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Preface

Compilers of previous English-language anthologies of soccer literature often apologize for the quality of writing from which they have had to choose. Ian Hamilton, editor of the most recent anthology of soccer writing to appear in the United States, *The Faber Book of Soccer* (1992), characterizes the game as “a sport without much literature.” “Unlike cricket or rugby,” he continues, “it has few links with higher education.” Although assembling a more comprehensive collection mainly for American readers, the late George Plimpton in *The Norton Book of Sports* (1992) takes the trouble to say:

Soccer has no important literature at all that I can find, though it is such a universal activity that surely I am at fault here—I must have missed a South American novel, or a Yugoslav’s essay on the bicycle kick, or an appreciation by a Frenchman on the existential qualities of the game. Albert Camus once played goal for the Oran Football Club of Algiers but did not seem moved to write about it. The best I’ve come across is Pelé’s *My Life and the Great Game* [sic]. The evident lack may have something to do with the practitioners of the game, who tend to be more agile with their feet than with articulation. A well-known definition is that soccer is a gentleman’s game played by thugs, whereas rugby is a thug’s game played by gentlemen.

Plimpton’s interest lay in lifting up literary traditions related to the games more popular in the United States, especially baseball, boxing, golf, tennis, thoroughbred racing, and so on. Perhaps Plimpton was, to some degree, trying to make the task of selection easier. But it is curious that the worldly editor of the *Paris Review* would appear so dismissive of literature of non-American origins—“a South American

novel . . . a Yugoslav's essay"—and not know that Albert Camus, in the same year that he won the Nobel Prize in Literature (1957), had written a widely quoted article about his time as goalkeeper at Racing Universitaire Algérois. (And to take Plimpton up on a factual point, Camus played for l'Association Sportive de Montpensier in Oran.)

Low regard in other parts of the world toward soccer's literary canon perhaps stems from the game's dominance and from the elitist's assumption that such a popular sport—a game played by “thugs,” no less—could not produce fine art. In part to challenge the view that cricket has literature but football does not, Peter J. Seddon amassed his *Football Compendium* for the British Library (1999). At more than eight hundred pages, the volume has the heft of an exhaustive biblical concordance. Further, Seddon only included works published in the United Kingdom or Ireland. Meanwhile, books about soccer have continued to proliferate, from pulpy, ghostwritten player biographies and hooligan confessionals to academic and literary treatments of the sport's cultural importance.

One important realization concerning soccer around the world, especially for those to whom the game still seems “foreign,” is its everyday quality. Reverend Ellen Harris Dozier, who helps direct a Presbyterian mission for women in and around San Felipe, Guatemala, writes that women with whom she works typically give prominence to the soccer field when asked to draw maps of their villages. The game and the space in which it is played are central, both geographically and in offering cultural identity in a broader sense. Soccer as a featured element on holy days can also give cause for theological reflection, as Dozier writes in 2000 in an online Presbyterian Church (USA) mission diary:

On the morning of Christmas Day . . . I watched as pickup trucks full of people . . . pulled into the seminary and people piled out. Then families began to arrive, again by the truckload. I had been told that there would be a soccer game, but it looked like much more than one soccer game! As it turned out, there was a soccer tournament on Christmas Day, beginning at 8 a.m. and concluding at 5:30 p.m. . . . I spent most of the day watching the

games, enjoying the warm sun and the visits with neighbors and friends. I am still trying to understand what it means to play a soccer tournament on Christmas Day. Perhaps you have to be Guatemalan to really understand.

In choosing entries for this anthology, the capacity of selections to evoke places and emotions associated with soccer weighed more heavily than treatment of big matches and players. Iconic names—Pelé, Cruyff, Maradona, Zidane—do flit across the pages, along with names of clubs of international reputation, such as Real Madrid, Barcelona, Internazionale of Milan, Juventus, Ajax, Liverpool, and River Plate. Yet even entries from celebrated writers such as Günter Grass, Ted Hughes, Charles Simic, Gay Talese, and Mario Vargas Llosa tend to emphasize associations apart from the moneyed fields of “big soccer”: men in “bunting colours” struggling to head the ball in a gale (Hughes); an unreliable radio that offers a child’s only tether to the World Cup, thousands of miles distant (Simic); a run-down *hutong* (alleyway) in Beijing along which a famous player’s family lives, with the player’s cleats and other mundane effects in evidence (Talese).

Given soccer’s place as not only the most popular ball game worldwide but as a cultural expression in itself, the best method of organizing this book seemed to be through concepts native to the game and everyday life. Thus, while striving for diversity of selection by genre and region, we did not adhere to groupings by date or predetermined topics, such as history, players, World Cups, and so on. As one argues over the greatest matches and goals, the reader can judge whether the editors chose well when selecting writings that address some of the qualities inherent in both soccer and the human experience: space, improvisation, challenge, loss, belief. Some of our selections could fit under more than one heading, or they might strike themes different from the section in which they landed. No doubt we did not always succeed in our creative choices.

We relate such decisions to the existential quandaries facing the midfielder, who continually must negotiate competing urges of hanging back or going forward.

Note to Readers

Entries in this anthology as well as supporting editorial material meander between use of the words *soccer* and *football*. The same game, with the full name of *association football*, is always in view. Authors, editors, and translators have used the term with which they felt most comfortable, without an attempt to standardize.

In general *soccer* is the preferred term in North America, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the Republic of Ireland where rival football codes—rugby union and rugby league as well as football using American, Canadian, Australian, or Gaelic rules—are active. Linguists believe that *soccer* gained usage early in the sport's development in Britain as a diminutive of *association football* in the way that *rugger* became a shortened form for *rugby football*. Variants included *socca*' (appearing as early as 1889, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) and *socket*.

The word *soccer* is used freely around the world and does not, contrary to some thinking, represent an American corruption of the name for the world's game.

Other linguistic skirmishes—such as the differences between *field* and *pitch*, *forward* and *striker*, *bleacher* and *terrace*—have been resolved according to the author's, translator's, or editor's preference.

Introduction

The broadcaster at the 2004 European Championships was almost beside himself watching the Portuguese winger maneuver into his favored territory along the right-hand touchline: “Luis Figo finds space . . . and Luis Figo loves space!” The attacking player’s goal is to find space, the defender’s is to close it down.

More broadly, however, the concept relates to the soccer field as a floating green zone of fantasy—one that shuts out worldly concern but meshes with life such that it seems a marker of the species, an inheritance from the ancients. Both Eduardo Galeano and Nalinaksha Bhattacharya in selections to follow reach for primeval origins to explain the lure that football spaces offer women and men.

An intriguing aspect of the modern game is that despite—or perhaps because of—relatively fixed rules and codes of behavior (“Has football . . . become a universal constant?” asks Erik Eggers) a myriad of cultural expressions find a place on the field and among spectators. In Cameroon the confines of the capital, Yaoundé, permit children to join impromptu games, even a small girl who pops into a side street while still wielding a long kitchen knife. In Peru the stadium serves as auxiliary living space, “a huge public dining room or picnic area spread out over the bleachers,” writes Julio Ramón Ribeyro, where spectators feel comfortable enough to perform bodily functions and from which stories are born and evolve. In Mexico pieces of personal history become so wedded to the *fútbol* grounds and the players associated with them that they are “readymade,” according to Álvaro Enrigue, akin to found objects in art. Even in the unlikely setting of America’s Great Plains, Bridget Carson finds that a soccer field produces site-specific memories for “the strikers/searching for a way through air.”

That soccer provides such a range of meaning and memory should

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not obscure that the space in which it is played is always contested. Rival fans hurl vile insults. Women search for their place in a male bastion. For scholar María Graciela Rodríguez, her first football match adds new insight to “the other,” that foundational concept in the study of philosophy, social relations, and gender: “If the other didn’t exist, who would you yell ‘asshole’ at?”

1. The Orb

Klaus Rifbjerg

Translated from the Danish by Thom Satterlee

A game of football begins with a ball, and the ball might be an orange or a grapefruit, it might be rags or plastic bags tied together, or it might be the most recent innovation found at a sporting-goods store in an urban mall or on the Internet. In the ancient place and time that FIFA, the world governing body of football, recognizes as having developed one of the earliest forms of football—China, some two thousand years ago—the word for the game already incorporated the key object: *cuju* translates literally as “kicking a ball with the foot.” By the sixteenth century references to air-filled leather balls appear in English schoolbooks, but it is not until the end of the nineteenth century that the modern football emerges. Credit goes to Great Britain for patenting the rubber bladder and the valve for air pumps we associate with today’s balls. The Germans came up with the alternating black-and-white hexagonal pattern in the 1970s. Improvements (depending on whether one is a striker or a goalkeeper) continued in the shooter-friendly design of the official 2006 World Cup game ball.

Still, as Danish writer Klaus Rifbjerg demonstrates, a group of young players intent on playing a game of football can make do with almost any “orb,” even a beat-up ball whose bladder sticks out of the sides and is stretched nearly to the point of popping.

It wasn't round
I don't know what it was
But it wasn't round.
Even so, we called it “the orb.”

It was a friend
Who had it
And as soon as the ice and snow melted
Out it came.

We walked beside a hedge of whitethorns
And Herman carried the orb under his arm.
It rested safely inside the crook
Lopsided and bulging as it was.

The goal stood in the raw wind.
It was March and there was war.
Spring. Football. Boys.
And so the ball got its first kick

Sailed seasick up into the gray
Came down and was chased.
Here! Here! we all shouted
And hoped for the next kick.

Hoped to get it in
To score a goal to be with others
To be simultaneously oneself and every boy
To be best!

Then the sore broke open
The ball the orb
A blister, pink, protruded
from between the stitches

And our spirits sank
Because if it burst everything was over
The last hope a patch
Alongside sixteen other.

A penalty kick was called, and it went in
But the piece of crap held together
And there are plenty of old tubes
And thousands of patches

And thousands of knees and thousands of boys
Who play football
Kicking whatever they can
Like that time long, long ago.