HIPS DON'T LIE

Soccer can have influence beyond its realm

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For the next one month the centre of the world will be Brazil when it stages the World Cup where thirty-two countries are contending for the title of world champion. Weeks before the event which kicked off on June 12, soccer stories have been dominating the media, and not just in the sports pages. Advertisers cannot get enough of it; companies are launching and altering production lines to cater to it; and politicians are postponing all but their most essential meetings until after the final. Nearly half of humanity will watch at least part of the tournament. Debates about who will win the trophy and who will win the Golden Boot (awarded to the top scorer) will be especially animated in South America's three main soccer countries—Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay—whose people view success on the field as more than just sporting prowess.

Latin American excitement and pride are justified. Uruguayans still derive immeasurable satisfaction from their soccer successes, including two World Cup triumphs in 1930 and 1950. Argentina has twice held the trophy, and boasts two of the game's greatest players ever, Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi. And Brazil with its roll call of heroes including Pele, Garrincha, Socrates, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, and Neymar has won the cup a record five times.

The competition, however, has its detractors. Hundreds of protesters took to the streets in at least four cities, including Sao Paulo, where host Brazil beat Croatia in the opening match. They railed against the $11.5 billion that Brazil's government has spent to host the event, arguing the money could have been better spent on social programmes like housing and education. In Argentina, opposition groups worry that the government will use these crucial weeks to bury bad news. And then there is FIFA, soccer's apex body, with its dysfunctional management and rampant corruption.

In a more ethical world you would be tempted to ask: "Couldn't we find something better to spend all this money on when millions of children die each year because they lack safe drinking water?"

What's the point of all this, you wonder.

Libyan leader Gaddafi, often called a "mad dog" by the west, wrote in his Green Book, "It is ... illogical for the society to allow an individual or a team to monopolize sports while the society as a whole pays the costs of such a monopoly for the exclusive benefit of one person or team...The same holds true of the crowds who, because of ignorance, fail to practice sport by and for themselves. They are fooled by monopolistic instruments which endeavour to stupefy them and divert them to indulging in laughter and applause instead."



A protester lies on ground before a line of riot police during a demonstration against the FIFA World Cup on June 12, 2014.
PHOTO: AFP

