

Sport in the Global Society – Contemporary Perspectives

FIFA WORLD CUP AND BEYOND

SPORT, CULTURE, MEDIA AND GOVERNANCE

Edited by

Kausik Bandyopadhyay, Souvik Naha and Shakya Mitra



FIFA World Cup and Beyond

Soccer, the most popular mass spectator sport in the world, has long been a site which articulates the complexities and diversities of the everyday life of the nation. The imaging and prioritization of the game as a 'national' or an 'international' event in public opinion and the media also play a critical role in transforming the soccer culture of a nation. In this context, the FIFA World Cup remains the grand spectacle for asserting the identity of the nation. This book intends to offer eclectic perspectives and discourses on the FIFA World Cup, and to throw light on the changing dimensions of football and sports culture in terms of identity, race, ethnicity, gender, fandom, governance, and so on. On the one hand, it focuses on the significance of the FIFA World Cup for nations in terms of hosting, performance, playing style, and identity formation. On the other, it looks beyond the World Cup to highlight the growing importance of a host of perspectives in sport in general and football in particular with reference to art, fandom, gender, media, and governance.

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**Kausik Bandyopadhyay, Souvik Naha
and Shakya Mitra**

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Helton Levy

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INTRODUCTION

FIFA World Cup and beyond: sport, culture, media and governance

Kausik Bandyopadhyay, Souvik Naha and Shakya Mitra

Soccer, the most popular mass spectator sport in the world (Goldblatt 2008), is a game where humanity comes alive with one goal.¹ Globally soccer has long been a site which articulates the complexities and diversities of the everyday life of the nation.² The game has always remained a marker of identities of various sorts. Behind the façade of its obvious entertainment aspect, it has proved to be a perpetuating reflector of cultural nationalism, distinctive ethnicity, community or communal identity, cultural specificity as well as representative of models of development and international status of post-colonial nation states. For those nations, which still remain at the periphery of the modern world, the game provides a platform to assert their national identity at the international stage through on-field performance or off-field fandom.³ The imaging and prioritization of the game as a 'national' or an 'international' event in public opinion and the media also play a critical role in transforming the soccer culture of a nation into a developed one.⁴ In this context, the FIFA World Cup remains the grand spectacle for asserting the identity of the nation. It also gives birth to heroes, icons and legends, who not only represent their national identity at the global stage, but float at a transnational global space, transcending the limits of space, identity or culture of a nation (Bandyopadhyay 2016).

It is the staggering mass following at all levels transcending age, space or time that makes soccer different from any other sports in the world. Yet, as in other sports, performance and non-performance are equally revealing in soccer as well. The craze and status of the game as well as the future of soccer is revealed through this graph of performances or non-performances in World Cups. In the developed, developing and underdeveloped nations, soccer has faced new challenges emanating from globalization: commercialization, professionalization and mediatization in the last three decades.⁵ In the face of these, when growing competition among elite football clubs in developed soccer bastions has become obvious and when the FIFA, world's apex body of soccer, has recently put so much emphasis on the exercise on standardization, new priorities under globalization – access to capital, models of sports governance, competitive mass media and sponsorship, transnational fandom, gendered discourses on the game, and so on – all have altered the balance of power in international, national and local rivalries affecting the game across the world in the twenty-first century (Garland, Malcolm, and Rowe 2013).⁶

In trying to address some of these diverse issues mentioned above, the present volume intends to offer eclectic perspectives and discourses on the FIFA World Cup, and throw light on changing dimensions of football and sports culture in terms of identity, race, ethnicity, gender, fandom, governance, and so on. The initiative for this volume goes back to the International Conference on *FIFA World Cup and the Nation: Culture, Politics, Identity* jointly organized by the Taylor & Francis Group and the University of Central Lancashire and held at the University Club, Oxford on 23–24 July 2014. While the present work has incorporated some of the papers presented in the conference, it also includes essays primarily written to illuminate the theme of the volume. Apart from its predominant emphasis on the FIFA World Cup, the volume comprises a few essays that shift the focus in the end to some other football/sports-related issues, emerging in the field. The volume is divided into two sections apart from the Introduction. The first section ‘FIFA World Cup and the Nation’ focuses on the significance of FIFA World Cups for nations in terms of hosting, performance, playing style, and identity formation. The last and forthcoming editions of the Cup – Brazil 2014 and Russia 2018 are given particular attention by the authors in that context while case studies include those of Brazil, Italy, Australia and the United States. The second section looks beyond the World Cup to highlight the growing importance of a host of perspectives in sport in general and football in particular. These include art, fandom, gender, media, and governance.

The volume, i.e. the first section, unfolds with two intriguing perspectives on the 2014 Brazil World Cup. After the 2014 World Cup was concluded, various stakeholders started promoting the particular event as the best ever in the history of the tournament. The media circulated the event’s positive aspects so successfully that in a public poll conducted by the BBC, 39% of the readers voted in favour of the best ever tag. Kevin Moore’s narrative, which offers the first perspective, travels through the long history of the FIFA World Cups to show that such comparison between eras is not only invalid in terms of goal scoring and style of play, but also in the scale of organization. The event was pretty average in the number of goals scored per match, indicating how competitive global football has become. Both media coverage and public attendance have increased exponentially over the years. Even the widely reported social turmoil over the high costs of hosting the event was trifling compared to the political controversies to have taken place within the World Cup’s contexts. Moore’s chronological account also adequately captures the international and local politics at play behind every edition of the tournament. Since it is a tournament between nations, heads of states and other politicians naturally become involved in its organization. Their exercise of political motives plays a significant role in determining participation, which is evident in the inclusion and exclusion of various countries and preparation of first round groups over the years. War – both the Second World War and civil wars, refusal to compete against political enemies, non-acceptance of countries not diplomatically recognized by the host, ethnic tensions, boycott against FIFA rulings, and dictatorships have all played critical roles in shaping the tournament’s fortunes. The much-criticized 2014 World Cup, in Moore’s analysis, was far less controversial politically.

The second perspective on the 2014 World Cup comes from Helton Levy who discusses the significance of media coverage in bringing forth the narratives and counter-narratives about the preparations, problems and prospects of the tournament, and its role in prioritizing specific narratives in that context. As Brazil was engulfed by social turmoil and political tension in the year preceding the World Cup, issues such as poverty, protest and

violence became pivotal in local media reportage. Yet, Levy shows through a frame analysis that these serious social issues were ultimately overshadowed by commercial interest and political agenda projected by the global media, particularly in England and elsewhere, which privileged the priorities of a global spectacle, thereby focusing on FIFA's narrative on the event. As a result, delays and infrastructure problems were given more consideration than crucial local issues, thereby pointing to the role of global media in the marginalization of local voices in case of international sports events. Levy's effort underlines the significance of the continuing debate around motivated mediatization of sporting events across the world.

With growing emphases on the bidding and preparation of, and build-up to global mega events in recent times, studies on the significance of hosting such events have become increasingly relevant and popular. The essay by Dona Wong and Simon Chadwick reflects upon the prospects of World Cup 2018 to be hosted by Russia in terms of risk-assessment. While hosting a grand spectacle of the magnitude of FIFA World Cup provides a great opportunity to showcase the nation, modernize the state's economy, and fast-track development, it also brings risks of various sorts. Wong and Chadwick first take stock of the risks faced by the last three World Cups and comment on the ability of the host nations to handle those risks. With this background, they proceed to identify the potential threats and challenges that can jeopardize the security of the 2018 World Cup to be hosted by Russia, particularly in a context where the planning and operational decisions for Russia 2018 are undertaken under conditions of high ambiguity and uncertainty. Terrorism, violence, racism, boycott, cost inflation, infrastructural problem and political unpredictability loom large before Russia as it prepares for the greatest football show. To combat such risks effectively and to secure the mega event, they suggest, it is important to chalk out and implement preventative and security measures.

The World Cup is undoubtedly dependent on the media's assessment of the turn of events and inclination of readers/viewers for establishing its legacy. The same can be said about national football cultures, the distinguishing features of which are largely disseminated through the media's appropriation. The essay by Niels N Rossing and Lotte S Skrubbeltrang uses Edgar Schein's framework for cultural analysis to examine to what extent action on the playing field corresponds to specific 'national football cultures' commonly quoted in the media and the public sphere. They analyse textual (research works and popular books) and visual (match videos) materials related to Brazil and Italy's campaign in the 2010 and 2014 World Cups. The evidence leads them to argue that the two national teams' playing styles were sometimes consistent with how their national football cultures are universally understood. They present an intriguing idea, comparing a nation's style of play to a dialect within the general language of football. Each national dialect, they contend, is supported by 'different basic assumptions and to some extent specific symbolic actions on the field'. However, this consistency was not so regular that a cultural identity could readily be imposed on each country at national level football. In the final analysis, they reveal divergences between the Brazilian and Italian national teams and their football culture in general, mainly because of how players are primed in their club career. Hence, they conclude, a national team doesn't always speak the same dialect as of its internal football culture.

While soccer is widely considered as the global game, but within two major regions of the world it was largely seen as an 'outsider' sport. Two following essays by Binoy Kampmark and David Kilpatrick examine the place of football in these regions – Australia and the United States respectively. Despite being the world's most popular sport, football for a long

time struggled to make an impact in the sporting landscape of Australia, widely considered as one of the world's most sports loving countries. Perception towards the sport has been helped though by qualification for three consecutive Men's World Cups. Kampmark's essay accounts for football in Australia, the past indifference and a growing warmth towards it in recent times. One of the main reasons why soccer (as a lot of Australians refer to it) struggled to gain relevance in Australia for long periods of time was that it could not match the popularity of rival sports, the most prominent being Australian Rules Football. However with time for Australia to garner a more global identity, it became necessary to embrace football. Over the last decade, much of the indifference that football was subjected to in the past has reduced. One of the clearest manifestations of this growing significance of the game was seen in the outrage throughout the country when Australia was controversially eliminated in the round of 16 in the 2006 World Cup, or even more recently, when Australia missed out on hosting the 2022 World Cup. Despite the continuing cultural resistance towards the game, the essay argues, the experience of the 2014 World Cup hints at a more stable future for the game in Australia.

The United States also had similar issues coming to terms with soccer. Kilpatrick looks at the indifference and animosity with which the game has been viewed with in the United States. While the 1950 Cup was remarkable in that it witnessed USA's shock victory over England, but this upset victory did not really push the game further in the States as it was followed by a lull of 40 years as the Men's Football team failed to qualify for the World Cup between 1950 and 1990. The game retreated into an isolated, insular and mostly ethnic marginalized status on the periphery of the American sporting landscape. If Pelé's arrival in America to play for New York Cosmos was deemed to be soccer's arrival in the States, argues Kilpatrick, hosting the 1994 World Cup was the real big boost for the game in the USA, particularly in terms of audience reception, followed by the start of Major League Soccer. The performances of the Men's National Team have improved considerably since then with a concomitant rise in FIFA rankings. Despite this rising image of soccer in contemporary America, according to the author, the sport does not seem to completely break away from its amnesia probably due to the animosity which has always marked its struggle for relevance in American society. Soccer being a threat to hegemonic forces and discourses in American sporting landscape, it has always been criticized for its alleged 'foreignness', and hence its competition with ostensibly indigenous sports has been far from fair. More importantly, as Kilpatrick shows, the internal animosity in the organization and governance of the game continues to complicate the growth of the domestic game on stable footing. Yet, given the steady rise in mass interest in soccer visible during and post 2014 World Cup, the author predicts a brighter future of soccer in America.

The second section of the volume begins with Mike O'Mahony's nuanced attempt to explore the relational complexities among sport, art and society. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the urban landscape of the city of Moscow changed considerably with a host of new monuments springing up. Old Heroes once revered but later despised during the Soviet era acquired a new found status with their statues adorned on the streets of Moscow post the events of August 1991. Yet one man established as a hero during Soviet times continued to find pride of place, even in the aftermath of the collapse. Mike O'Mahony explores this legendary Russian – Lev Yashin, widely considered as the greatest goalkeeper of all time, with reference to him being immortalized in Moscow in the form of two sculptures by Alexander Rukavishnikov, one of the most prolific Russian sculptors of the post-Soviet

era. O'Mahony through these sculptures looks at two issues, the connection between sport and art, and the role of the goalkeeper in Soviet society. Also in accounting for the greatness of Yashin, the author deconstructs the sculptural representations to reflect upon the career, status and reputation of Yashin. Yashin remains without doubt one of the greatest national heroes from the Soviet Union, and with Russia all set to host the 2018 World Cup, there is no doubt that his name will be used to build up publicity for the tournament.

The spread and significance of transnational fandom and its associated subcultures has become one of the core values and markers of contemporary sporting world primarily driven by commercial forces. Football being the most global of international sports, fandom has made strongest inroads to foment fan identities based on nation, club or personality, both singularly and plurally. The old Indian city of Kolkata has been a case in this regard, as Sarbajit Mitra and Souvik Naha examines roots and impact of the fan base *La Albiceleste* (the Argentine national football team) and its football legend Diego Maradona began to command since the mid-1980s. Their essay traces the fascinating story of Kolkata's transformation from a Brazilian football colony to an Argentinian one particularly during World Cups from mid-1980s to mid-1990s through a discussion of Maradona's footballing ability, personal life and political predilections. The trajectory of Bengalis' tryst with Maradona/Argentina between 1986, the year Argentina lifted the World Cup under his captaincy and 2008, when Maradona visited Kolkata, is explored analysing contemporary media representations and literary output. The study, by exploring the deeper significance of an international icon in the social and political world of an underdeveloped footballing nation like India, brings to fore the complexities of fandom as a global process.

Like transnational fandom, local fan cultures constitute an important area of enquiry in sports and cultural studies. Andy Fuller's essay explores the patterns of local football cultures in Indonesia, another underdeveloped footballing nation with a focus on two of its cities – Solo and Yogyakarta. While Indonesia cuts a sorry figure in the international soccer map, international soccer including European leagues and World Cups are hugely popular there commanding large fan bases and supporter groups. Yet, despite the consistent failure of the national team, as Fuller shows, local football rivalries and culture have been rich in tradition and intense enough to merit scholarly attention. Parallel to the popularity of the English Premier League, the author, through his painstaking ethnographic research, sheds light on the violent and tense rivalries in Solo and Yogyakarta in the broader context of Indonesian 'soccerscapes'. He links the urban fan culture in these cities to wider processes of politics and policies of decentralization in the post-New Order period (1998 onwards) as well as to the deeply contested identity politics across the state. The essay focuses on the experiences of identification with a particular club in case of Solo and an ex-player in case of Yogyakarta to understand how football culture plays a pivotal role in shaping urban identities.

'Time' is a crucial aspect in everyone's life and it is no different with football. Kath Woodward looks at the current state of women's football from the relational perspective of time and temporality. Taking 'Time' into context, Woodward argues that the legacy of memories of pivotal moments, record breaking displays and construction of heroes over a period of time have been absent in women's football. This is in complete contrast to the men's game. While the 2014 Men's World Cup did see some degree of incremental change in the way women are viewed, there still remains the feeling that gender in sport, particularly football, is dominated by masculinity rather than femininity. There were of course positive changes taking place, examples being Women being brought in as commentators as well as

providing their expert opinion on the game during the Cup or the Women's Super League being launched in England. There have been, on the contrary, negative blogs questioning how much women can support football. Woodward also draws attention to sexist abuses to which women on and off the field are subjected to and the persistent need felt at all levels to rectify the discriminatory gendered attitude inherent in society in order to efface such abuses. Woodward argues that football should be enjoyed, and should become as socially inclusive as possible. While Women's Time is not an alternative to Men's Time, being able to address the inequalities of the past could help bring us a more equal future for Men's and Women's Football.

Football in England constitutes an important part of what constitutes the nation's cultural identity. Televised football is a key arena where prominent ideas of race, identity and gender and the differences they entail are reproduced and naturalized. These ideas have become all the more important in a multicultural society like England which has begun to question the lack of Englishness in its highest league, due to the influx of foreign players. The football media is one of the most powerful institutions through which ideas of races are dispersed. It is also one of the few arenas in our modern society where segregation across gender lines takes place. In their essay, Rens Peeters and Jacco Van Sterkenburg, through a focus group research conducted with students of two London universities, viz. Brunel University and Croydon College, discuss how ideas of nationality, race/ethnicity and gender are made through the prism of televised football. In doing so, they try to explore on the one hand the discourses television viewers of various ethnic and gender groupings draw on to give meaning to race/ethnicity and gender, and on the other how viewers' individual reception and discourses overlap with hegemonic media discourses and strengthen or challenge wider hegemonic media discourses in a multi-ethnic society. However, as the authors argue, a fuller understanding of a participant's sense of belonging that includes various domains of social experience such as national and/or local belongings would require more complex approach in both the focus of the interviews as well as in the analysis of the data as the researcher in that case would have to negotiate with new and politically infused questions about groupings and racial hierarchies in and through (mediated) football.

It has already been shown in an earlier chapter that despite resistance from competing sections soccer in the United States – both Men's and Women's – is making steady strides to become a popular and commercially viable mass consumed sporting activity. In that process, along with real time soccer play and its telecast, in the last one decade or so, a new element of multimedia has become an influential vector in generating tremendous interest in the game particularly among the younger sections of American society. This burgeoning development in the field of soccer has been due to EA Sports' *FIFA* video game series, launched globally in 1993. As the essay of Andrei S. Markovits and Adam I. Green has tried to argue, while soccer still lags behind America's 'Big Four' of football, baseball, hockey and basketball in terms of following, the recent proliferation of *FIFA* the video game has the potential to transform soccer's cultural presence in American society in coming years. The authors discuss the origins, growth and impact of this unique audiovisual instrument of soccer's global popularization in the context of soccer's social and cultural presence in the United States over the last one decade or so. By offering an in-depth analysis of video game users and their narratives, they conclude that this video game, a non-reality, has become a new lived cultural experience that has the ability to transform the 'real' social and cultural status of soccer in the United States.

The last essay of the volume turns attention to the crucial issue of governance in contemporary sports world with focus on the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) of Ireland, the largest Irish sporting body, in the context of growing significance of corporate business and stakeholder management in the realm of sport. Traditionally being an amateurish and community-based institution, the GAA's transition to modern day professional and commercial stage has been the subject of enquiry by the authors – David Hassan and Ian O Boyle. They situate this transition against the backdrop of a changing reality within global sport – the pressing need for effective management of the interdependency of national governing bodies, individual clubs and a network of stakeholder interests. While the GAA as a self-regulatory body employed both volunteerism and financial altruism as also stewardship for administering good governance, the main challenge it now faces is how to manage a vibrant, professional and modern sporting body within the confines of a historically determined and fundamentally amateur context. The essay argues that only through the introduction of a meaningful stakeholder model can the governance of an organization like the GAA even attempt to respond to this challenge.

The present volume has in no way pretended to present any holistic understanding of events, processes and discourses in relation to FIFA World Cups and other sporting issues enshrined in the title. Neither does it claim to offer an equitable spatial representation of global perspectives, as evidenced in the virtual absence of Africa in its coverage. The volume is rather an attempt to explore and understand some emerging issues in the realm of modern sport/football with two focal points of attention. The first looks at the FIFA Men's World Cup in relation to nations who host, take part in, or simply consume it. Representations of the nation through the World Cup in myriad forms have been discussed with reference to history, culture, identity, security, media and commerce. The second goes beyond the World Cup to look at more general yet important issues of sports/soccer culture, media representation and sports governance. Here, the essays aim to reflect upon a range of diverse themes including footballing art, fan culture, women's football, mediatization, video game and stakeholder governance.

Notes

1. Throughout this introduction and the volume, soccer and football have been used almost interchangeably, unless otherwise specified as in the cases of the United States or Australia.
2. Numerous studies have discussed the role of soccer/football in the everyday life of nations. For a most recent example, see Goldblatt (2014).
3. For a case study on this, see Crolley and Hand (2006).
4. For a general study of the significance of national identity around the two most significant global sporting spectacles, viz. Olympics and FIFA World Cup, see Tomlinson (2012).
5. A number of works have dealt with the impact of globalization on sports in general and football in particular. For example, see Sandvoss (2003).
6. Many of these emerging issues in world football have found their way through the articles published in the last few years in a host of scholarly journals on sport, and most notably in *Soccer & Society* (London: Routledge).

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A second 'Maracanazo'? The 2014 FIFA World Cup in historical perspective

Kevin Moore

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to evaluate the 2014 FIFA World Cup in relation to the World Cup tournaments since the first in 1930, in terms of the success of the tournament, both on and off the pitch. The 2014 FIFA World Cup was characterized in the international media for several years prior to the tournament as one which was highly problematic in terms of its organization in Brazil, as to whether the stadia and other infrastructure would be ready. This negativity was compounded after the street protests around the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup, leading to fears that the 2014 tournament would be marred by significant popular political opposition. Once the 2014 World Cup began and it was clear that the infrastructure was sufficiently in place and the protests would in fact be very minimal, the international media did a swift volte-face and instead portrayed the tournament as a great success. As an historian I take the long view, evaluating the 2014 tournament in the full historical perspective. In doing so, I debunk the media myths about the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

With a year to go, there were great concerns about the cost, with the country facing major economic and social problems. There were protests and then riots on the streets. Even just days before it began, there was negative media coverage, with the population split on whether it was all just a big waste of money, a distraction from the real issues facing the country. But once it began, the event was proclaimed a great success by the international media.

No, this is not the FIFA World Cup in Brazil 2014, but the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. London 2012 showed how a negative image and mood, partly created by the media, can very quickly be turned around. London 2012 is generally accepted to have been a great success, even by the hyper-critical UK media. Parts of the British media were still being negative after the games began, but then quickly changed when they realized the public mood was overwhelmingly positive. In many ways the same can be said of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, in the sense that an event which was being portrayed very negatively in the media before it began is now generally regarded to have been a success. World Cups and Olympic Games are now reported and judged in the context of 24-hour

rolling news channels and social media, with instant reactions and the possibility of the smallest negative incident becoming a major international news story.

This paper seeks to evaluate the 2014 FIFA World Cup in relation to the World Cup tournaments since the first in 1930, in terms of the success of the tournament, both on and off the pitch. To do so we need to get beyond the instant reactions of journalists and take a longer, historical view. The 2014 FIFA World Cup was characterized in the international media for several years prior to the tournament as one which was highly problematic in terms of its organization in Brazil, as to whether the stadia and other infrastructure would be ready. This negativity was compounded after the street protests around the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup, leading to fears that the 2014 tournament would be marred by significant popular political opposition. Once the 2014 World Cup got under way and it was clear that the infrastructure was sufficiently in place and the protests would in fact be very minimal, the international media did a swift volte-face and instead portrayed the tournament as a great success, with some forecasting after the first round of group games that this could be the 'best World Cup ever'. Such is the nature of the modern global news media. As an historian, in this paper I will take the long view, evaluating the 2014 tournament in a historical perspective, from 1930 onwards. In doing so, I will debunk the media myths about the 2014 FIFA World Cup, some of which had been propagated even before it began.

Despite being the most successful World Cup nation, with five wins, Brazil had not hosted the finals tournament since 1950. Despite this success, deep in the Brazilian football psyche is the scar of the highly unexpected (by Brazilians) defeat in the deciding match in 1950 in the Maracana Stadium, known as the 'Maracanazo', the 'Maracana blow'. Hosting in 2014 would give the opportunity to finally expunge this by Brazil winning in the final in the new Maracana. However, given the protests around the Confederations Cup in Brazil in 2013, it seemed a real possibility that this dream could have turned into something of a nightmare, with unfinished stadia and street protests. The major fears were unfounded. It went from potentially a question of what went wrong for Brazil into a question of how it went right. But there was a genuine sense of trepidation before the tournament began, which cannot be put down purely to modern media hyperbole.

How in retrospect can we evaluate the FIFA 2014 World Cup? It is a moot question as to how long after an event can a historian make a composed and objective analysis? When asked in 1972 about the impact of the French Revolution, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai said it was 'too early' to say. This story turns out to be apocryphal, that he was referring to turmoil in France in 1968 and not – as is commonly thought – to the more distant political upheaval of 1789 (Campbell 2011). But as an historian I am still going to attempt the very difficult if not impossible task of evaluating the 2014 tournament after a few months, rather than years. To do so, it is essential to take an historical perspective, from the first FIFA World Cup in 1930 onwards. This paper does not consider the development of the women's FIFA World Cup or any of the other World Cup tournaments organized by FIFA. It will demonstrate that we can only understand and evaluate the FIFA World Cup Brazil 2014 if we consider it in relation to the FIFA World Cup from its inception. From this historical perspective, the 2014 tournament was one of the *least* controversial, in political terms.

The 2014 tournament was rapidly acclaimed around the world as potentially the best ever World Cup. But by which criteria? How can one measure the success or failure of a World Cup? Clearly the tournament is polysemantic, it means different things to different persons, no two views are the same. More than 3.2 billion people watched at least some television

coverage of the tournament. In an increasingly globalized world, even most of those who did not watch would have an awareness and an opinion. During the tournament, the world was 'footballised'. Completely unrelated media stories were given a link to football, however tenuous, or even non-existent. For example, when experts found the largest ever fossilized skeleton of a bird, the story was that it would have made a great goalkeeper (Myles 2014).

Is it possible to quantify a World Cup? Joseph S. Blatter, then the president of FIFA, believes it is. At a press conference the day after the tournament ended, he gave it a score of 9.25, out of 10. 'We have improved on four years ago in South Africa,' said Blatter, who awarded the 2010 World Cup 9 marks out of 10 – for organization, not the quality of the football. Smiling broadly, he told reporters that 'We consulted all our computers and our Facebooks (*sic*) and decided on 9.25 out of 10 because perfection does not exist in football' (Collett 2014). Immediately after the rather disappointing – in football terms – World Cup in South Africa, Blatter said that FIFA should consider making the goals bigger, or have just 10 players in each team, as the great Brazilian player Socrates had suggested, given that modern players were so much fitter and faster, but that pitches were still the same size (McOwan 2011).

The one obvious quantitative measure for a World Cup is goals scored. In contrast to at least the two previous tournaments, the initial group games were not low scoring draws, but saw plenty of goals, not least the Netherlands' shock 5–1 defeat of the reigning champions Spain. There were 53 goals in the 12 initial group games, at an average of 4.42 per game, with only one 0–0 draw. The media started to talk about how this might be the best World Cup 'ever'. But by the end of the tournament, the number of goals per game had fallen to 2.67. This was the best since France in 1998, which it exactly matched. However, taking an historical perspective of all the World Cup tournaments from 1930 onwards, the number of goals per game at Brazil 2014 was lower than ten previous World Cups, as Table 1 demonstrates. More goals do not necessarily mean better football, as they can be the result of poor defending or bad goalkeeping, and a 0–0 draw can sometimes be as exciting as a high-scoring game, but in general the greater the number of goals, the more exciting the tournament. Brazil 2014 by this measure was average at best. The public at large, however, lack historical perspective, and in a BBC poll carried out immediately the tournament had ended, Brazil 2014 was voted the best World Cup ever, with 39% of the vote (BBC 2014).

Historical comparison between World Cups beyond goals scored becomes extremely difficult, not least because the early tournaments are on a completely different scale to the most recent. Take, for example, the number of teams entering and competing in qualification matches, as outlined in Table 2. The 1930 World Cup required no qualification because it had places for 16 teams, but only 13 turned up to compete. The first tournament to require qualification matches was in 1934, but as only 22 teams were competing for 16 places, the largest qualification groups were only three, with two teams qualifying from these groups. Some groups were only two, so teams only played each other home and away. Further, Peru and Chile withdrew, so Brazil and Argentina qualified automatically. In 1938, several teams qualified without playing a game, due to withdrawals. For example, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dutch Guiana, El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States all withdrew, so Cuba qualified automatically. In 1938 71% of teams competing reached the finals, as Table 2 demonstrates. In 1950, with only 34 teams initially entering for 16 places, and 13 then withdrawing, some teams again qualified without playing a game. Nineteen teams in qualification were competing for 14 available places. 1954 was the first World Cup where no team qualified without playing a game, but teams in qualification had a 48% chance of reaching the finals.

Table 1. Goals per game at FIFA World Cup Finals.

Year	Teams competing	Matches	Goals	Average goals per game
1930	13	18	70	3.89
1934	16	17	70	4.12
1938	15	18	84	4.67
1950	13	22	88	4.00
1954	16	26	140	5.38
1958	16	35	126	3.60
1962	16	32	89	2.78
1966	16	32	89	2.78
1970	16	32	95	2.97
1974	16	38	97	2.55
1978	16	38	102	2.68
1982	24	52	146	2.81
1986	24	52	132	2.54
1990	24	52	115	2.21
1994	24	52	141	2.71
1998	32	64	171	2.67
2002	32	64	161	2.52
2006	32	64	147	2.30
2010	32	64	145	2.27
2014	32	64	171	2.67

Source: FIFA, 2014a, 'FIFA World Cup Tournament Statistics', <http://www.fifa.com/worldfootball/statisticsandrecords/tournaments/worldcup/organisation/>.

Table 2. Teams entering and competing in qualification matches at the World Cup.

Year	Teams initially entering	Teams qualifying as hosts or holders	Teams withdrawing before qualification matches	Teams competing in qualification matches	Teams at finals	% of teams in qualification appearing at finals
1930	13	0	n/a	n/a	13	n/a
1934	32	0	5	27	16	59
1938	37	2	14	21	15	71
1950	34	2	13	19	13	68
1954	45	2	10	33	16	48
1958	55	2	7	46	16	35
1962	56	2	5	49	16	33
1966	74	2	21	51	16	31
1970	75	2	5	68	16	24
1974	99	2	7	90	16	18
1978	107	2	10	95	16	17
1982	109	2	4	103	24	23
1986	121	2	9	110	24	22
1990	116	2	11	103	24	23
1994	147	2	15	130	24	18
1998	174	2	4	168	32	19
2002	199	3	3	193	32	17
2006	198	1	3	194	32	16
2010	206	1	5	200	32	16
2014	203	1	2	200	32	16

Sources: FIFA. 2006. 'FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in a Nutshell', http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/fifafacts/mcwc/ip-301_11a_fwc-prelstats_8828.pdf; FIFA. 2013. 'Recap of the FIFA World Cup Preliminary Competitions 1930–2014, Statistical Kit', http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/fifafacts/mencompwc/51/97/68/2014fwc_kit_recap_fwc_prel_neutral.pdf.

Withdrawals also affected the finals tournament after 1930. In 1938, only 15 teams were at the finals instead of 16, because Austria withdrew. In 1950, there were only 13 teams, because India, Scotland and Turkey withdrew.