

Why Is the World Cup Coverage So Full of Stereotypes?

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Like many Americans, I know and care very little about soccer and the World Cup. I understand intellectually that it is a great sport with tens of millions of devoted fans, but not having grown up around it, I do not have an appreciation for its nuances and beauty. I suspect this is how many from non-baseball playing countries feel about baseball, a sport in which I have [some interest and knowledge](#).

Nonetheless, even for a non-soccer fan like me, it is hard not to enjoy the World Cup. This does not mean I watch the games, give more than passing attention to newspaper stories about the tournament, or even know who is playing on any given day. Rather, I enjoy seeing my friends from various countries get excited about the games and watching people here in New York root for their countries. It is not the same as seeing the buzz in this city when the Yankees are in the World Series, but it is a fun diversion.

Every World Cup, even through my very casual observance, I am struck by how in this extraordinarily international tournament that seems, in real ways, to bring the world together, national stereotypes still characterize, and at times even dominate coverage of the games. German teams are often described using terms such as [“efficient” or “ruthless,”](#) Brazilians as playing with [flare, excitement, “razzle dazzle,” and the like](#). It is possible, although I wouldn't know that these descriptions are accurate, but it seems significant that they are consistent with existing national stereotypes. One half expects the American team to be described as arrogant or one of the Asian teams as inscrutable. This reliance on essentially national stereotypes to describe how the game is played, at least to the non-expert ear, makes it seem as if a major global event is being presented with the political sensitivities of the bridge of the USS Enterprise.

It is also reminiscent of the days when mediocre white baseball players who year after year found spots on major league rosters were described as “scrappy” or “hustling” while great African American players were invariably described as having “natural talent.” The descriptions of national football teams are not overtly racist in the way these descriptions were, but they are still important. However, people, particularly young people, learn far more about the world by playing and watching sports than we might think. For many young soccer fans, the World Cup provides exposure to countries and cultures they have never encountered before. Many good young athletes first work closely with people from different backgrounds on the field or court of play. If these interactions are framed by clichés about national character, sports will not be able to bridge differences as well as they might.

The persistence and tolerance of national stereotypes in soccer coverage is a little troubling, but more significantly is a reminder that many people still see the world in

these terms. That soccer fans hear a Northern European team as more efficient and a South American team as more flashy is not in of itself a tragedy. Moreover, many of my soccer fan friends tell me these descriptions are accurate. However, when these views spill over into other aspects of life, it creates more of a problem.

The frequency in which these descriptions are found in soccer analysis is a reminder of how deeply engrained not only these stereotypes, but the corresponding approach to understanding the world, is. I am no longer surprised to hear soccer pundits and writers fall into this form of analytical laziness, but am still struck by how often I encounter this approach from policy makers and diplomats. It is far less excusable from these people, but it demonstrates the persistence of this paradigm. Changing how we describe sports, even if it is a matter of finding more descriptive language, would be a small but wide reaching step towards changing this.