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Chapter 1

Introducing Planet Soccer

Association Football — soccer, as it's known in the United States — is the most popular sport in the world. It's referred to by many different names around the world: *football*, *footy*, *soccer*, *fitba*, *fútbol*, *calcio*, *futebol*, *voetbol*, *le foot*, *foci*, *sakka*, or *bong da*. Whatever it's called, the game remains the same: two teams of 11 players, each team trying to kick a spherical ball into a goal more times than the other.

Soccer is fiendishly addictive, whether you watch, compete, or do both. Across the planet more supporters and spectators follow the professional game than any other sport, and at grassroots level more amateur participants enjoy the game than any other athletic pastime. Though its growth has been slower in America than elsewhere, it's become one of the most popular participation sports in the United States. As a spectator sport, millions now attend games and tune in to international soccer games via television or online, and the top professional leagues in North America — Major League Soccer (MLS) for men and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) for women — are both growing fast and thriving.

Soccer arouses passion in spectators and players like no other game in the world — and perhaps like nothing else known to humankind. It has done so ever since some British rule-makers formalized the pastime of kicking a ball around into a sport during the late 1850s and early 1860s. (That's 150 years and counting, *and it's still getting more popular by the day.*) But why have billions of men and women, boys and girls, adults and children been enthralled by this simplest of sports for such a long time? What makes soccer so special? Read on for some ideas.

Nothing as Simple as Soccer

John Charles Thring was spot on the money when, in 1862 in Uppingham, England, he wrote a set of draft rules for the game that later became known as Association Football. With the sport yet to be christened, Thring decided to entitle his rules “The Simplest Game.”

Thring's rules were tweaked before being ratified by the newly founded Football Association in England the following year, but the new sport of Association Football remained *the simplest game*. Because no game (with the possible exception of running in a straight line, and that's not really a game, is it?) is less complicated than soccer.

The basic aim: It really is that simple!

The object of the game is simple: for a team of 11 players to guide a ball into a goal and do it more times than the opposition team can manage.

That's it!

So why is soccer so popular around the world?

Pop psychologists have written more words attempting to explain why soccer is so popular than on any other subject (except organized religion, maybe, although some soccer fans will tell you that's pretty much the same thing).

The truth is, nobody's ever been able to quite put their finger on why the game is so popular, so I'm not going to pretend to give you a definitive answer. There simply isn't one. The best I can do is offer you the following three suggestions:

- » **Its simplicity makes it readily accessible.** You only have to watch a couple of minutes of action to work out what the teams are trying to do.
- » **Goals have a rarity value and are at a premium.** Basketball involves scoring tons of points and a tennis player may win a point every 30 seconds. But you can watch 90 minutes of soccer and not see a single goal scored by either team. Some skeptics say this makes the game boring, but its massive popularity around the world suggests that the rarity value of goals only increases the excitement of soccer for many, many people.
- » **The teams belong to the people.** Despite its origins in British private schools, organized soccer quickly became a working-class sport, a release from the tedium of everyday life all around the world. Results really began to matter. Following a team became tribal, with a sense of belonging and a commitment to a cause.

Having said that, thousands of other, better reasons may exist. After you've watched a few games, or played soccer yourself, you no doubt have a few theories of your own. Actually, that's another great thing about soccer: Everyone's got an opinion about it — often a strong one!

Where do people play soccer?

Everywhere, basically. The game, in a very basic form, is thought to have started out in China over 2,000 years ago, with the ancient Greeks, the Romans, and indigenous Australians playing variations on a theme over the centuries.

It wasn't until the mid-1800s that the game as you know it today developed in Britain, but by 1900 it had spread all over Europe and to South America. Fast-forward another 110 years and every country and continent in the world is now playing the game. That includes the United States, a country that has long favored other sports such as baseball and its own version of football, but now has well-established professional leagues, the most successful women's national team in the world, and a huge level of participation in youth soccer.

SOCCER: NOT AN AMERICANISM

One of the great myths in the sport is the origin of the word *soccer*. It's generally considered to have been coined in the United States — where the game commonly known as *football* in the United Kingdom is indeed called *soccer*. But in fact, the word is a creation of the English elite.

In British universities and elite private schools, well-spoken students had the habit of abbreviating nouns and then appending them with the suffix *-er*, to create a new informal word. For example, someone with the surname Johnson would be known as *Johnners*. Similarly, the game of rugby union was called *rugger*.

According to legend, in the mid-1880s, someone asked an Oxford student named Charles Wreford-Brown whether he wanted to play a game of rugger. Preferring to play football, he shortened the *association of association football* to *soc* and tacked on the usual colloquial suffix — quipping back that he'd rather have a game of *soccer*.

In America, it makes sense that the game is most widely known as soccer, to distinguish it from another popular form of football now dominated by the NFL — similar to why the term was coined all those years ago by Wreford-Brown, who went on to captain England's *soccer* team!

Explaining a Few Rules

So how does this team of 11 players actually go about playing the game and scoring these elusive goals? I go into further detail about the laws of the game in Chapter 4, but first here's a brief overview of how you play a soccer game.

The field

You usually play soccer on grass, occasionally on artificial surfaces, but always on a field no bigger than 80 yards wide and 120 yards long. You might also hear it called the “pitch.” Figure 1-1 shows you how the field looks.

Each end of the field has a goal, composed of two upright posts 24 feet apart and 8 feet high, topped with a horizontal crossbar. One team tries to score in one goal, and the other team tries to score in the other goal. While both teams are trying to score, they are also trying to stop the other team from scoring.

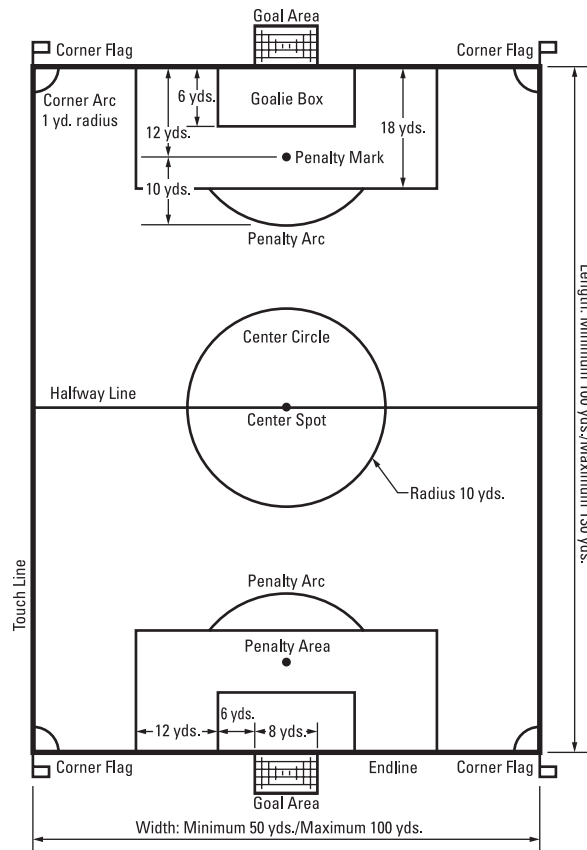


FIGURE 1-1:
The field.

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Play stops if the ball leaves the marked field. If a player in one team kicks the ball off the field, then a player in the opposing team must throw or kick the ball back in.

The players

Each team has 11 players. Ten of these players aren't allowed to touch the ball with their arms or hands. They're called *outfield players*. The other member of the team is called the *goalkeeper*; this player can use their hands and arms in the penalty area around the goal they're tending.

Four basic positions exist:

- » **Defender:** A defender's job is primarily to defend their team's goal and stop players from the opposing team scoring.

- » **Forward:** A forward's role is to score goals or create them for other players.
- » **Goalkeeper:** The goalkeeper's job is to stop the ball going in the net at all costs, thus ensuring the opposing team doesn't score a goal. The goalkeeper can do so by using any part of their body.
- » **Midfielder:** Midfielders — usually the team's most adaptable players — cover a lot of ground and help the defenders defend and the forwards attack.

These players are arranged in different places around the field, and the variations on ways to do this are known as *formations*. The most common is 4-4-2: four defenders, four midfielders, and two forwards. An alternative is 4-3-3: four defenders, three midfielders, and three attackers, a more offensive lineup than a 4-4-2. You may notice both of those formations only add up to 10 players, not 11: That's because the goalkeeper isn't listed in the formation; that position is taken for granted. Find out more about the fun of formations in Chapter 5.

General behavior

A referee is on hand to officiate every game, and the referee's decision is always final.

Players aren't allowed to shove each other away from the ball, kick each other, trip each other up, or obstruct each other. If they do, they give away a *foul* and the referee awards the other team a *free kick*. (See Chapter 4 for more on free kicks.)

If one team concedes a free kick close to the goal, the team awarded the kick has a fair chance of scoring directly. If a team concedes a free kick in its own penalty area, the referee awards the opposition a *penalty kick* — a free shot from 12 yards out with only the goalkeeper, who must stay on the goal line until the ball is kicked, in the way (not surprisingly, this usually results in a goal).

Referees can *send off* (eject for the rest of the game) players who continually concede fouls or do something *really* bad. Find out more about free kicks, penalties, and obeying the laws of the game in Chapter 4.

Goal!

To score a goal the whole ball has to cross the whole goal line, going between both of the posts and under the crossbar.

Players are allowed to score by shooting with their feet or heading the ball into the goal. This sounds easier to achieve than it actually is, which is why goals are greeted with such unbridled joy by crowds.

Keeping score . . .

The scoring system in soccer is simple. If Team A has scored one goal and Team B hasn't scored any then the score is 1-0. If Team B then scores two goals the score is 1-2. It's pretty simple, which is why fans will sometimes chant the hopeful ditty: "We're gonna score one more than you!"

In a less thrilling result, a game may end with neither team scoring a goal. This score is 0-0; traditionally known as a *nil nil* scoreline, though zero zero works fine too.

. . . and keeping time

A game (also called a "match") lasts 90 minutes, split into two 45-minute halves, with a 15-minute break in between. The team with the most goals at the end of 90 minutes wins the game. If both teams have the same number of goals, the game is a tie (also called a *draw*). Depending on the rules of the competition the game is being played in, ties are sometimes settled by playing extra time or going to a decisive penalty shootout.

Playing the Game

The beauty of soccer as a sport is that anyone can play it, anywhere. That's something you can't say about horse racing or NASCAR.

You don't even really need any equipment, apart from a ball — and even then you can improvise. In fact, famous players like the Brazilian legend Pelé and Argentinian icon Diego Maradona both grew up in shanty towns and played with rolled-up newspapers for a ball.

Playing solo

Although soccer's a team sport, you don't even need anyone else to play it with. Soccer is a game you can have just as much fun practicing alone. Argentine legend Lionel Messi used to spend all his spare time as a little boy practicing by kicking around a tennis ball. As well as keeping him fit and healthy, it honed the skills that turned him into one of the greatest players the world's ever seen.

EVEN SIMPLER SOCCER

Sometimes you may only have a few friends to play with at your local park, but it's still easy to have fun playing games in lieu of a proper game of 11 on 11.

- **Headers and volleys.** One player's the goalkeeper, with the other players trying to score, but only with headers and volleys. Players get a point for a goal scored but have to go in goal if their attempts are caught in the air by the keeper.
- **Knockout (also known as "World Cup").** The best street soccer game, bar none. You have only one goalkeeper. Everyone else pairs up. Each pair tries to score; whenever they're in possession all the other pairs try to stop them. Upon scoring, a pair qualifies for the next round. Each round sees the last pair to score dropping out.

Playing with others

It's easy to find people to play soccer with at parks all around the world. Join in a pickup game for some friendly competition and a chance to hone your skills in a (usually) relaxed setting.

But if you want a proper game, don't fret. There are thousands of organized teams that you can join, for all age groups and levels of ability. And who knows: If you're good enough, you may one day get a try-out for a professional team. And then . . . well, we're not promising anything, but *somebody's* got to be the next Messi or Marta, right?

Watching Soccer and Supporting a Team

Professional soccer is the most popular spectator sport in the world. Billions of people follow the game by going to a stadium to witness the action in the flesh or watching live coverage or edited highlights, either on television or online.

Following club and country

Most people follow the fortunes of two favorite teams: the club team closest to their heart and their international team that represents the country of their birth or that of a parent.

Fans choose club teams for different reasons. It can be the closest team to them growing up. Maybe their father or mother, or some other close family member, was a fan. Or it can be that a person watched a particular game on TV and fell in love with the club immediately.

There can be other reasons. Their favorite player plays for the club. They really like the color of the team jerseys. They visited the stadium once and especially enjoyed the atmosphere. Anything is possible when people are making emotional attachments.

Who you support is up to you, and you can't change what feels right. One warning, though: If you're a Manchester City fan from Los Angeles, some fans will accuse you of being a *glory hunter* (someone who follows a club just to associate themselves with its success) and ask why you aren't supporting the team from your home city as well or instead. You'll never win this argument, so don't bother getting involved in it. Remember, who you support is a personal decision; no right or wrong answer exists.

Remember, too, that supporting Team X means that you automatically dislike Team Y. (Think Portland/Seattle, Rangers/Celtic, Arsenal/Tottenham, Real Madrid/Barcelona.) These rivalries can generate a lot of pain, but a lot of joy as well. It may not be edifying, but it's an important part of the game.

Winning trophies: The be-all and end-all?

At a very basic level, professional soccer is about winning. Club teams compete to win league championships and cup competitions, while countries try to win the World Cup or continental titles.



REMEMBER

But it's not just about winning the big trophies, which is just as well because there aren't that many to go round — and it's always the top teams and perennially successful nations who land them anyway. Soccer is also about:

- » **The game's history.** Soccer is over 150 years old and there are thousands of fascinating stories to be told. If you're bitten by the bug, you may never be able to stop reading about old-school players and what they got up to.
- » **Discovering the world.** Soccer is a truly global sport — watching broadcasts from leagues all around the world not only exposes you to exciting soccer at all times of the day, but is an invitation to learn more about different cultures and a great excuse to go abroad and watch a game or two!

- » **Registering an unexpected win.** Some weekends it's best to write off a result in advance, especially if you're going to the league leaders in full knowledge that they're miles better than you. It insulates you from the pain of defeat, and also makes it 100 times better when your team somehow comes away with a ludicrous 4-1 win.
- » **Schadenfreude.** It's not necessarily an emotion to be proud of, but few feelings are better in soccer than letting rip a guttural guffaw after watching a painful defeat befall a club you dislike intensely.
- » **Strategy and tactics.** Soccer isn't just a visceral thrill; it can be an intellectual pursuit, too. Working out how your team played, and why they won or lost, can be enlightening and frustrating in equal measure.
- » **Having an opinion (and an argument).** Apart from the hard facts on the scoreboard, no absolute rights and wrongs exist in soccer. A heated discussion with fans of either your team or another club over the performance of various teams, refereeing, and the merits of different players can be one of the real joys of being a fan — and a pressure valve to let off steam and keep you sane.
- » **A famous jaw-dropping moment.** Everyone remembers where they were when Zinedine Zidane headbutted Marco Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final, or when Brandi Chastain scored the winning penalty kick for the United States in the 1999 Women's World Cup final.
- » **A personal jaw-dropping moment.** Nobody will remember this one apart from you. Maybe it was a moment spent watching the game as a youngster with your mom or dad, or the time you scored the winning goal in a pickup game that you'll always treasure.
- » **Watching the biggest games.** You may never see your team compete in one, but still nothing beats the pomp, ceremony, and sheer anticipation of the final of a major tournament.
- » **The pain of defeat.** Because without it, you wouldn't appreciate the good times.