

Canada's most popular game

By Anthony Carnovale

Soccer, like coffee, running and Netflix, is something I came to late in life. Like so many Canadian kids, I grew up playing hockey. Soccer was something I played to keep me fit for the hockey season (it never worked). The highlight of my brief tenure as a player, was a game in which I scored four goals – the only four goals I scored in the four years that I played.

To me, soccer was a game that somebody, somewhere else watched and played. Soccer was the World Cup every four years; soccer was Juventus, Inter and Milan playing on a channel that didn't broadcast games in English. One of my earliest soccer memories is from 1982, the year Italy played Germany in the World Cup final. I was watching the game at my grandparents' house. Before the game, we were doing some work out in the yard, when a car, with a German flag, drove past the house. My Nonna cursed, spit and put a hex on the German national team. I remember my grandfather standing for the Italian national anthem; I was surprised when he remained standing for Deutschlandlied. Italy beat Germany 3-1. My Nonna took credit for the victory.

I didn't really take to the game because I didn't understand the game. Offsides threw me off. Players liked to dive. Every thirty seconds there was a foul and a player flopping on the turf like a fish out of water (I could never tell if a player was actually hurt or not). I hated the way the players surrounded the referee after a call went against them. There were hardly any goals, hits or fights. My favourite hockey players were Wendel Clark, Mark Messier, Eric Lindros, Cam Neely. Soccer players seemed more concerned about their hair than the actual game.

It wasn't until I went to school in Australia that I learned to appreciate soccer. I was far away from home and couldn't afford to have cable hooked up in my room. It just so happened that Manchester United games were played on the one channel that I did get. After a late night at the pub, I'd return to my room and watch Roy Keane boss the midfield; Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, the super-sub, come off the bench to score a goal. Their goalie, Peter Schmeichel, was more beast than human. I'd watch the ball come off Paul Scholes' foot like a blast from a cannon; David Beckham controlled the ball like Picasso with a paintbrush. Their manager, Sir Alex Ferguson, was the general leading his troops. It was the year Manchester United won the treble. I came home from Australia with a teaching degree, a love for Manchester United, and a reverence for the sport of football (serious fans don't call it soccer).

Football has now surpassed hockey as the most popular sport amongst youth in Canada. According to the 2014 Canadian Youth Sports Report, 767,000 children from ages 3-17 played organized football, while only 531,000 played ice hockey. Football is the number one team sport in Canada for children aged 3-6, 7-12, and 13-17. The primary reason for this is financial. Football is the one sport that any person can play. On average, hockey costs a minimum of three to five thousand dollars a year. Football is the game of the poor, the hungry and those dreaming of freedom and social equality. Around the world, the game is more likely to be played in back alleys, streets and parking lots than it is on the well-manicured pitches we see on television. You can't tell the difference between a rich kid and a poor kid at a soccer game (in hockey, the poor kid is likely to not be playing). Football is the great equalizer.

Football also happens to be the sport of new Canadians. In 2014, Maclean's cited a report by The Institute of Canadian Citizenship that explored the ways in which new citizens participated in Canada's sporting culture. The most popular team sport for new Canadians? Soccer. By comparison, only six per cent of new citizens had enrolled their children in hockey or baseball.

In many ways, the game of football is the perfect game for me. The pace of the game perfectly mirrors the pace I try to live my life at. The game is about making sure that every touch of the ball matters. Football is more about what happens between those rare goals; more about the build-up and team-play, where every touch counts. Football, more than any other sport, is about patience. I hate the frenetic, anxious pace of hockey (and life). Baseball bores me; American football is too violent. In American football, time stops at the half and the end. I can watch a football game, pretty much free from any advertisements (and blow-hards like Don Cherry).

My appreciation for the game has grown since my own kids have started to play. My son has been playing for three years now. He's developed from a shy, reluctant child, to a young boy that can take control of any game. He's got a big kick and an even bigger smile. People mention his smile as much as they do his skills. He's developing a deft touch and is learning how to put the ball into space. He is learning how to 'see' the game.

I 'coached' my son his first two years. I bracketed the word 'coached' because when kids first start playing football they're like a cat with a ball, only not so nimble. Trying to coach young football players is an exercise in futility. They zig-zag and swirl around the pitch. They're like tiny mice chasing the same piece of cheese; it's pure madness. Last year, a kid wandered off the pitch and walked home by himself. After one game, I got into an argument with a coach for running up the score against my team. I tried not to get annoyed at the kid doing cartwheels as an opposing player ran by him and scored the winning goal. One night, a parent came up to me after a game and asked me to tell one my players to stop trying to 'hump' his son. Two years later, things have settled down. The kids have learned to control themselves (a little). Their competitive nature has intensified; their skill development has been outstanding. Last night, my son's coach yelled out: 'I know you guys are like rabid dogs, but spread out and just be patient.' They love to play the game.

I also have to say just how impressed I am with the work that the Orangeville Minor Soccer Association has done for our kids and this community. On any given night, the fields at ODDS, Princess Elizabeth and Alder are chock-full of kids and families. Community spaces matter. We wouldn't have these spaces, and opportunities for play, without these dedicated people. Some coaches run their own practises, and even invite other players from other teams to participate. They do it because they know that the more a player touches the ball, the better.

Orangeville has a reputation for being a hockey and lacrosse town. For me, the future of this community is out on those football pitches. If you're ever out watching a game, take a step back and listen to the sounds. On any given day you'll hear people speaking Croatian, Italian, Spanish, Mexican, French, Urdu, Arabic, Patois. Football is a language we can all understand.

This summer is my three-year-old daughter's first year playing the game. Last week, while chasing the ball, her look grew intense as she ran towards the goal. She was determined; she used her body to protect the ball. She held onto the ball and put it into the back of the net. In those few seconds, I saw her defend herself, and take what she thought was hers to take. Football is teaching her so much more than the skills required to play the game. Football is teaching her about life.

Football is life. The world, like that ball, is at her feet. It really is something exquisite to watch. The Portuguese have a word for it? o jogo bonito. The beautiful game. Indeed.