



The Ball is Round: A Global History of Soccer

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The definitive book about soccer. With a new foreword for the American edition.

There may be no cultural practice more global than soccer. Rites of birth and marriage are infinitely diverse, but the rules of soccer are universal. No world religion can match its geographical scope. The single greatest simultaneous human collective experience is the World Cup final.

In this extraordinary tour de force, David Goldblatt tells the full story of soccer's rise from chaotic folk ritual to the world's most popular sport-now poised to fully establish itself in the USA. Already celebrated internationally, *The Ball Is Round* illuminates soccer's role in the political and social histories of modern societies, but never loses sight of the beauty, joy, and excitement of the game itself.

The Ball is Round: A Global History of Soccer Details

Date : Published January 2nd 2008 by Riverhead Books (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9781594482960

Author : David Goldblatt

Format : Paperback 992 pages

Genre : Sports and Games, Sports, Football, Soccer, Nonfiction, History



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Sheila says

I am finally finished with this monolith of a book! Not only is this gigantic work a complete global history of football, it is a history of the world in the Industrial and Post-Industrial age, as the incubation & growth of football is completely intertwined with the industrial movement.

This is also an ethnography of one sport in many cultures, a thorough examination of the singular phenomenon of one ball sport taking hold & captivating over 1 billion people from disparate cultures and societies. Football is not just a sport, it is the history of humanity from the mid-19th century onwards.

What I would love is to see an updated version of this book that reflects on the changes that have taken place in football since 2008 & the new influences on the sport. Regardless, this is a key book for any fan or scholar of football or sport!

Jeff says

Here's the thing about this book: to read it, it's not enough just to have an interest in soccer, you also have to have interest - and pretty deep literacy - in geopolitics, economics, and contemporary cultural history. It contains fascinating anecdotes from important moments in soccer, i.e. what most people probably think they're getting when they pick the book up, but placed in extremely deep and detailed historical and socioeconomic context.

I'm inclined to give it high marks because I learned so much, and because I'm so impressed by the book as a research achievement. And not for nothing, but Mr. Goldblatt's vocabulary is truly staggering (I was an English major, so that's not something I say lightly).

All that said, depending on how much you're willing to wade through to get the soccer out of this soccer book, your mileage may vary.

Andrew says

The final whistle has been blown; the fat lady has sat down again; the boisterous crowd are flooding away through the exits from rows A-Z....shaking their heads in wonder at such a memorable game. I feel a little churlish, after reading such a tome, of both profound depth & touch-line-hugging width, to shake my head & sound a note of disappointment at Goldblatt's exhaustive & relentless neo-Marxist interpretation of Football...run through with a pallid internationalism & a predictable sneer at England & its dismay...at seeing our beautiful game hijacked by so many enthusiastic charlatans, rogues, megalomaniacs & card-carrying communists & vile fascists. Goldblatt has an apparently sentimental attachment to Third World politics (A white, Jewish, Tottenham-supporting North Londoner with dreadlocks!!?). I have a word for such posers; though far be it from me, as a 'play up & play the game' gentleman-scholar-athlete to use it in polite company.

In a nutshell then...I admire his scholarship, but question his motives; a very political survey of the development of football, coloured by Goldblatt's evident training/indoctrination as a socialist economist &

sociologist,& an apologist for some terrible men,& some contemptible regimes.

(And, on a point of fact; it wasn't the Fulham-supporting Matthew Simmonds who upset Eric Cantona on that notorious night in S.E.25 in January 1995, when the psychotic Frenchman went doolally...it was me, a Crystal Palace fan! I addressed him in perfect French...he heard me...& the rest is history! What did I shout? That's for me to know! But it wasn't "It's an early bath for you, Mr Cantona!" !!And I & many others too, declined Paul Ince's kind offer of some fisticuffs."Come on then...we'll take you all on!". Being well-mannered Palace fans, we had some class!).

Giano Cromley says

This is a great, 900-page book. The astute reader will note that the first adjective is somewhat surprising in light of the second.

Here's what I can tell you about *The Ball Is Round*: As you read it, you will feel your brain getting bigger. Seriously. The author, David Goldblatt, is not only an expert on the history of soccer; he has an incredible grasp of the vectors that shape world history – from colonialism, to economics, to military power, to governmental competencies. The subtitle, *A Global History of Soccer*, is probably the most apt description you can get for this book, provided you understand that the word "global" is as equally operative as the word "soccer." Goldblatt manages to weave history's threads together in an engaging and immensely readable way. What you'll discover as you get deeper into this book is the symbiotic and, at times, parasitic relationship soccer has with global history and vice versa.

Colonial history and economic development are two of the biggest indicators of whether or not a country will have a good soccer team. Most often, according to Goldblatt, soccer is a result of history, a product of these factors. However, this book is most interesting when it's describing those times when soccer stops being a product of history and becomes an actual shaper of history – the times when a nation's soccer team has an impact on the strength of a governing party or when the failure of a team cripples the psyche of a nation. Those are the passages when this book is truly riveting.

Of course, all the usual caveats apply for any 900-page book. It's heavy as a brick and I basically spent the better part of my summer working my way through it. So if you're going to tackle this one you have to be committed. And there are times when this book may pull back the veil a bit too much for true die-hard soccer fans. Hearing about the huge number of match-fixing scandals, the frequently despicable fan behavior, and the endemic corruption of soccer's governing body, FIFA, may dim the true fan's enthusiasm a bit. But in the end, if you like soccer and have even a passing interest in history, you really must read this book. Your brain will be bigger when you're done.

MH says

This history of soccer, told chronologically and covering every nation in the world, is a massive undertaking, and there are obviously going to be some quibbles: Mexico seems to get pretty short shrift, and the chapters on colonialism and the diaspora of the sport (and why some nations took to it, and some didn't) were much more interesting to me than the last third of the book, which seemed to be a dreary catalog of bald-faced corruption in South America, Africa, and the offices of FIFA (punctuated by horrific stadium accidents,

human rights violations, and street violence).

More troubling to me are his assumptions on the growing popularity of youth soccer in the modern USA, as he argues that for American parents baseball is too pitcher-batter focussed and not about teamwork, therefore harmful to the "precious and fragile egos of the players," and that "basketball was rapidly becoming the game of the African-American ghetto" (783). This fundamentally misunderstands the sinking popularity of baseball and the massive popularity of basketball, and in such a well-researched book to take a glib surmise (middle-class American parents are overprotective and racist) and turn it into a statement of unsourced fact is worrying, and made me wonder about the accuracy of his other analyses and assertions.

Goldblatt, though, is an engaging writer and finds a nice balance between sociology and story-telling, and between the breadth of his subject and his generous bibliography I can't imagine any soccer fan wouldn't want this on their bookshelf.

Don Willow says

Took forever, but worth it

It took me ages to get through this thing and I believe that half of this book could have been cut out and we'd all be better off for it.

However, this is THE book for the history of the game and gives you everything you need to understand the intricacies of the modern landscape. For those of you newer to football and who are serious about understanding the complex nature of it, do yourself a favor.

John says

I did not really read this, but I read the first hundred plus pages and some random other bits. I needed it for a guest lecture on the history of Atlantic World sports. I have to say, it is well-written and I get that it is supposed to be the definitive history of soccer doorstopper, but the thing is 900 pages. This is too long. I kind of wanted to read it just for fun, because I like global histories of things and I like sports, but really, I do not have 900 pages of time. And Goldblatt includes these little page long asides that tell the stories of individual matches, which were nice, but there is so much text aside from the asides that I even started to run out of steam for those.

So anyway, I'm not saying this is a bad book by any measure, and certainly people who live and breathe soccer (football) will love it, probably. But for the casual reader, an abridged version would be good.

Saadiq Wolford says

This 900-page behemoth explains the 150-year evolution of soccer through history, sociology, and economics.

It's simultaneously both too much and too little: too much focus on the big picture and cause-and-effect, and too little focus on the individual lives and stories that humanize history and make it compelling. Soccer captures the heart and imagination like no other sport, but only glimpses of that passion are offered within these antiseptic pages.

Framing a story over six continents and almost two centuries is an amazing accomplishment nonetheless, and only fans with the most encyclopedic knowledge of the game will walk away feeling cheated.

Damon says

I have read many soccer history books, but none have ever reached the width and scale of what David Goldblatt has achieved. He has covered almost every single country in the World, and he has broken up the chapters into fifteen year sections to make it more digestable. But even so, he has packed so much information into this book, that it is sometimes hard to keep all the dates, numbers, names and teams straight. I have been forced to pull out my atlas a number of times to help me keep all of the cities, and teams, and their placement in relation to each other straight in my head. This is a very dense and scholarly work, worthy of being on any university library's shelf. My favorite parts, which I have learned the most from was David's coverage of the history and developement of the European Cup, which later became the UEFA Champion's League. He used the Champion's league to measure the developement of different leagues over time, and this was very insightful and informative.

Kelvin says

The book that I read was The Ball is Round: A Global History of Soccer by David Goldblatt, a great soccer book for all soccer player and soccer fans. I started reading this book a years ago when I finished reading a Michael Jordon book and I was interested in sport books. When i saw this book a year ago I was thinking of the last Goodreads book review and thought about the basketball book that I read and now, I started reading a soccer book about the best history of soccer. I was interested in this book because I thought that there were going to part of history a long time ago that I did not know about and maybe read more about the best soccer player that ever lived in the past. Another thing that I was interested in was the details that the author did in the story, by explaining how the fan there angry at the referee in one moment of the story. It was ever pleasant that the author would talk about the background information about the fans and the referees, so that the reader can get to know what he did in the past.

I recommend this book to my friends because it is interesting and amazing. I believe that my friends will like this book more than my friends that are girls because in the beginning of the story it talks about the soccer history of the best soccer leagues of the world. In the middle of the story it talked about a player that made 91 in a season. In the story they give put great details about match and the author puts incredible grasp of the vectors of some world history moments. If girls read this book they will not know who that player is and will ask a lot of questions. They will not be able to finish the book all the way , but that's what I think probably there will be someone who is interested in the book and it history.

In the story the book becomes a little uninteresting when it begins talking about how they wanted to spread soccer throughout the world and they started to make the Aussies, US, and Canada play soccer, but they rejected soccer. Soccer then spread to Europe and Latin America, as the book becomes more interesting it stops being a history. The book changes from a history to a story, a story about the great players in the post WWII era. The story talks about the success of the World Cup in the 70s and 80s.

In the book it seemed daunting at first, being almost 1000 pages but I had to finish it really slowly because it was so good that I did not want to finish it. Usually I would take a break from a large book and do something else for a while but I could not bring myself to do that with this book. It was very informative and really exposed the underside of the Beautiful Game.

I could rate this book *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Soccer* I will rate it as a four because it interested me in reading more books about sports. I would read lots of books that are about sports and I recommend this book to all kinds of ages. At the end of the book it compares the soccer player of the present time and the past time. It talks about how the fans loved to watch their favorite player play and some think that the player known are not the same player from the past.

Richard says

The Ball is Round is the global history of football by David Goldblatt. It is a breathtaking work, one of those instances where the words of praise on the cover do not do it justice. It is a work of great learning, of great scope, it is an important work, something which contributes to the knowledge of humanity. The tone is slightly academic and wordy but this fits the contents. It is not just a history of global football but a social history of the world. Football history and the histories of the countries sit side by side and advance together, the football reflecting the nation, the nation the football. By understanding football you can understand the world. The way that football is in a country is a reflection of how that country is. The way that football is global, is how the globe often is. And for this I quote the book directly

'Many things in the world are badly governed. There are many elites who are incompetent, self-serving, self-important and arrogantly blasé about their evident limitations. None of them can begin to compare with the circus masquerading as the global governance of football.'

The book was published in 2006 and there have been enough recent developments that are a sufficient break with the past that it could be a new section all of its own. Others are continuations of what is predicted at the end of the book. Whilst I have praised its scope, it does mainly concentrate on Europe, South America (principally Brazil and Argentina), and Africa. Women's football is mentioned briefly. The sections on post-war European football and that detailing the growth of football via the conduit of British informal empire are especially good. Basically, economic ties of trade and finance from Britain sent many British people abroad who spread the game by playing it. Although the Swiss were instrumental in spreading football through much of Europe).

Whilst I have given it no amount of praise. The book is very long and unless you have an interest in social history and football (although that goes without saying) you may find the experience like taking some bitter medicine. Something good for you that doesn't taste great. But I loved the taste.

Lauren Guynn says

I liked this book quiet a little bit. I read some of it and didn't finish but i like this book because i love soccer and that's all this book talks about and it doesn't get boring to me. They talked about how different players did different things like tricks and it taught me some things about soccer. So this book was definitely a good book to read and if anyone is interested in soccer they should read this book.

Jamie says

This is a mammoth book, just over 900 pages. Broken up by continent-specific chapters within chronological sections. Goldblatt covers soccer within the cultural context of the nation he is discussing, giving plenty of international history lessons along the way. My soccer knowledge goes no further back than Cobi Jones and the 1994 World Cup (and even then it's pretty spotty), so learning about the early development of the sport and its growth in the Americas and Africa was all brand-new. I could have probably done with a shorter book, but picked this up based on the recommendation of Men in Blazers, a part of ESPN's WC coverage who have since moved to NBC.

One interesting nugget was the discussion of professionalizing soccer that each nation had to have as soccer's popularity grew. Those who chose to professionalize soccer earlier had a HUGE advantage when it came to international competition, over those who thought even practicing was ungentlemanly. I couldn't help but think of college football and the widening gap between SEC and B1G teams. While the B1G chooses to think of itself as the noble gentleman, the SEC is innovating with big money behind it (infer from that what you will).

Homer says

Pack a lunch because this 900 page epic will take you on a journey you will never forget.

Eric says

Very comprehensive, well written mega-history!
