

The Global Game

A FOOTBALL MONTHLY

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Supporters and players are different animals. Athletes and writers have long made the distinction, with Michelle Akers, FIFA's co-player of the century among women, perhaps [stating it best](#): "I'm not a big TV person. I'm always outside doing things. I've never been a sports watcher. I was just a sports *player*."

This distinction between players and watchers was brought home to me last fall, when I debuted in a scrimmage of Atlanta-area recreation-league players—a diverse group, with team members from Norway, Iraq, and the Republic of Ireland in addition to the locals. The first thing that struck me was my lack of fitness. Second, though—and only partly due to the fitness problem—I did not enjoy the competition. My anxiety about making a mistake was almost all-consuming, so much so that I awoke the next morning with a stomach ache, already preoccupied with the next practice. It was a familiar feeling, stirring memories of Little League baseball and all those old failures. At one moment in the scrimmage, however, from my position at left back, I lofted a ball down the wing to the front-runners. It was precious, what commentators would have called a "textured pass." Even though the ball skittered fruitlessly over the byline, a teammate made a comment that would allow my retirement the following day: "Nice ball." That's all I needed—one small affirmation.

What about the larger question, beyond football, of spectating versus participation? Should spectators feel guilty, as I

[>> go to page 2](#)



Supporters stand on earthen berms outside a pitch near Lichinga, Mozambique.

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MEDIA GLEANINGS

Amid descriptions of snow-leopard pelts on Chicken Street and a decimated Kabul cityscape resembling the Roman Forum, **Alex-**



ander Smoltczyk details the reemergence of Afghanistan's football team before its return to international competition at the

[South Asian Football Federation \(SAFF\) championship](#) ("[Afghanistan: Operation Freedom](#)," *World Press Review*, April 2003; translated from the article appearing originally in *Der Spiegel*, 27 January 2003). Players, on wages of 90 cents per day, lean their bicycles on stands at the stadium, which, it is gruesomely recalled, was a site for executions under the Taliban regime. Coach **Meir Ali Azghar**, demonstrating the multitasking necessary among footballers and staff in poorer nations, moderates a Kabul television program on local politics. Smoltczyk writes, "These men are pioneers in their own country. They are not looking for new territory; they only want to make the old one habitable again." Afghanistan did not score a goal in the SAFF event in January, but on 16 March it defeated Kyrgyzstan 2-1 in an Asian Nations Cup preliminary. . . .

Football fiction is alive and well, demonstrated in the current issue of *Harper's* ("Ajax Is All about Attack," April 2003, 73-80). Using former Ajax and Partizan Belgrade great **Velibor Vasovic** as a protagonist, author **Jim Shepard** creates a fanciful first-person account that spans Vasovic's career. Some of the information, according to a [thread](#) on [Soccerpages.com](#), has come from **David Winner's** *Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Football*, which includes a chapter on Vasovic. The interesting aspect of Shepard's story is imagining what might run through the mind of a self-aware footballer—and not just any footballer, but one of the greats in Europe, the captain of an Ajax side that included **Johan Cruyff**. In fact, when

[>> go to page 2](#)

>> [continued from page 1](#)

Vasovic died last year at 62, a heart-attack victim, Cruyff [eulogized him](#) as a “big brother.” Shepard’s prose is sensitive and rewards re-reading, but I was especially touched by the description of Vasovic’s life following his football career: “I got a job sweeping the new Café Het Station, which seemed chilly and fantastical. The huge bleak spaces of the adjacent bus station rose out of the mist beyond every morning as I pushed my broom. On one occasion I even stepped away from a ball that rolled toward me from a nearby boys’ game. Wasn’t it so that even when we were laughing we were sad.” . . .

Few things brought the poignancy and tragedy of potential (now consummated) war with Iraq home like mention of former footballers and footballers-to-be making preparations. **Khaled Hadi**, whom the *Los Angeles Times* ([John Daniszewski](#) and [Sergei L. Loiko](#), “Iraqis Prepare to Hunker Down,” 14 March) called an “ex-soccer star,” packed wares in his silver shop. “I don’t want to leave all my treasures to Ali Baba,” he said. Photographers captured boys playing



football on Baghdad street corners (see picture at left), next to piles of sandbags.

In southwest Baghdad, according to the *Los Angeles Times* piece, a group of volunteers dug bunkers in a soccer field. “Using picks to scratch at the rock-hard soil of a field where hundreds of children were playing soccer, the workers made slow progress. The fox-holes were about 2 yards square, each big enough to hold four fighters, and the dug-up earth was used to fill sandbags.” The Olympic qualifying series between Iraq and Vietnam, which had been scheduled for April 5 and 19, has been postponed. . . .

I have felt over the last year or so that world football could be employed as a tool in teaching geography, economics, languages and other subjects. I was excited, therefore, to read that the [Goethe Institute of San Francisco](#) was performing such an experiment through its [Transatlantic Soccer](#)

Watching others play—one spectator’s guilt

>> [continued from page 1](#)

sometimes do, for not truly being involved—for being unwilling to step onto the stage? If it is not too ridiculous to make such a leap, I believe that the ready availability of Iraqi war coverage on television and the Internet raises some of the same issues. “It is a measure of our post-modern age of information overload that people increasingly see themselves as performers or spectators, roles that lend a self-consciousness to their own actions and detachment to the experiences of others,” writes Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times*, referring to the broadcast coverage of the war with Iraq (“[Shock, Awe and Razzmatazz in the Sequel](#),” 25 March).

Returning to football, the separation between player and supporter was one of Nick Hornby’s themes in *Fever Pitch*. He states several times that, despite his obsession, he did not want to know the Arsenal players, and he was happy with that. Being a fan, to Hornby, was a perfectly valid pursuit: “One thing I know for sure about being a fan is this: it is not a vicarious pleasure, despite all appearances to the contrary, and those who say that they would rather do than watch are missing the point. Football is a context where watching *becomes* doing.”

These questions come to me as another [Women’s United Soccer Association](#) season begins, and my wife and I begin trekking downtown with several thousand others to Herndon Stadium to see the [Atlanta Beat](#). With Hornby, I’ll be asking if I really share in the disappointments and victories, or am I an easily discarded appendage? Am I perhaps more justified in supporting a women’s league that might not exist on the American sportscape for much longer? For now, I suppose, I’ll take comfort in Roy Hattersley, who [writes](#) in the *Guardian* (London) about his devotion to [Sheffield Wednesday](#) (15 March). One man with owls—the team logo—tattooed on his arms approaches him, asking if Hattersley is a “Wednesdayite.” The man, after Hattersley admits his allegiance, congratulates him, saying: “Any fool can support Arsenal. It takes a real man to support the Wednesday.”

—JOHN TURNBULL

[Bridge](#) program ([Claire Luna](#), “Teachers’ Goal Is to Make German Classes a Real Kick,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March). The program combines instruction in German with football training. “[Students] learn parts of the

body by labeling a drawing of a soccer player then standing for an interactive lesson,” Luna writes. When teacher [Liz Kaulard](#) “calls out ‘oberschenkel,’

>> [go to page 3](#)

Safe Side of the Screen

by Helena Petre

Football is all around me, but only by association. Not something I've played much myself, but always there, through my friendships. In Ireland, my first home, not so much of the soccer as the Gaelic football. Only one girl in our class was allowed to play—with the boys! The rest of us stood watching, envying the rugged Roisín, yet glad not to take part in something so tough and teamly.

In 1970, aged six, I collected World Cup coins from Mobil petrol stations. In the heat, Alan Ball's face shimmered from every other disc. His wife, Lesley Ball I remember from a more sinister sauce—the Bisto gravy ads in my granny's *Family Circle* magazines.

My mother had table football, a sub-subbuteo. To this day, I'm never sure why, as the only other boy's toy she had was an Action Man in training for the priesthood, knees eternally bent in front of a plastic altar, cold and naked as he waited in vain for his vestments! Is it any wonder my brothers became altar boys?

From '70 to '80, the only footballs in my life were cheesy footballs, a snack served at occasional drinks parties and other grown-up functions. Scotland sang briefly about Ally's tartan army in '78, but their own goal ceded to Iran in Argentina made more impression than any other performance.

At my Scottish convent, we were led to believe that rugby was more desirable.

Accordingly, my first great crush was on a flanker!

Scotland again qualified for the World Cup in '82, and by this time I was marginally interested, roaring with rage the night they lost to Russia. I was drinking—legally at last—with a St Mirren player, a relative of the Scotland squad's John Wark. (Name-dropping extends no further than this!)

My first boyfriend was, bizarrely, a policeman who charged a crowd at a football match and burned books at Greenham Common. Ours was a stormy match,

and so too was the next, where my 'big man' argued that he'd rather be going

to the match on Saturday with his mate Gordon than spending his time with me.

He never went, though, and neither did he ever take me. I still haven't been to a 'real' game, though I've feared the crowds of Hibs and Hearts, and later Arsenal, Chelsea, West Ham, and Milwall. Perhaps if I went, I wouldn't.

I'm told it's too expensive—now.

The years and the Cups went by, giving way to Euro '96, for me the definitive

nerve-gnawing moment—my Czech friend was staying in England. I'd once shared a flat with her in a shoe-making town in Czechoslovakia. Together in '96 we passed through London on Final day, a London plastered with Czech notices, its streets running with Pils and Slavic songs. She boarded the coach to Prague, and I took the train back to Gloucester.

I bit all my nails that night, the night they lost to the Germans.

[>> continued from page 2](#)

the kids point to their thighs; when she says 'ferse,' they lift their heels. Geography is taught through the 18 teams in the Bundesliga." One student tells Luna, "I took German in the first place because it was kind of off the beaten path, and the soccer thing just makes it even more crazy." . . .

Football often creeps into the news in unexpected places, evidenced by reports earlier this month of alleged truancy and negligence among air-traffic controllers at Milan's Linate Airport ("[RPT-Italy Court Rules 11 to Stand Trial in Linate Crash](#)," Reuters, 13 March). An Italian court ruled that 11 officials would face charges, including manslaughter, related to the 118 killed on October 8, 2001, when a Cessna and a Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) jet collided on a foggy runway. Investigation into the crash revealed wider problems, including controllers who would abandon their posts for cappuccino breaks and to play football. The trial is scheduled to start June 4.

WOMEN'S ISSUES

With the opening of the Women's United Soccer Association season, a small trend has developed,

as reported by **Scott French** of [Soccer America](#), of players being "lost to love." **Jen Mascaro**, **Sher-**



rill Kester and **Rhiannon Tanaka**, all of the [San Diego Spirit](#), have retired at the peak of their careers, or before their careers really got started, to live near husbands or fiancés. Perhaps the league's tenuous status played a role in their decisions, but would **Ronaldo** have done likewise? In the latter's case, of course, **Milene Domingues**, who as of this writing is still married to him, [sacrificed](#) her own footballing pursuits. But for how long?

INTERNET, TV, CINEMA & MUSIC

I have been downloading supporters' songs and anthems over the last several weeks. No doubt a professional music critic would label them trite and musically unrealized, but I'm not a professional music critic. And, with

Football, far from home



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Taken by José William Claros Conde, 10, of Soacha, Colombia, this photograph represents part of the work of [The Aja Project](#) of San Diego, a non-profit group that offers educational support among refugees in San Diego, youth in Colombia and in camps along the Thailand-Burma border. José writes about his picture: "Sometimes I saw that my parents were sad because we couldn't go out to play because other kids had been kidnapped and taken by the guerrillas and all that. That's why my parents got very sad."

>> continued from page 3

a few exceptions, I like them.

Topping the list would be the Polish reggae stylings of [Trawnik](#) on "Zinedin Zidane" ([click](#) to play MP3 version). As you will quickly realize, it's not necessary to understand Polish to appreciate the message. If you love **Zinedine Zidane**, you'll enjoy Trawnik's tribute.

Diversity of musical styles among anthems is evident in "Breda, Breda" by **Albert Brosens**, who takes a Dixieland approach ([click](#) for MP3). As in "Zidane," the chorus is easily singable, regardless of familiarity with [NAC Breda](#) (former team of U.S. international **Earnie Stewart**) or the Dutch language. Interesting, with a harder edge, is the [anti-racism theme](#), "Stadio Legato," of Italy's [Progetto Ultras](#), which calls for a *nuovo tifo* (new fan) and an end to stadium violence often associated with the "ultras," the organized and boisterous supporters' associations. If you like to accompany football tunes with energetic air guitar, the best alternative is "[Rock del Deportivo](#)" by Cacahué; interestingly, this Deportivo de La Coruña song has

also been [performed](#) by the orchestra of Spain's Galicia region. The best blend of classical music and football, to my mind, remains the UEFA Champions League theme, which always makes me weep.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the [faux Go-Go's track](#) that pulses through Atlanta's Hernon Stadium at the introduction of the hometown Beat of the WUSA. Imagine the bass notes pounding after a goal has been scored. Beautiful.

QUOTABLE

"In my day players were reared on the tit, not this processed grub"—**Francisca Ortíz**, 93-year-old supporter of La Liga's CD Alavés (quoted in **Sid Lowe**, "[Dodderly Alavés Open the Door Again](#)," *The Guardian*, 10 March).

"If war is God's way of teaching Americans geography, international sport is how [God] teaches it to the rest of us"—**Simon Kuper**, "[Cricket World Cup a Mere Rehearsal for Football](#)," *Financial Times*, 21 March.

"The soccer ball network, it's so big it's kind of scary sometimes," **Joe Maresca**, director of Liga Deportiva in Louisville, Kentucky (quoted in

Steve Chaplin, "[Soccer Park Louisville's Melting Pot](#)," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 30 March).

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