

World Cup Soccer – A Metaphor For Life

“In football, everything is complicated by the presence of the other team.” Jean-Paul Sartre

“Everybody’s inner philosopher, it seems, is released by soccer.” Roger Cohen

FIFA World Cup 2006 is watched by one-sixth of the world’s population.

Soccer has such an impact on life that it has been reported by the World Bank: “In the past, winning the World Cup added 0.7 percent to their economic growth. From the last three tournaments, the winning country’s stock market considerably outperformed the losing country’s stock market. On average, there’s a 10 percent positive effect in the winner’s and a 25 percent negative effect in the loser’s.”¹

No wonder governments all over the world are pouring millions of dollars and taking soccer so seriously.

In reading and watching news about soccer, I cannot help but reflect about how soccer is really a mirror of life.

Soccer, like life, is about passion.

Screaming fans, painted faces, delirious crowds (when a goal is scored), frenetic sale (1.3 million German soccer jerseys were sold after Germany reached the quarter finals), the desperate, merciless lunges (to stop an opposing footballer), the fake tumbles (to win the sympathy of the referee), the pure, consummate joy (of scoring a goal, especially one that wins the match) all point to the passion of soccer.

Bill Shankly, the former Liverpool manager, sums it well, “Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I’m very disappointed with that attitude, I can assure it is much, much, more important than that.”²

Passion will bring joy to what we do. The passionate person will experience indescribable exhilaration when he succeeds. In soccer, as in life, joy keeps us motivated and helps us have fun along the way and to enjoy what we do.

Whatever our stages of life maybe, whatever occupations we are in, we should live passionately. If life is worth living, then we should live life passionately. If we don’t have that passion, life can be pretty meaningless.

Soccer, like life, sometimes, is irrational.

People support the country for a variety of reasons. Someone told me, “I support England because their white jersey looks great.” Another said, “I was rooting for Portugal because I placed my bet on them but they failed me.”

The most bizarre story I read is from Roger Cohen of International Herald Tribune, who writes, “The other day I found myself sitting next to a Chinese journalist named Geng Kun. She’s a correspondent with the Tianjin Daily. I asked her which team most Chinese are rooting for.

“Italy”, she said.

“Why?”

“Oh, because millions of women think their men are so beautiful.”

Cohen concludes, “Who needs metaphysics when football’s really that simple?”³ I wished.

Soccer, like life, is unpredictable.

Who would ever imagine that Australia would be knocked out by Italy in the last minute by a dubious goal? For that matter, the Germans could never imagine themselves being knocked out of the World Cup in the

last five minutes of the game. They thought that having the 12th man in the game was enough to carry them through. Who would ever imagine that France could surprise five-time world champion Brazil?

John Morgan a IHT correspondent said, "To make matters worse, there's often as much caprice involved in the calculus of success as there is pure skill." To some, it is the referee who makes or breaks the heart of the most earnest footballers and soccer fans.

Life is indeed unpredictable. And we should better be prepared for it. The only predictable thing about life is its unpredictability!

Soccer, like life, is about winning together as a team.

Talented individuals don't win championships. Only individual champions working together will. Or else, Ronaldinho or Frank Lampard or Shevchenko would have been carrying their trophies. For the uninitiated, they are the top-ranked footballers of the year.

But Thierry Henry, No. 2 ranked Player of the Year, went into the Finals because he learned to work as a team with the aging but maestro mid fielder, Zidane and solid defender, Thuram.

In 1998, the French players have a motto, "on vit ensemble, on meurt ensemble" (we live together, we die together), which they keep repeating. That's one of the reasons they won the World Cup that year. As the Reuters writer reported, "That same phrase sums up the spirit of a team desperate to make up for embarrassing eliminations of 2002 World Cup and 2004 European Championship, where internal squabbling and oversized egos marred their campaigns."⁴

Being the most prolific striker, point person and captain for Arsenal, Thierry Henry is content to play second fiddle to France's captain, Zidane so that his country can win.

The image most vividly etched in my mind was the friendly, supportive advice and pat on Jens Lehmann's shoulder by Oliver Kahn and the handshakes between him the No. 2 and Lehmann the No. 1 German goalkeeper before the penalty shoot-out between Germany and Argentina. The constant bickering between the two of them was notorious.

Both insisted that they are No. 1 and should be in the first eleven. But common sense prevailed. No wonder, Lehmann knocked out Argentina to get Germany into the quarter-finals. Country first, self second.

Soccer, like life, we need a good coach to bring us to the next level

Australia has Hiddink. Portugal has Scolari. Germany has Klinsman. Italy has Lippi. Francis has Demenech. Good coaches matter. Not so good ones falter along the way. Our mentors and advisors play a huge part in our lives and help shape us.

They know our strengths and weaknesses. They know who can complement us and support us. They unafraid to tell it like it is without demoralizing us. They shout instructions from the side to guide us. They lift our spirits when we are down. They apologize and not make excuses for their mistakes.

They are not afraid to substitute us when we are playing lousy. They make decisions for the sake of the team, despite criticisms. They don't play favorites. They remind all to play as a team and not for themselves. They take personal responsibility for our failures and attribute us when we succeed. They rejoice with us when we succeed.

Great coaches are hard to find. But when we have one, we can be sure we will fly!

Soccer, like life, is won only if we worked hard in defending and attacking well.

There is no short cut to hard work. Coaches must study, analyze their teams and the opponent and change pattern of play accordingly. Players must developed stamina, run up and down the field, trained to dribble, pass, or shovel. All these will show up in the real matches. Life is the same. No pain, no gain.

Italy and France, the two finalists are hot because they are excellent at defending, orchestrating, and attacking. Companies can only excel if we learned to clinch deals but also have playmakers and strong back room operations to execute and sustain the growth.

Soccer, like life, is a series of ups and downs.

Like England, their irrepressible joy of getting into the quarter-finals was brought down by the sorrow of losing it to Portugal. Even French players, in winning the World Cup, will spiral downwards when the euphoria is gone.

It is important to savor the joy of victory when we are in it but also to realize that it is only temporal. Similarly, the sorrow of failure is also temporal. It is how well we recover from both that will determine how we handle the next milestone of life.

As my eighteen-year old daughter, Meixi, writes, "Soccer is like life, we only have 90 minutes, but there's always extra time."

Soccer, like life, is about heroes who come and go.

Heroes today will be gone tomorrow. Beckham, Zidane, and Ronaldinho recognize that fame is short-lived. Heroes will come and go. There will be more exciting new players, like Cristiano Ronaldo, Podolski, and Ribery. Heroes are human after all.

In ten years, these starry-eyed young heroes of World Cup 2006 will have to give way to new heroes. Hence, we must live recognizing our days of triumph will soon fade away. It is the legacy we will live behind that really matters.

Two past heroes come to mind: Pele and Maradona. Pele, at least at this point of writing, has left a rich legacy for soccer fans all over the world to emulate. In contrast, Maradona lived a life of debauchery and drugs. Fortunately, he is now in remission, on the way to recovery. Like football, the kind of legacy we live behind is what counts!

Soccer, like life, is more than winning. It is about good sportsmanship.

The truth in life is that some will win and others will lose. Life, like soccer, is not just about winning. It is also how you play the game and how you lose.

One can't help but think of the Argentinians, who lost and stirred up a foot brawl after they lost on penalty shoot-out to Germany. One can't help but think of poor play-acting Cristiano Ronaldo, being booed.

Good sportsmanship is as important as winning. It always is heartwarming to see players helping their opponents get up from their feet or congratulating the winning team warmly. Sore losers never win. Cheats may win in the short-term but will lose in the long-term.

Soccer, like life, finds that football crowds cannot be trusted.

Before the World Cup and even up to the quarter-finals, the Brazilians were worshipping their two-time Player of the World, Ronaldinho, as though he could do no wrong. Every mistake forgiven. Every pass he made gloriously applauded.

When Brazil lost their match to France, it was a completely different story. Ronaldinho's statue, which was built in his hometown in honor of his World Player of the Year 2002, was burnt down. Only a heap of rubble was left just because he had failed to deliver.

Fans one day, foes the next. That is crowd mentality. Your staff will love you if the company makes money. But curse you when your company suffers losses. Rats are the first to leave a sinking ship. Crowds are rats of the finest kind.

Soccer, like life, unites people as a proud nation but can also lead to incensed nationalism.

See how a nation rejoices hysterically when their country wins a match. Flags flying high, honking of cars in the streets, and hugging of strangers, these all bringing a nation together in a way nothing else could. It is a spontaneous ground-swelled unity that is truly quite inexplicable. Not even war could unite a country the same way.

But, there is a more sinister side to national pride: ugly nationalism. Watch the unstoppable hissing of opposing player, the emotionally charged accusation of opposing fans, the overturn and burning of cars, the hooligan-like tauntings and fightings – all these point to the darker flip-side of nationalism when a country loses.

Like soccer, life is the same. Beware of a good thing that when overdone may become bad. An over-utilized strength becomes an irrepressible weakness.

Soccer, like life, must be more than soccer.

There is more in life than soccer. After the glorious victory or the ignominy of defeat, life has to be lived in the mundane. Footballers will wake up from their euphoric joy to return home: facing up to the reality of marital conflicts, dealing with the humdrum of the monotonous, the constant bantering of the unappreciative teens, experiencing the frailties of human body, the deterioration of the aging limbs and confronting the certainty of death. Life is more than soccer.

Roger Cohen cynically observes, "The ennui of football as metaphor for the greater ennui of the existential dilemma we all face is a result of being born."

We should find meaning beyond our human existence. Perhaps, there is more to life than this life and soccer.

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This article acknowledges the input from John Ng's 18-year daughter, Meixi.

p.s. If you have other observations about soccer as a metaphor for life, feel free to write in to me.

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¹ Roger Cohen. Soccer and the meaning of life: How deep to dig? International Herald Tribune, June 24-25, 2006, p.2.

² [Reuters. Poll picks Shankly's quote as most memorable. The Straits Times. July 8, 2006. Singapore.](#)

³ Roger Cohen. Soccer and the meaning of life: How deep to dig? International Herald Tribune. June 24-25, 2006, p. 2.

⁴ [Hamelin. Once for all, all for one. The Straits Times. July 8, 2006. Singapore.](#)