Soccer, known by various versions of the word *football* in most of the world, is a global contemporary cultural phenomenon. Since its standardization in the late 19th century in England, the sport has traveled with remarkable verve and speed, anchoring itself in almost every society on Earth. What explains its popularity? What institutions have shaped and been shaped by it in various contexts? And how has it impacted the world?

Various kinds of ball games have existed in societies throughout the world for millennia. The oldest written rules governing such games known today come from China, and archaeological and documentary evidence makes clear their importance in the societies of Mesoamerica. The immediate ancestors of the contemporary game of soccer, however, are a diverse set of games played in England, which were increasingly channeled and codified within the English school system in the 19th century. As these schools began to play against one another, they worked to agree on a set of norms and practices that could be shared across institutions to avoid the confusions that resulted from the panoply of different rules in existence.

In 1863, the “Cambridge Rules” were codified at a London meeting of alumni from various universities. Although adjustments to these rules followed, this set of rules formed the basis of what became known as “association football.” The fundamental aspect of this game was that it codified the use of the feet rather than the hands—except by the goalie—thus eliminating the carrying of the ball. Rugby, which came out of the same broad set of games as association football, maintained ball carrying. Out of rugby there emerged, in North America, the sport of American football, codified at elite universities there in the late 19th century. Of the three sports, American football remains contained to North America. Rugby and association football, however, spread rapidly throughout the English colonial and commercial empires starting in the late 19th century.

Interestingly, however, association football did something that rugby did not: It extended beyond the cultural and social boundaries in which it first traveled and was appropriated and embraced by a wide range of social groups. In Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, for instance, the sport was first played within English merchant communities and was quickly taken up by other local groups. Local clubs were formed in many areas, including among marginalized sectors of the population, such as people of African descent in Brazil. They spread from large urban areas into smaller cities and the countryside. By the early 20th century, in Latin America, national teams were established to play against one another, and, in 1916, a regional confederation—the first of its kind—was created to organize international matches on the continent. In Africa, where some European colonists and missionaries envisioned the sport as an ideal way to inculcate the colonized with European values of discipline, solidarity, acceptance of rules, and cooperative effort, the sport rapidly spilled out of its colonial quarters. From Cameroon to Algeria, communities created clubs; in many cases, these clubs became centers for community expression and, at times, anticolonial politics. Indeed, football played a significant role in some anticolonial struggles, most famously in Algeria where the Front de Libération National, fighting for independence from France, created a football team in 1958 that toured the world as a representative for the revolutionary
The global institutionalization of the game is tightly linked to the history of an organization called the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). It was created in 1904 by Dutch and French founders, and its multilingual name is the result of the fact that, although the organization was named in French, it used the English term association football, then in common use throughout Europe, to specify the game it governed. FIFA's initial brief was to govern and supervise the playing of the game in different European countries. Over time, however, it grew in size and importance, especially under the leadership of Jules Rimet after World War I. Its members began to include countries outside Europe, and in 1930 FIFA organized the first World Cup, which took place in Uruguay. Although much about the competition has changed since then, its basic format has remained the same. The World Cup takes place every 4 years, brings together teams from throughout the world, and produces one winner, considered the champion of the world. Today, the World Cup is the largest sporting event in the world and garners the largest global audience of any contemporary event. According to FIFA estimates, as many as 700 million people watched the 2010 World Cup final. The tournament creates opportunities for the reification and performance of nationalism, and as such often gets taken up in political debates and conflicts.

Soccer is also a massive global industry. Whereas most club soccer teams were initially organized as community organizations and staffed by amateur players, the professionalization of the sport proceeded rapidly in the first decades of the 20th century in many areas of the world. Over time, clubs have become powerful and profitable businesses with a global reach. Today, such clubs spend lavishly to recruit the best players, and many profit from television rights, commercial endorsements, and global merchandizing of jerseys and other merchandise. The soccer industry propels and sustains patterns of movement by athletes that parallel broader forms of global migration, as soccer players from regions such as Africa and Latin America seek careers in Europe, home to the world's richest clubs. Almost all European club teams are extremely global, with players from Africa, Europe, and Latin America playing together. Soccer has become a truly global presence and language, creating unexpected connections and affinities.

See also:
Connectedness, Economic Development, Events, Global, Global Culture, Media, Globalization, Phenomenon of, Identities in Global Societies, Leisure, Sports, Recreation

Further Readings


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