

# Football: For Fairies or Future Heroes?

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Every four years, the World Cup provides a sporting spectacle for people across the world. In almost every nation, people come together to celebrate what can feel like a truly global sport: football. Here at Loughborough University, this could not be more true. Students watch the game at the Students' Union, family and friends gather at houses and pubs, and academics publish their research articles and opinion pieces.

Especially this year, the controversies around the host country have made the World Cup feel particularly spectacular in its scale and reach. With debates about human rights, values, and cultural differences, it can feel like the very soul of football is at stake. But what really is football? It is easy to claim a type of global craze nested within masculine structures of power, but this would lose moments of difference and resistance that can occur at the grassroots which can shape the future of the sport.

## Football in the UK

(by *Stevie Ashurst*)



Many sports are enjoyed in the UK, but for as long as I've been aware, football has felt like 'the' sport of this nation (others may disagree and that's fair enough). With chants and celebrations referring to back World Cup of 1966 that England won, it was hailed as being the pinnacle of the country's achievement in football. The fact that England beat West Germany in the final of that year also created unkind comparisons to both of the prior World Wars. However, this connection has had the effect of embedding it into our country's culture. Even more so as we now know that hostilities ceased briefly between England and Germany on Christmas Day in 1914, and a game of football was played between the opposing sides. A gesture of goodwill between the nations and something that would create an even stronger emotional connection to the sport for both countries.

Personal experience of football in the UK, especially in the 80s and 90s, conjures images of aggressive males shouting at TV screens in pubs, with testosterone fueled jeers and cheers being hurled with passion. It was an environment that did not feel particularly inviting to the LGBT+ community, such as it was back then. I remember that whilst I kind of enjoyed playing football at school, I never felt as passionately about it or aggressively as others clearly did and this made me feel that it was a sport for the 'masculine' males and that I didn't belong. Derogatory words of abuse such as 'poof' or 'queer' were regularly used towards anyone who didn't fit the stereotypically aggressive male personality, regardless of any genuine sexual orientation.

Over the last two decades and especially in the last few years, I felt that outwardly the LGBT+ community seems to have been accepted and allowed into 'normal' society. So naively my assumption was that this was the case everywhere. But given the quite recent announcements of high-level male footballers having to come out publicly seemed to be a surprise that they needed to do so, but clearly not all cultures and environments develop at the same time, even within the same country.

I have two boys at high-school currently and the fact that they have an LGBT+ community is a fantastic thing. Staff and pupils there – I'm told – don't find many LGBT+ related issues to need deal with. Which is an amazing situation to be in. My boys have certainly never faced the kind of homophobic abuse I faced. My brother-in-law coaches two youth teams in the area and – to my knowledge – doesn't face any LGBT+ issues as in this day and age, people being gay, lesbian, trans, is becoming more normal in popular culture, so not something to find 'different'. A very comforting thought considering where things were not that long ago. Hopefully the youth of today will be accepting of people regardless of any LGBT+ association and that the football clubs of tomorrow will be populated by a more understanding youth of today.

## **Football in the US**

*(by Michael Bukur)*

Soccer (as us Americans call it), has quite a different landscape and culture than in Europe. Although football is a relatively common sport played alongside its more popular counterparts like American football, basketball, and baseball, there has always been a difference in social status between soccer players and the other athletes.

Growing up in the Chicago suburbs in the early 2000s, it was normal that most kids would choose a sport to play by the time they entered primary school. For me, I chose football. I remember my best friend in preschool played football and so I wanted to play too. For those early years, we played in a local community league in our town hosted by the YMCA. The games were often informal, and you had a mix of serious footballers, kids who sat and picked the dandelions, and some who did both.

As the years wore on, the number of football players continued to drop as people found other sports and hobbies. Those of us who remained formed our own local subculture. Although there were always one or two players on each team who had the confidence and swagger of the standard European footballer, many of us never inherited that perspective. Many of us quietly loved our sport for years, knowing that many of our friends and family would never care for football as much as we did.

For years we played on pitches that were often flooded, with overgrown grass, and filled with holes perfect for rolling an ankle. They were often located on the outskirts of town or in open fields behind churches or schools with just a goal and maybe painted side lines if we were lucky. But this invisibility granted us a kind of possibility, especially for boys, which

wasn't possible in other sports.

In this space we could be ourselves because there wasn't a dominant societal standard for us to compare ourselves to. We could chant 'pink... rainbow... popsicles' before running onto the pitch, make dandelion necklaces between rounds of sharks and minnows, and embrace each other in celebration after each win playing World Cup. Nobody cared. We didn't mind if our classmates referred to us as 'grass fairies' and insinuated that we were less masculine or gay for playing football. We knew that they just didn't understand our love of the sport.

## A global sport

With a global sport like football, there can often be a dissonance between our local subcultures and the global culture we find them positioned against. In some cases, this global culture can provide context for empowerment and elevation; however, in other cases, it can be a jarring experience of cultural conflicts between values and perspectives. During these days, it is easy to let all of our energy and attention be consumed by the World Cup and focus solely on criticisms of FIFA's decisions and the government of Qatar for not meeting our cultural expectations. But in some ways, this outward fixation can be a distraction from our unique ability to shape sport, and specifically football, here at home.

Our children can be the future heroes of football who can come to influence the politics and direction of sport and society. Or maybe they will end up being fairies who go on to pursue other dreams. Either way, football is unique in its position as a global sport and can provide endless paths and possibilities. And at the very least, from this fairy, I am grateful to football for all the friendships, memories, and most of all for the confidence to be myself.

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