality of this male milieu: that of sports. Americans

know details and become passionate about the World Series, the playoff games of the National Football League, batting averages, earned run averages, triple doubles, and March Madness, and they remember and revere—perhaps even idolize—legends such as Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Ted Williams, and Henry Aaron in baseball; Jim Brown, Joe Montana, Bart Starr, and Walter “Sweetness” Payton in football; Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Michael “Air” Jordan, and Earvin “Magic” Johnson in basketball; and Bobby Orr, Maurice “Rocket” Richard, Mario Lemieux, and Wayne Gretzky (“The Great One”) in hockey. Europeans have identical relationships of affect and admiration for the likes of Bobby Charlton, Franz “Kaiser” Beckenbauer, Gianni Rivera, Ferenc “Öcsi” Puskas, Johan Cruyff, Pelé, and other greats of the world of soccer. While to Americans, Fenway Park, Yankee Stadium, Lambeau Field, and Madison Square Garden invoke history, memory, and awe, Europeans experience identical sentiments and associations with names such as Old Trafford, Anfield, Wembley, Ibrox Park, San Siro, Estado Bernabeu, Nou Camp, Nép Stadion, Maracana, and the Boekelberg.

The question, of course, is why. Why has the United States remained so aloof from the world’s most popular sport? Why in a sports-crazed society like the American one has soccer played such a marginal role?³ Why has this remained true despite the United States hosting the World Cup with great success in 1994? Why was this still the case four years later when the World Cup played in France was watched and followed by a hitherto unprecedented global audience estimated at 40 billion cumulative television viewers over one month, and after a well-financed professional league had completed three seasons in the United States?⁴ Why is this arguably the only global phenomenon wherein the United States counts for little and has continued a marginalized existence throughout all of the twentieth century? Why do many consider the twentieth century the “American century”—with this “nowhere more evident than in the landscape of sports”⁵—yet, concerning soccer, Paul Gardner’s words could not be a more accurate characterization: “Not even the most chauvinistic American could claim that the United States has had any influence on the development of soccer.”⁶ After all, the United States has most certainly mattered in this era’s global politics, economics, all aspects of cultural production and consumption (popular as well as elite), science, and education; and, of course, in sports, too, where, for example, the United States has garnered the largest number of Olympic medals among all countries since the inception of the modern games in 1896?⁷ Even in the Winter Olympics, where the United States most certainly never attained the prominence it has had throughout the twentieth century in the summer games, Americans proved quite successful over the years in such glamorous events as figure skating and Alpine skiing. Hence, it is simply

not true that America has lived in “splendid isolation” throughout the twentieth century, apart from the rest of the world, content to enjoy life on its own continental expanse buffered by two seemingly impenetrable oceans. The twentieth century would not be called the “American Century” had the United States behaved as parochially on the world scene as some have argued. Yet, in the world’s most popular sport by any measure, this has been exactly the case.

Whereas it would be quite impossible to write a history of the twentieth century in virtually any field without having the United States present in some prominent (if not necessarily predominant) manner, this is simply not the case in the world of soccer. Crudely put, America did not matter. What are the origins and manifestations of this particular “American exceptionalism”?⁸ Answering this question forms the core of this book.

In presenting this introduction, which is the basis for our consideration as to why we believe soccer never became a dominant player in America’s sport culture, as it did in that of other advanced industrial societies, permit us this comment: We want the reader to know that we are in equal awe of the accomplishments of athletes in all of the sports we examine in this book. In our research for this project and in our lives as sports fans on both sides of the Atlantic, we have often observed and experienced a great deal of contempt for the other continent’s sports on the part of fans, writers, commentators, and analysts. To many Europeans, American sports appear to be not only awkward and strange (perfectly understandable in view of their unfamiliarity) but also inferior and easy (less excusable, one might think). The exact same thing pertains to the ways in which many Americans view the most dominant European sport, soccer. But to us—the authors of this book—hitting a small, hard ball traveling in excess of ninety miles per hour with a thin wooden bat sixty feet away is just as difficult and impressive as threading a beautiful fifty-yard cross from the back of the field into the opposing team’s penalty area as an assist to a possible goal. Fade-away jump shots are every bit the equals of headers, and a great run by an American football player remains as aesthetically pleasing, emotionally exciting, and intellectually impressive to us as a great run by a European or Latin American soccer player. These athletes are akin to artists whose creativity, no matter the medium, has earned our utmost respect. Most important, the appreciation of these sports has given us a degree of joy and fulfillment in our lives that only other true sports fans will understand and appreciate.

Chapter 1 presents our argument and its framework. The next two chapters offer a historical overview of the development of team sports in the United States, from their origins in the nineteenth century through the end of World War II. Chapter 2 features a discussion of those team sports that formed what we have termed America’s “hegemonic sports culture”:

baseball, football, basketball, and (to a lesser extent, but still with a legitimate and palpable presence) ice hockey. These four sports are what we have come to call the “Big Three and One-Half” of America’s “sport space.” Soccer’s history of turmoil in the United States during the same period comprises chapter 3. The second half of the twentieth century is considered in the book’s next section, with the Big Three and One-Half featured in chapter 4, and soccer in chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 provide respective case study accounts of World Cup 1994 (hosted by the United States) and World Cup 1998 (hosted by France). A brief conclusion reexamines the book’s thesis and offers some thoughts regarding soccer’s possible and potential future in the United States.