

The beautiful game

Over the last hundred years the game of football has totally changed the worlds of sport, media and leisure. Football is played worldwide by more than 1.5 m teams and 300,000 clubs. An amazing eight out of ten people in the world watch the World Cup. It is, as the great Brazilian footballer Pelé described it, ‘the beautiful game’. Andrew Hunt reports.

How football began

As far back as 2500 BC the Chinese played a kicking game called **tsu chu**. Similar games were played by the Romans and North American Indians. In England in medieval times ‘mob football’ was wildly popular. In 1583, Philip Stubbs said of football players:

“sometimes their necks are broken, sometimes their backs, sometimes their legs, sometimes their arms.”



By the mid-19th century, with the help of English public schools, the game had become less violent. Each school had different rules for playing the game. On the playing fields of Eton the ball was kicked high and long. At Rugby School the boys caught and ran with the ball. Problems arose when boys from the different schools went to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and wanted to continue playing. This is from the description of a match played in Cambridge in 1848:

“... The result was chaos, as every man played the rules he had been accustomed to at his school.”

It became common to play half a match by one side's rules, the second half by the other's. That's how half-time came about. However, this was not good enough for the university men. They decided to sort out the rules once and for all.

On Monday October 26, 1863, they met at a pub in London. By the end of the day they had formed the Football Association and a Book of Laws was on its way. The sticking point was whether a player could pick up the ball and run with it or not, and this was not decided until December 8. From this decision the games of both football and rugby were born.

Football around the world



Europe is home to the world's richest professional clubs: Manchester United, AC Milan, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich. These clubs are famous in many countries far away from their home grounds. Rickshaw pullers in Mumbai, **tuk tuk** drivers in Bangkok, on discovering they have an English passenger respond with 'Ah, English, Manchester United. You know Manchester United?'

South America has produced some of the most exciting soccer on earth. Many of the world's leading players have come from poverty to play on the world stage. They have been snapped up by wealthy European teams after making their mark at home. Brazil has won the World Cup five times, Uruguay three times, and Argentina twice.

North America is the only continent where football (or soccer as it is called there to distinguish it from their homegrown game) has become more popular with females than males. In 1991, the US won the first Women's World Cup. Interest amongst American men has been growing since the World Cup in Los Angeles in 1994, and more recently since the arrival of international stars such as David Beckham.

Asia: Over the past two decades heated rivalry among Japan, China and South Korea has increased the passion for soccer across the continent, especially after Japan and Korea co-hosted the World Cup in 2002. However, not all Asian countries share the passion: India and Pakistan prefer cricket.

The Middle East: Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar have lately been investing huge sums of money in football. They've hired the best players and coaches that money can buy.

Australia: Sport in Australia has long been dominated by cricket, rugby and surfing. However, since they qualified for the 2006 World Cup, Australians have become much more interested in the game.



Africa has produced a number of soccer superstars, but many of them have been lost to the rich European clubs. Africa is poor in resources but rich in talent, with thousands of gifted young players dreaming of big time football. South Africa's hosting of the 2010 World Cup is very important for African football.

A global passion

The game of football is played in every nation on earth, not only by the 120 m regular team players, but also by countless others on beaches, in playgrounds and streets. The world's love of football is simple – it's because football is simple. All that is needed is a ball, a piece of ground, and two posts. The world's greatest players, George Best, Diego Maradona, and Pelé, all learned their skills on waste grounds. These are the places where the sport is born and why football has become a global passion.