You may call him mad all you want. But if you really think about it, he makes sense.Soccer fans are, however, indifferent to all this. What matters to them are the mesmerizing wizardry of Lionel Messi and the muscular grace of Cristiano Ronaldo that may carry the narrative power of a novel, the depth and beauty of poetry—ballet's mesmerizing sense of wonder and the high voltage rush of a rock concert.

Here at home, football's magical power will draw supporters into intricate discussions over the mastery of a goal, the real intention behind a foul, or what could happen if an attack was successful. People will talk of nothing else, while pressing social, economic, and political questions are left to fester. That's all right in a nation that has had few reasons to celebrate lately. But some of the things we do in the name of the love of the game defy logic, in polite terms.



Opening ceremony PHOTO: AFP

Zakaria Pintu, the captain of Swadhin Bangla Football Team, says, "Perhaps soccer invokes more emotion in Bangladesh than anywhere else in the world. But passion alone cannot improve the sport." Zakaria Pintu is also the convener of Save the Sports, a forum dedicated to developing the sports sector.

In Magura, a modest farmer named Ajmal Hossain, a supporter of the German team, sold a piece of land to make a German flag more than two thousand yards long that cost him Tk 250,000 in a nation where per capita income is about Tk. 92,375. Shihab, a 12-year boy died after being electrocuted while hoisting an Argentine flag, ahead of the opening game, in Munshiganj.

"Soccer is still more popular than cricket in this country. How many flags do you see during the cricket world cup?" says the veteran footballer. "But it is not enough to raise flags. We have to hold this passion and translate it into actions." Bangladeshi soccer has seen better days. The first and only time the country won the SAFF or South Asian Football Federation Cup was in 2003 since the tournament's inception.

"We need fields," says Pintu. The government should send players, ex-players and coaches to the World Cup so they can watch the games, learn and report back. If we want to qualify for the 2022 cup, we must start planning and preparing from now."

That seems unlikely. Can we then use such passion to bring about some social and political change? "To separate political activism from love of the game is a false distinction," writes soccer specialist, writer, and broadcaster Marcela Mora y Araujo. "The two are often intertwined, sometimes in the most extreme circumstances. Opponents of the Argentine junta were still keen to know the outcome of matches, even when they were locked away in clandestine detention centers. Indeed, torture survivors recount eerie exchanges with their torturers about team formations and goals scored." Marcela is a regular contributor at *the Guardian, Telegraph and Sports Illustrated.*

Therefore, the choice may not be whether to support or oppose the World Cup, but how to use it to further our social goals. The unprecedented global attention is an opportunity. The business community certainly understands the potential and capitalizes on it by producing soccer-related consumer goods through blanket advertising both on and off the field and earning high profit on sportswear. Can't social organizations do the same to achieve some social goods? Marcela Mora writes, "Non-governmental organizations working for social improvement can, and sometimes do, find ways to draw attention to their campaigns through soccer."

At the same time, the "feel good" factor of soccer has its limitations in influencing political and social events. After all, Argentina's hated junta collapsed just four years after the country's World Cup triumph, followed by its military defeat by Britain.

Selina Hossain, noted author and champion of child rights says, "Using this platform we can raise awareness about violence against women, eating healthy, discipline, reading, the importance of sport in physical and mental development and so on. Once a week, we can provide domestic workers with better food and allow them to watch the game."

These messages can be promoted using social marketing tools. For example, ads launched by the government and social organizations advocating elimination of violence against women may be shown on TV during the half-time of matches.

The world cup's magnetic power to turn the eyes of the planet onto a single ball is impressive but ultimately meaningless, unless we use the passion invoked by it to generate lasting change in the world we live in. For the duration of the match, we are entranced; afterwards, everything returns to how it was. A great game of soccer is often described as poetry—the greatest form of art—in motion. But unlike great art, it struggles for influence beyond its realm.

It doesn't have to.

(*Hips Don't Lie* was the theme song at the closing ceremony at the 2006 World Cup in Berlin.)