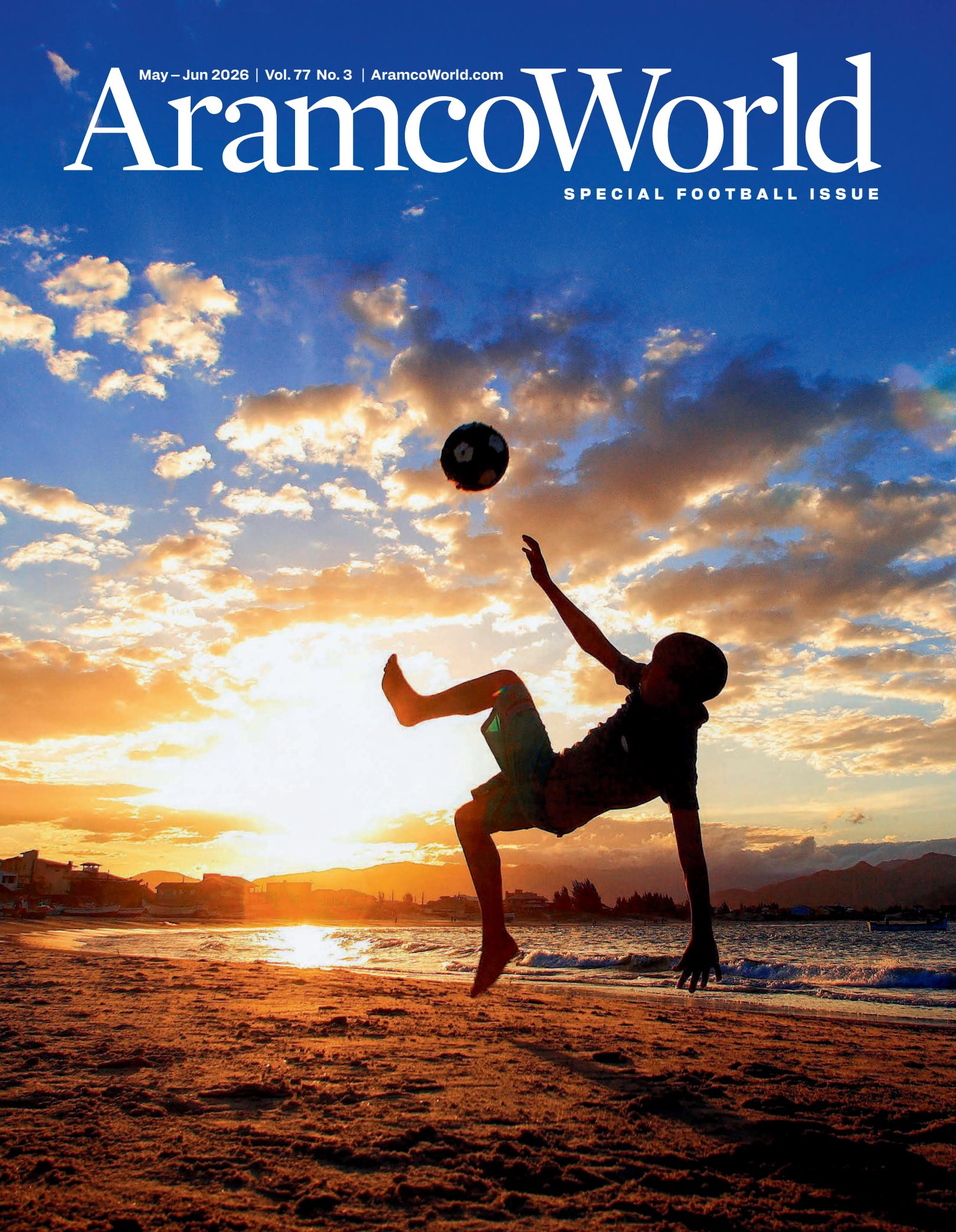
May – Jun 2026 | Vol. 77 No. 3 | AramcoWorld.com

AramcoWorld

SPECIAL FOOTBALL ISSUE



AramcoWorld

May / June
Vol. 77, No. 3

2026

AramcoWorld inspires global connections that broaden the appreciation of diverse cultures. We believe in celebrating our shared experiences through engaging and educational stories and content.

AramcoWorld.com

Publisher: Aramco Americas Company
President and CEO: Ahmed AL-Mulhem
Director, Public Affairs (A): Blain Rethmeier
Editor (A): Amra Pasic
Specials Editor: Alva Robinson
Assistant Editor / Social Media Editor: Sarah Taqvi
Visuals Editor: Waleed Dashash
Copy Editor: Suzanne Garofalo
Budget & Contracts Advisor: Cheryl Kopp
Print design: Graphic Engine Design Studio
Printing: RR Donnelley / Wetmore
Web design: eSiteful Corporation

Subscribe online: AramcoWorld.com
Subscription services: aramcoworld@sfsdayton.com or P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429 USA
Editorial: publications@aramcoamericas.com or P.O. Box 2106, Houston, Texas 77252-2106, USA
ISSN: 2376-1083

AramcoWorld (ISSN 2376-1083) is published bimonthly by Aramco Americas Company, Two Allen Center, 1200 Smith Street, Houston, TX 77002, USA

Periodicals postage paid at Houston, Texas, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to *AramcoWorld*, P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429.

A Note From the Editors

It is difficult to overstate the cultural importance of football. Around the world, the game brings together athletes and spectators alike who share customs and traditions as points of pride. All sports foster a sense of belonging and identity—but none more so than this.

As the most globally beloved sport, football or soccer transcends all manner of boundaries—languages, nationalities and backgrounds. Fierce rivalries on the pitch are no match (pardon the pun) for the mutual love of "the beautiful game."

The 2026 FIFA World Cup, for the first time hosted by three nations—Canada, the United States and Mexico—presents a unique opportunity to highlight that which unites us. In this special edition, *AramcoWorld* explores the deeply rooted connections between football and facets of culture. Our visually driven content invites you to consider the immense variety of influences that converge over the game, sparking both community engagement and individual inspiration.

As the world gathers to take part in football on its biggest stage, we hope you'll pore over this keepsake issue to feel connected to the stories and ideas that sustain the culture surrounding football—one of enduring unity, respect and excellence.

Can't get enough football? Find additional feature stories, recipes, reviews and more at AramcoWorld.com.

FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

FRONT COVER A boy practices the beautiful game as the sun sets on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Around the world, football belongs to everyone.

MATTHEW BROMLEY; OPPOSITE: SHUTTERSTOCK; FRONT COVER: JEFFERSON BERNARDES/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; BACK COVER: MEHMET BIBER/ARAMCO AMERICAS ARCHIVE

Visual Corner

What We Remember

"In football, the worst blindness is only seeing the ball." The late Brazilian writer Nelson Falcão Rodrigues's line mused on looking past possession of the ball to the game's place in our collective imagination. As children, we absorbed the idea behind those words and carried it into adulthood—without even realizing it.

When we first picked up the game, we moved en masse, singularly focused on the ball. Whether we sprinted hard across a courtyard or through an alley, on sand or snow, we recall our friends' laughter and how the game *felt*—the sun on our faces and the sting in our lungs.

Less visceral were the lessons: how to lead and to follow. That disappointment can motivate. When to stand alone and when to share.

Football was never just a moving ball. It was about chasing after our best and having fun along the way. And that, we'll always remember.

Saudi Arabia, 2020: On the esplanade of Hasan Anani Mosque in Jeddah, **ABOVE**.

Morocco, 2025: Within the outer walls of the old Marrakesh Medina, **BELOW**.

TOP: GIUSEPPE CACACE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: CHRISTOPHER PILLITZ/GETTY IMAGES

Türkiye, 2021: Playing on the snowy ground in the village of Kars at an altitude of 2,084 meters (6,837 feet).

Argentina, 2018: At a playground in La Boca neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

Somalia, 2018: On Lido Beach in Mogadishu.

TOP: ISMAIL KAPLAN/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES; MIDDLE: LUDOVIC MARIN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: MOHAMED ABDIWAHAB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Great Britain, circa 1970: A break from playing in the street to buy ice cream.

Bhutan, 2008: At Zilukha Junior High School in the capital, Thimphu.

TOP: KEYSTONE/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: CHRISTOPHE BOISVIEUX/GETTY IMAGES

Indonesia, 2023: Street playtime in the coastal city of Surakarta, **ABOVE**.

Malaysia, 2019: Performing freestyle tricks in the city of Shah Alam, **LEFT**.

TOP: ROBERTUS PUDYANTO/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: ADLI GHAZALI/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

From London Hangout to WORLD'S GAME

Since its birth in 1863 in London, football has spread around the globe, boasting billions of fans who connect with the game as a source of cultural pride beyond the pitch.

WRITTEN BY RICHARD PARR

In London's Covent Garden district, a juggler entertains tourists as commuters head home and theatergoers drift toward the West End. Few pause to consider that they have walked past the birthplace of one of the world's great spectacles.

The Grand Connaught Rooms on Great Queen Street rarely attract attention unless a conference is underway. But in 1863, when the venue was known as the Freemasons' Tavern, it hosted the meetings that produced the first unified rules of association football.

Those decisions did not invent the game. They standardized it, made it transferable and enabled it to spread far beyond London.

OPPOSITE A vintage newspaper sketch depicts the very first international football match, between England and Scotland, in 1872. **LEFT** Reenactors in traditional kimonos practice *kemari*, a Japanese predecessor of football, in 2012 at Shimogamo Shrine in Kyoto.

Today football is watched and played on every continent. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the first to take place in the Arab world, reached nearly 5 billion people globally, with 1.5 billion watching the final. These figures underline how far the sport has traveled since Victorian England. (FIFA is the acronym for Fédération Internationale de Football Association.)

Keir Radnedge, an author and former editor of World Soccer magazine, has covered the tournament since 1966. "My history of the World Cup goes back to the days of black-and-white television," he says. "It was a football tournament. Now it's a global social media populist event."

DEEP ROOTS, DIFFERENT GAMES

According to the FIFA Museum, long before 1863, cultures across Asia, Europe and the Americas had developed ball games of their own.

"Football did not appear out of nowhere in 1863," says Marco Fazzone, managing director of the FIFA Museum in Zurich. "What happened in England was not the invention of play but the codification of one specific version of it."

Earlier games such as Japan's *kemari* or China's *cuju* were not direct ancestors of the modern sport, he explains, but "parallel expressions of the same human impulse" to play.

Kemari was played in Japan for more than a millennium. Cuju, documented in ancient China, existed in various forms for nearly 2,000 years and involved kicking a ball.

In Mesoamerican civilizations, in what is now Mexico and Central America, ball games carried ceremonial and symbolic meaning, with players propelling the ball using their hips.

In ancient Greece and Rome, written accounts describe ball games as part of daily life. Victorian reformers later pointed to Greek games such as *episkyros* as distant forerunners.

What England provided in the 19th century was not the instinct to play. It was structure.

That structure emerged in a society being reshaped

OPPOSITE: GETTY IMAGES; ABOVE: SANKEI/GETTY IMAGES

by industrialization and urban growth, where public schools were codifying sports and expanding railway networks were connecting towns and cities.

FORMALIZING THE MODERN GAME

By the mid-19th century, different English schools, universities and clubs were playing by their own variations of rules.

In 1863 solicitor Ebenezer Morley proposed the creation of a governing body to establish a unified code.

On October 26 that year, representatives from London-area clubs met at the Freemasons' Tavern and formed the Football Association. Over subsequent meetings, the "Laws of the Game" were agreed upon, and association football formally separated from rugby.

By 1871 the FA Cup was launched as the first organized national competition. In 1888, 12 clubs formed the Football League, the world's first professional league.

Standardized rules allowed clubs from different towns, and eventually different countries, to compete without confusion.

In an age of railways and expanding cities, football slotted neatly into the weekly rhythms of industrial life. The spread of Saturday half-day working hours in the late 19th century created new leisure time for working-class communities, helping turn football into a mass spectator sport in Britain's growing industrial cities.

But codification did not contain the game within England. The same networks that powered the British Empire carried its rules far beyond its shores.

From British ports, factories and schools, football spread. Engineers and traders introduced it to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Montevideo, Uruguay. Trade, migration and education networks carried it across Europe, Africa and Asia.

"By the late 19th century, clubs were already being founded in places like Argentina," Fazzone notes.

Football spread quickly across the rapidly growing cities of the region. "Port cities around South America, prior to the Panama Canal, especially, experienced intense urban growth," says Brenda Elsey, professor of history and Latin American studies at Hofstra University in New York.

In Brazil, for example, the game soon moved beyond elite clubs. Dockworkers and immigrants carried it into working-class communities, while

BELOW, RIGHT Hero dog Pickles sports a medal he was presented for recovering the stolen trophy in 1966.

The Dogged Pursuit of a Stolen Trophy

Sixty years ago, on July 30, 1966, England won its first and, to date, only World Cup title, defeating West Germany 4-2 at Wembley Stadium in London. Yet the host country's champion team almost wasn't able to hoist the trophy.

Not the real one, anyway.

Four months earlier, in the run-up to the tournament, Westminster Central Hall exhibited the Jules Rimet Trophy, a gold-plated silver statue of the Greek goddess Nike that had been awarded to winners since 1930. Then it was stolen from a display case.

Scotland Yard police arrested the thief when he tried to collect on a ransom demand of £15,000 (£362,720, or US $484,240, today). But they hadn't recovered the trophy. The panicked Football Association ordered a replica to be made.

A week after the theft, a border collie mix named Pickles, out for a walk with owner David Corbett, sniffed out a newspaper-wrapped object under a laurel bush. It was the abandoned trophy. Police cleared Corbett, and the replica was canceled.

Grateful officials invited Pickles and Corbett to a World Cup celebration dinner. A pet-food manufacturer named Pickles Dog of the Year, the National Canine Defence League awarded him a medal, and he even appeared in a film, "The Spy With a Cold Nose."

As for the trophy, it was given to Brazil following the country's third World Cup triumph in 1970. It was stolen from the Brazilian Football Confederation building in 1983 and hasn't been seen since.

The original World Cup trophy may be gone, but football fans still can explore this chapter of the game's history. Since 1997 the United Kingdom's National Football Museum in Manchester has displayed Pickles' collar.

Sources: BBC.com, HistoryExtra.com

LEFT FIFA President Jules Rimet arrives in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1930 to attend the first World Cup tournament. **BELOW** A young Pelé sets his sights on the ultimate prize: the Jules Rimet Trophy, circa 1958, when he helped Brazil win at just 17 years old.

factory owners, educators and early newspapers promoted it as a modern and disciplined sport. "Labor unions and working-class neighborhoods ultimately created the rituals that gave football its meaning," Elsey says, "and it became uncontrollable despite elites' best efforts."

In parts of Africa and Asia, the game took root in schools and urban communities. What began as a codified English pastime was adopted, adapted and claimed elsewhere.

Radnedge notes that independence movements amplified football's meaning. In newly sovereign African nations, he says, the sport emerged as "a declaration of new identity and national pride."

A similar dynamic unfolded across the Arab world. Football clubs and national teams often grew into symbols of community identity and political expression.

"Football became deeply embedded in social and political life in many regions for three main structural reasons: accessibility, institutional diffusion and political symbolism," says Mahfoud Amara, an expert on sports, society and politics in the Arab world at Qatar University. "As national federations joined FIFA and international competitions, the sport also became a powerful instrument of nation-building and international recognition."

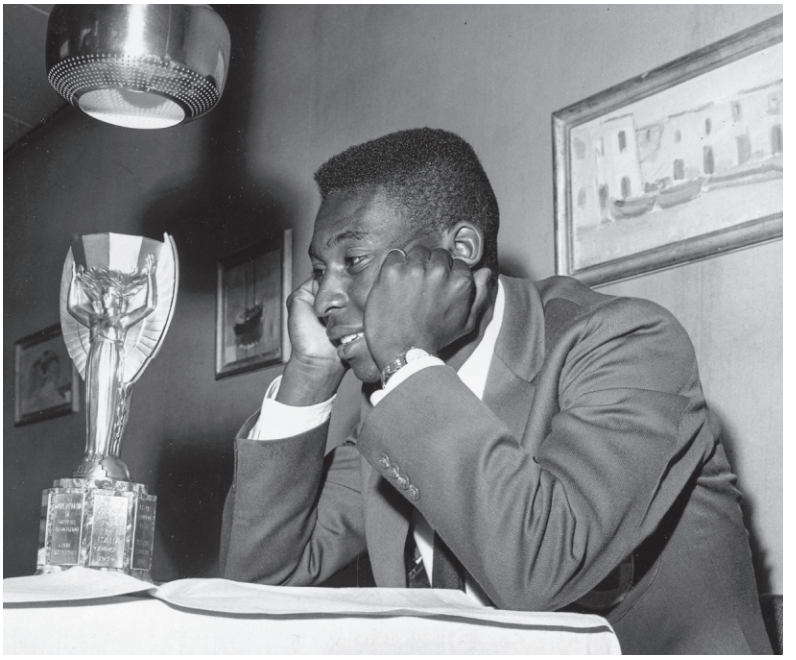
FORMATION OF FIFA

In 1904 representatives from seven European nations founded the Fédération Internationale de Football Association in Paris.

"When FIFA was founded, the priority was practical: to regulate cross-border matches," Fazzone explains. "In hindsight, it marked the moment when football began to organize itself internationally."

That ambition became visible in 1930, when the first men's World Cup was staged in Uruguay. Thirteen teams competed. By modern standards it was modest, yet it marked the beginning of an era.

"The first World Cup was far from guaranteed success," says Fazzone. "What changed everything was the decision to create a truly open world championship."



OPPOSITE: S&G/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES; TOP: HAYNES ARCHIVE/POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Pia Sundhage (7) of Sweden makes a run as Tone Haugen of Norway closes in during a semifinal of the Women's World Cup in 1991, the first year the women's tournament was held.

The final between Uruguay and Argentina captured the tournament's early drama. The teams used Argentina's ball in the first half and Uruguay's in the second. Uruguay's 4–2 victory crowned it the first world champion.

WORLD CUP AS GLOBAL RITUAL

After the interruption of World War II, the World Cup expanded. By 1950 in Brazil, it had grown into a mass spectacle.

Over the decades that followed, FIFA's membership expanded dramatically. Particularly during the decolonization era of the 1960s and 1970s, newly independent nations joined in large numbers. "As more nations joined FIFA, football became more democratized and less Eurocentric," Fazzone says.

Television accelerated its reach, turning it into a shared global moment.

Radnedge points to 1970 in Mexico as a turning point. "It was the first World Cup broadcast in color," he says. "Suddenly, seeing the green of the pitch, the colors of the shirts brought football to life."

> "[The World Cup] became a global ritual, a shared moment that brings nations together every four years."
>
> —MARCO FAZZONE

With Brazilian forward Pelé at its center, Radnedge continues, "the World Cup exploded into people's faces. Nothing since then has been the same."

As broadcasting technology improved, it was not only the colors that traveled. The sound of stadium chants, drums and, decades later, the vuvuzelas of South Africa in 2010 carried the atmosphere of the game into living rooms around the world.

Qualification now involves more than 200 national associations. Only eight nations have won the men's World Cup, with Brazil the most successful, holding five titles.

Yet the tournament's power lies beyond statistics. For many countries, participation alone carries symbolic weight, a moment of visibility on a global stage.

Morocco's run to the semifinals of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar offered a vivid example. As the first Arab and African nation to reach that stage of the tournament, victories over Spain and Portugal sparked celebrations across the Arab world and Africa. As Amara notes, such moments can become "an arena where multiple identities—national, ethnic and regional—are articulated and negotiated."

"It became a global ritual," says Fazzone, "a shared moment that brings nations together every four years."

Football's history has not always been inclusive.

Women were playing organized matches by the 1880s. More than 50,000 spectators attended a women's match at Liverpool, England's Goodison Park in 1920 before institutional resistance set the game back decades.

In 1921 the English FA banned women from playing on its grounds, declaring the game "quite unsuitable for females." The ban remained until 1971.

From local grounds to vast modern arenas, stadiums remain places where communities gather, argue and celebrate together, including the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, where the United States hosted the 1994 World Cup final. Brazil's victory over Italy marked the first time the World Cup was decided on penalty kicks.

"The establishment of the FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991 and the inclusion of women's football in the Olympic Games in 1996 were defining milestones," says Fazzone. Since then, growth has accelerated significantly.

The 2019 Women's World Cup was watched by more than 1 billion people worldwide. In 2023 total tournament attendance reached nearly 2 million, with 75,784 spectators at the final in Sydney. In 2018, the Ballon d'Or Féminin was introduced to recognize the world's best female player.

PROFESSIONALISM AND MEDIA POWER

If the 19th century gave football its unified rules, the late 20th century gave it global media reach.

The formation of England's Premier League in 1992, underpinned by a £304 million (£816 million, or US $1.08 billion today) broadcast deal with the satellite television company Sky, reshaped the domestic game and signaled the power of television money. Today the league is broadcast in more than 180 countries.

Satellite television, combined with the 1995 Bosman ruling that liberalized player movement within Europe, reshaped football's labor market.

As Radnedge puts it, "all these different strands came together into what you have nowadays with football: a global beast."

Yet commercial expansion did not erase the sport's local roots.

"Football is simple," Fazzone says. "You can play in a stadium or with jumpers for goalposts in an open space. Anyone, anywhere, can play."

That simplicity helps explain why the game settled so deeply into everyday life.

What began in a London tavern now shapes weekly routines across the world.

Supporters inherit allegiances from parents and grandparents. Rivalries spill into workplaces and family dinners. Shirts and scarves signal belonging.

From local grounds to vast modern arenas, stadiums remain places where communities gather, argue and celebrate together.

Radnedge describes sitting beside the same Tottenham supporter and his two sons for years. "I don't know his name, where he lives or what he does," he says. "But for those two hours on a Saturday afternoon, we are on the same level."

As the sons have grown taller, the ritual has endured. "Ninety-nine percent of football is amateur," he reflects. "That's really the cultural root."

In Lagos, five-a-side games spill out onto neighborhood streets and local pitches. In Buenos Aires, murals of football heroes turn city walls into galleries. In Cairo, Casablanca and Riyadh, cafés fill for European finals. In Tokyo and Dubai, youth academies train the next generation. In Manchester, London and beyond, weekend fixtures remain markers in the calendar.

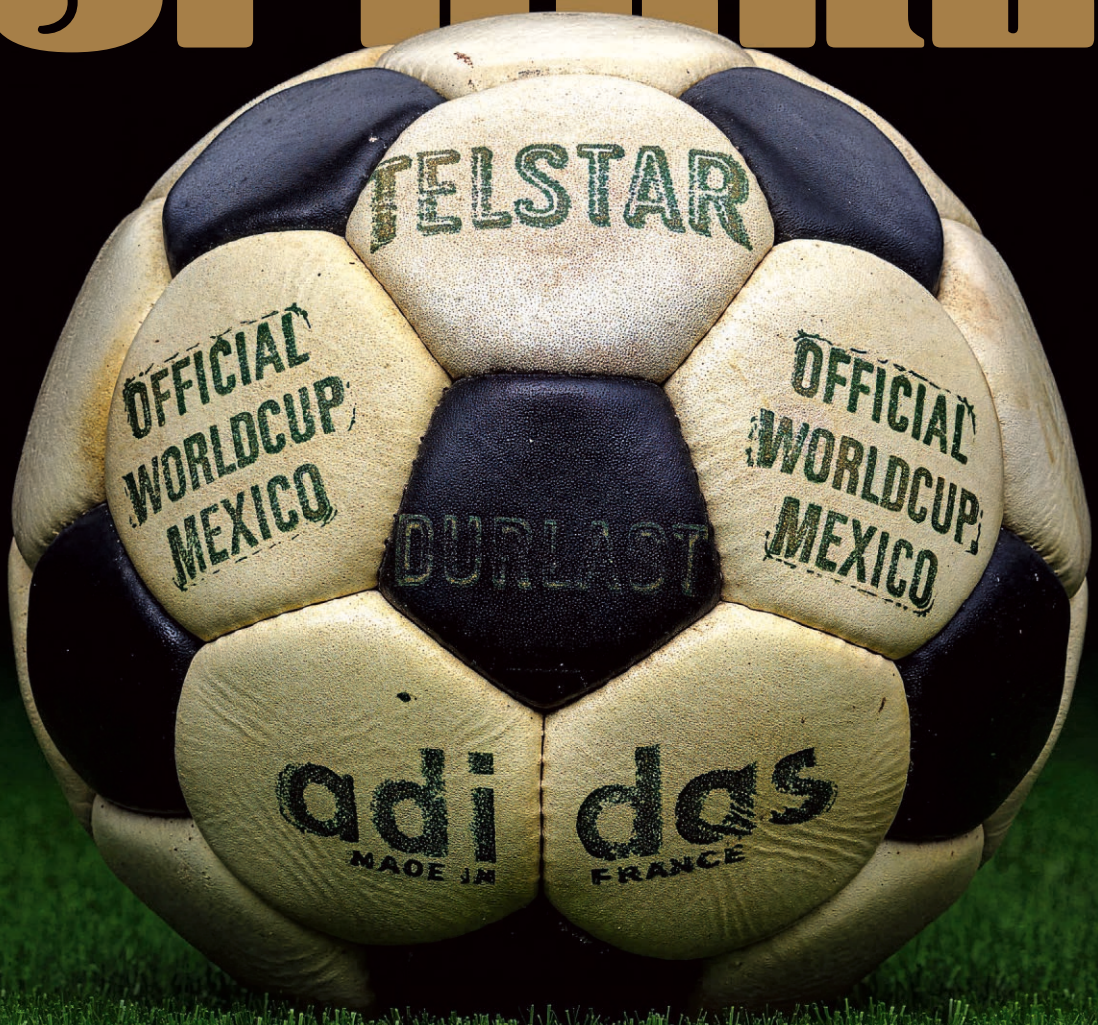
"That is the magic of football," says Fazzone. "It belongs to everyone."

The rules were settled in England. The story has been written everywhere. AW

Richard Parr is a London-based freelance journalist, producer and broadcaster with more than two decades of experience in sports media. His work has appeared on CNN, Al Jazeera and Sky Sports.

OPPOSITE: BOB THOMAS VIA GETTY IMAGES; ABOVE: MIKE POWELL/ALLSPORT

THE QUEST FOR A PERFECT SPHERE



Craft and Engineering Roll On in Ever-Evolving Ball

WRITTEN BY SUNNIYA AHMAD PIRZADA

ABOVE Adidas produced the first black-and-white ball, called Telstar, for the FIFA World Cup in 1970. Its name—a marriage of "television" and "star"—alluded to how the ball's contrasting pattern would amplify its visibility on TV.

The football looks simple. It isn't. Before it was tracked, engineered and analyzed, the ball used to play the game was something far less refined.

In medieval England, where the sport is rooted, a ball was little more than stitched leather packed with moss or cork, or an inflated pig's bladder wrapped in hide—rarely round and never uniform.

When the modern game began to take form in the 19th century, its laws made no mention of the ball's size or weight; teams simply agreed among themselves.

Gradually, the ball took on a more standardized circumference of 68-70 centimeters and weight of 410-450 grams, measurements that have remained remarkably stable ever since.

Yet while these measurements have remained largely unchanged, the ball itself has continued to evolve. Its materials, construction and behavior have been quietly reshaping how the game is played.

Today's football is one of the most carefully engineered objects in sport. Its surface, its seams—even the invisible air moving around it—are tested so that refinements can be made. And yet, at its core, the process remains an attempt to solve a problem that still exists.

"We know what a sphere is mathematically," says sports physicist John Eric Goff. "But physically, making every point exactly the same distance from the center—we've never been able to do that."

IN THE FACTORY

Long before it reaches a pitch, the ball begins its life like the pieces of a puzzle.

In Sialkot, a city in northeastern Pakistan that produces 70 percent of the world's footballs, according to Bloomberg, panels are cut, arranged and joined

Long before embedded microchips and meticulous engineering transformed the game, simple leather construction and hand-stitching defined balls such as that displayed with vintage boots at Beamish Open Air Museum in Durham, England.

OPPOSITE: PETER PESTI/GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE: DEA/S. VANNINI/GETTY IMAGES

A worker inserts a hose into the valve of an Adidas AG "Brazuca" soccer ball in a thermo-bonding molding machine at the Forward Sports factory in Sialkot, Pakistan.

with a precision that is learned over years. The process is repetitive and exacting, shaped as much by muscle memory as by instruction.

"We stitch the ball inside out so the seams are strong and don't show," Sughran Bibi, a senior worker in Sialkot, explains, describing a technique that has changed little since the early 1900s, even as materials have.

Workers pull waxed thread tightly by hand through layers of synthetic material, panel by panel, until the shape begins to emerge. Experience matters, so in some workshops, the final panels are left to the most skilled workers.

"The last part needs more strength," says Ayesha, another stitcher, who gave just her first name.

Even as manufacturing has modernized, these techniques remain embedded in the work. For many families, the craft is passed down through observation and repetition, without formal training.

Over time, machines introduced consistency, but human expertise remained essential.

From the late 19th century until the 1960s, workers in Pakistan constructed footballs from thick panels of local leather, stitched around a rubber bladder. In wet conditions, they absorbed water, becoming heavier and harder to control.

That began to change with the mass production of modern balls by companies like Nike, Puma, Mitre and Adidas, the latter of which has been creating World Cup tournament balls since 1970. As materials improved and synthetic coatings replaced leather, another, less visible change began to reshape the ball. With manufacturers searching for greater consistency and durability, the way the panels were joined became a new focus.

That shift led to the development of thermo-bonding, in which heat rather than thread fuses panels, creating a smoother surface and a more uniform structure.

"Thermo-bonding helps keep it dry and consistent," Goff explains. "Even a little bit of moisture changes how the ball flies and feels."

That transition was not seamless.

"The biggest challenge was moving away from hand stitching," says Khawaja Masood Akhtar, CEO of Sialkot-based Forward Sports, one of the world's leading football manufacturers. It produces 15 million footballs each year, including those for World Cup tournaments. "There were far too many balls being rejected at first. That was our worst time."

Quality control for newly made footballs, such as this one being made ahead of the 2014 World Cup, include checking their seams and weight.

Now he takes pride in the factory's automation processes being "second to none."

"We're using laser-cutting technology. We are using robots. ... Printing has moved to automated machines too. It requires someone to initially feed the design and then step back and let it do its magic," Akhtar explains.

New materials behaved differently, requiring new processes and skills. Workers who had spent years perfecting one method had to adapt. Over time, machines introduced consistency, but human expertise remained essential.

SHIFTING DESIGNS

For much of the 20th century, the football settled into a familiar design of 32 stitched panels arranged in pentagons and hexagons. That pattern became iconic with the introduction of the Telstar ball in 1970, named after a communications satellite. Its black-and-white panels were designed for visibility on television sets of that era.

The real story, though, lies not in how the ball looks, but in how it travels.

"The ball that really launched my career was the Jabulani," Goff says, referring to the official match ball of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Jabulani means "to celebrate" in isiZulu, a Southern Bantu language.

With just eight panels, it marked a dramatic shift away from tradition.

Fewer panels meant fewer seams and a smoother surface. That smoothness altered how the ball interacted with the air around it. At certain speeds, airflow around a ball can change suddenly—a phenomenon known as a drag crisis. When that happens, the ball slows and drops more sharply than expected.

"With the Jabulani, that transition happened at the kinds of speeds you see in long kicks," Goff explains. "So it could suddenly decelerate in a way players weren't used to."

For players the effect was immediate.

"It's almost like hitting a beach ball," says Mark Overall, a goalkeeping scout who has worked across European and African football. "The ball just keeps moving."

Overall has seen how these changes have altered the role of the goalkeeper. "When I was growing up,

"Now you see goalkeepers parrying more because the ball moves so much in the air."

—MARK OVERALL

OPPOSITE: ASAD ZAIDI/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES; ABOVE: AAMIR QURESHI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

RIGHT French midfielder Zinedine Zidane, right, dribbles the ball featuring colors—a first for the World Cup—around Brazilian defender Cafu (2), left, and midfielder Leonardo Araújo during the 1998 final in France. Recent generations of balls introduced more surface texture to stabilize airflow. **BELOW** The official match ball of 2026, the Trionda—which in Spanish means "three waves"—honors the first World Cup ever to be hosted by three nations.

we were taught to catch everything," he says. "Now you see goalkeepers parrying more because the ball moves so much in the air.

"The modern ball is more aerodynamically refined," he continues. "Advances in surface texture and construction allow players to generate speed and control more efficiently."

For outfield players, the differences are just as nuanced.

"The lighter ones can be pinging everywhere," says Monica Bowley, an English women's club captain. "Especially when it's wet—they're more plasticky, they slide more, and the pace along the ground is much faster."

By contrast, more textured balls behave differently. "They've got more grip," she explains. "They take a bit of speed off, so you can feel the pass better."

These are small differences, she says, but they have a cumulative effect. Surface texture, material, even the type of pitch all influence how the ball moves and how players interpret it.

"It depends on the [playing] surface as well," Bowley adds. "On a third-generation pitch [artificial grass], it can just float across, but on grass it might bobble or slow down."

The ball is always in conversation with its environment.

> "There's still room to adjust aerodynamics through surface design."
>
> —JOHN ERIC GOFF

BEYOND THE PANEL

In recent years, designers have pushed panel numbers down ever lower—from 32 to eight, then six, and now as few as four on the Trionda, this year's World Cup ball.

At first glance, this suggests a smoother, less stable ball. But advances in surface engineering have compensated for that. Grooves, textures and seam placement now play a more significant role than panel count alone.

"The goal is consistency," Goff says. "Players want the ball to behave in ways they expect."

That consistency is not just a technical objective but also a response to experience. When a ball behaves unpredictably, it disrupts the rhythm of the game. Modern designs aim to avoid that. After the Jabulani, subsequent balls introduced more surface texture to stabilize airflow. The changes are subtle, but at the highest level, subtlety matters.

"Elite players can detect these differences immediately," Goff says. "We're nearing limits in terms of panel reduction—you can't go below one panel. But there's still room to adjust aerodynamics through surface design."

Ultimately, any major change would need to be driven by players, fans and governing bodies.

"[Manufacturers] can only go so far," Overall notes. "You can't keep making it lighter forever. At some point, the game decides what it should be."

But upgraded technology introduced by Adidas is going to impact the ball beyond its flight and movement.

The Trionda contains an embedded sensor within a panel, as opposed to the center, that tracks movement and transmits data in real time. These systems can detect the exact moment the ball is struck, providing officials with precise information to support decisions such as offside calls.

"It's sending out a signal 500 times a second," Goff says.

At only a couple of grams, the microchip is barely detectable, he adds. The ball still looks the same, but it now carries information as well as motion.

From workshops and factories, the ball travels across continents—kicked on local pitches and training grounds, and in the world's largest stadiums. By then, it has passed through many hands and many ideas: shaped by craft, refined by engineering, tested by science and interpreted by players.

It is, in the end, still an imperfect object, one that has never been made entirely uniform—and perhaps never will be. For those who made it, that journey remains both distant and personal.

"When we see the ball on TV, it gives us immense pleasure," Bibi says. "We know it started in our hands." AW

Sunniya Ahmad Pirzada is a Peabody Award-winning journalist whose work focuses on the intersection of race, class and gender and how it impacts people and societies around the world.

OPPOSITETOP: OLIVER BERG/PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES; BELOW: CLAUDIO VILLA/FIGC/FIGC VIA GETTY IMAGES

4 BOOKS

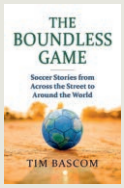
To Deepen Your World Cup Experience

Written by ZORA HUDSON

Football may be the world's biggest game, but it is also thousands of smaller ones—played in dusty courtyards and abandoned lots, remembered in faded photographs, argued over in cafes and sung about in many languages. As the 2026 World Cup approaches, these four books explore how the sport travels across cultures, shaping art, identity and memory far beyond the stadium. Together they remind us that football is not simply entertainment but a carrier of the human experience.

1 The Boundless Game: Soccer Stores From Across the Street to Around the World

TIM BASCOM



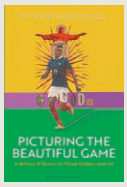
From red-earth pitches in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to university fields in Kansas, US, football has followed Tim Bascom across continents. In this collection of essays, the lifelong player and prolific author moves among memoir, cultural history and personal encounters on fields around the world.

Whether playing with Mexican immigrants in Chicago, United States, or boys in Soweto, South Africa, Bascom discovers how the sport creates moments of connection between strangers and holds together generations of families.

The stories paint a portrait of football as a shared human ritual capable of bridging language, geography and circumstance through the simple act of playing together. Warm, cross-cultural and deeply humanistic, Bascom's work becomes a living case study of the connection football fosters across the widest cultural distances.

2 Picturing the Beautiful Game: A History of Soccer in Visual Culture and Art

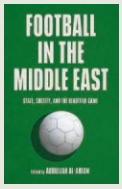
DANIEL HAXALL, ED.



This richly illustrated anthology explores how football has been seen, drawn and interpreted across visual culture—from early newspaper illustrations to contemporary art and digital media. Haxall organizes the chapters around themes such as memory, politics, gender and commercialism to examine how artists and photographers have responded to the sport across different eras and societies. In this book, readers begin to see that how football is pictured often reveals as much about society as it does about how the game itself was played, and how it continues to be remembered.

3 Football in the Middle East: State, Society, and the Beautiful Game

ABDULLAH AL-ARIAN, ED.



In this collection, historian Abdullah Al-Arian brings together 12 scholars to examine football across North Africa, the Levant and the Arabian Gulf. In the process the authors reveal how the sport has shaped public life across the region. Rather than presenting the Middle East as a single story, the essays explore distinct national experiences—from Egypt's early football culture to stadium rivalries, fan traditions and club identities that have developed in countries such as Jordan, Algeria, Türkiye and in the Gulf.

Together the contributors show how football has become a powerful arena for belonging, expression and collective memory.

4 The Power and the Glory: The History of the World Cup

JONATHAN WILSON

Jonathan Wilson, a freelance columnist covering the sport of football, traces the World Cup from its modest beginnings in 1930 to the vast global spectacle it has become. Along the way, he situates the tournament within the political and cultural moments that have shaped it—from Benito Mussolini's use of the 1934 competition as propaganda to the rise of modern football celebrities and the globalization of the game.

Wilson shows how the World Cup often mirrors the world beyond the stadium, reflecting shifting ideas about nationalism and identity. As the tournament prepares to expand to 48 teams in 2026, his work offers valuable perspective on football's greatest stage and on the global forces that continue to impact it.


ART
THE
Beautiful Game AS Muse
FOOTBALL INSPIRES ART ACROSS CONTINENTS
WRITTEN BY
JACKY ROWLAND

Stooped figures huddle into their overcoats as they make their way toward a football stadium. Under an overcast sky, they come in the hundreds, converging from every direction.

The stands are beginning to fill with spectators, yet there is barely a glimpse of the football pitch itself.

In the distance lie the faint outlines of an industrial landscape—mills, factories and towering smokestacks.

This is the scene depicted in "Going to the Match," probably the best-known work by British artist L. S. Lowry. It captures the pre-match atmosphere of northern England in the mid-20th century.

"I think Lowry is much more interested in the ritual and gathering-together of people than the football match itself," said Claire Stewart, curator of The Lowry Collection in Salford, northern England, where the painting is on display.

"Maybe the stadiums have changed, the prices have gone up, and the food is better. But the picture captures that feeling of anticipation that hasn't changed over the years."

Football is arguably the most popular sport on the planet, arousing strong and conflicting emotions. For artists, the game offers fertile ground, concentrating into 90 minutes a wide spectrum of human experience.

That universality is what makes football such a powerful subject for visual culture ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the first to be hosted across three countries: the United States, Canada and Mexico.

PRIDE ACROSS ART FORMS

Along with the tournament posters of each host city, the official tournament poster offers a prime example of this visual culture. A unique collaboration among artists from the three host nations, it brings together indigenous heritage, urban street art and national colors to express their distinct identities and cultural connections.

Additionally, with the World Cup expanding to 48 teams, Africa is seeing its largest-ever participation. Those countries' kit designs reflect the continent's rich and diverse culture.

The angular black patterns on Egypt's red shirt evoke ancient hieroglyphics, while Morocco's away kit draws on the country's distinctive geometric tile work. South Africa's kit pays subtle tribute to its 12 official languages.

ART INSIDE THE GAME

A huge shimmering bowl of glass and steel rises above a busy street in north London, as if a flying saucer has landed among the kebab shops and grocery stores.

ABOVE British artist L. S. Lowry's "Going to the Match" captures the timeless feeling of anticipation for football matches. **OPPOSITE** Muralists Juandrés Vera, Dazer Ramírez and Peter Westerink's optical illusion lends a worn pair of football boots a 3D effect in Salamanca, Mexico.

TOP: STEPHEN POND/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: @"TRIBUTE" BY JUANDRÉS VERA FEAT. DAZER RAMÍREZ & PETER WESTERINK, SALAMANCA, MEXICO

Contemporary art at OOF Gallery, within the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium complex in north London, includes football-themed pieces such as "Victoria 2008" by Marcus Harvey, **ABOVE**, and a series of charcoal drawings and plywood footballer sculptures by Leyman Lahcine, **LEFT**.

Tottenham Hotspur Stadium boasts high-tech innovations such as a retractable grass pitch. The stadium complex is also the unlikely setting for a contemporary art space—OOF gallery—dedicated to the intersection of art and football.

"I had a passion for football and a passion for art, but they were kept totally separate," said Eddy Frankel, art critic and co-founder of OOF Gallery.

When he began delving into art history, he realized that artists had been using versions of football in their work for centuries. This grew into the idea of a publication that would bring those two passions together.

Frankel launched OOF magazine in 2018 in

TOP: INSTALLATION VIEW OF "BALLS" AT OOF GALLERY, 2021. ©MARCUS HARVEY, SARAH LUCAS, PAUL DELLER AND DARIO ESCOBAR/COURTESY OF OOF GALLERY; BOTTOM: ©LEYMAN LAHCINE/COURTESY OF OOF GALLERY

collaboration with gallerists Jennie and Justin Hammond. After staging pop-up exhibitions around London, the trio opened OOF Gallery in 2021.

"We're interested in artists who use football as a metaphor to talk about other things," said Frankel.

"Football is a microcosm of wider society. Everything that happens on a football pitch also happens in the real world."

That idea—football as a lens through which to explore wider human experience—runs through the work of many contemporary artists.

American-born artist Paine Proffitt discovered football in 1994 after moving to England as a student.

Many of his paintings have a naive, almost comic-strip quality: fans wearing bobble hats and scarves, supporters yelling instructions from the sidelines, spectators standing in the freezing rain.

"Frustration, anger, deflation and disappointment are par for the course," Proffitt said. "Of course, it makes the excitement that much more enjoyable when your team does well. It's those deep feelings that make the game what it is—and find their way onto the canvas."

RIGHT Each 2026 World Cup host city has styled its official FIFA poster with colors and symbols reflecting identity and pride, including this one from Monterrey, Mexico. **BELOW** Tigres team fans choreograph placards to become living art in the form of a tiger *tifo* at a Liga MX Clausura match against Monterrey.

JULIO CESAR AGUILAR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

SURREALIST EXPRESSIONS OF FOOTBALL

While Lowry painted football as part of everyday life, surrealist artists took a very different approach. Rejecting straightforward representation, they turned instead to dreamlike imagery and unexpected juxtapositions to explore states of mind.

In posters designed for the 75th anniversary of the Spanish club FC Barcelona in 1974, Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró offered strikingly different interpretations of the game.

Using pen and ink, Dalí transformed the footballer into an otherworldly figure with a hollow carved from its heart, through which the Barcelona crest can be seen. The surreal symbolism elevates both the sport and the club to mythic status.

"Dalí was particularly interested in the sense of belonging and the collective passion that football arouses," said Montse Aguer, director of the Centre for Dalinian Studies in Figueres, Spain.

By contrast, Miró condensed the game into a black insectlike creature bearing the club's crest on its back.

Miró later designed the official poster for the 1982 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Spain, using vibrant colors to transform a sporting event into a celebration.

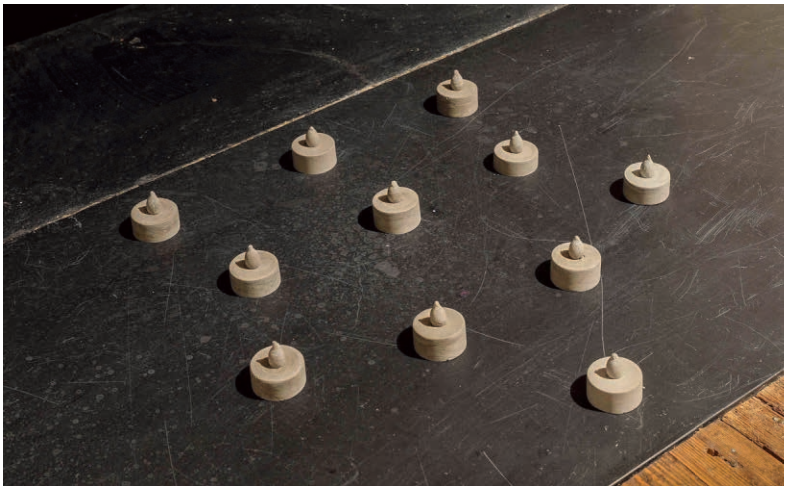
"The poster reveals a compelling dynamism that is both visually striking and conceptually rich," said Elena Escolar, a curator at the Miró Foundation in Barcelona.

"The central figure, with arms raised toward the sun-ball, suggests a connection between humanity and the cosmic—perhaps reflecting the universal spirit of the sport."

Today, artists across the globe are reinterpreting those ideas in different media and environments.

During a residency at OOF Gallery, Leyman Lahcine, a London-based French artist of Algerian heritage, created a series of charcoal drawings and plywood footballer sculptures inspired by string puppets.

"I was interested in that violent, aggressive instinct that is needed to compete in football at a high level," Lahcine said. "I created a link with the puppet—as if that instinct was the puppeteer, pulling the player's strings."



BELOW FC Barcelona's Football Museum offers an immersive tour. This type of museum has popped up around the globe—from Germany to Brazil to Spain.
BOTTOM "Communion," by AC Larsen and displayed at OOF Gallery, replicates with 11 tea lights cast in concrete the winning formation England used at the UEFA Women's Euro 2025.

GROUP WORKS AND 'OLDER SPIRIT OF FOOTBALL'

Football can inspire large collectives as well as individual artists.

One global phenomenon finds groups of supporters turning stadium terraces into living artworks with their vast choreographed displays known as *tifos*. From Mexico's Tigres UANL football club of Monterrey to Tunisia's Espérance Sportive de Tunis, fans use banners or colored cards to create giant human mosaics that pulsate with emotion and identity.

Back in Barcelona, the sound of skateboard wheels ricochets off the concrete in a small urban park. Street artists have covered the surrounding walls in murals that sometimes last only days before someone paints over them.

"The street is a living gallery," said Juandrés Vera, a Mexican street artist based in the city.

Working with two other artists, Dazer Ramírez and Peter Westerink, Vera created a mural in Mexico depicting a pair of dirty football boots hanging by their laces. An optical illusion makes the boots appear three dimensional when viewed from a certain angle.

"Football—even at a professional level—used to be about playing the game," Vera said. "Nowadays it can feel more about money and merchandising. So we painted these boots from the last century as an homage to that older spirit of football."

Street art in the United States and Canada often reflects local identity, social issues and music culture. While football is not a dominant subject, its presence is growing as the sport gains popularity across North America.

Around the world, artists have responded in

Carrer dels Agullers, a street in the Ciutat Vella historical district of Barcelona, Spain, that housed artisans and manufacturers, bears a mural of revered football figure Diego Maradona. The game has inspired artists across media and regions—and will continue to do so for generations.

different ways to the challenge of translating football's kinetic energy into static art forms.

"Any Wintry Afternoon in England"—a 1930 painting by C. R. W. Nevinson—made such an impact on Proffitt that he adopted a futurist style for several years.

"Futurism is all about breaking up the canvas with movement—for example, a player kicking, with his leg painted several times in fading tracer lines," he said.

"Now I mostly just pick a pose of action—kicking, heading, tackling—and that translates the movement onto the canvas."

British artist Emma Cousin grew up in a family of devoted football fans and became fascinated by how the game inspires intense loyalty and extremes of emotion.

She studied video footage of players, both male and female, to explore how that passion manifests itself physically.

"There's a buildup of tension in the body," Cousin said. "I became interested in seeing the deformation of the face—an expression that looks like anguish but is actually deep connection, love and joy."

Cousin's painting "Hard Side Part Undercut" featured in an exhibition organized by the founders of OOF to coincide with the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup.

The work depicts an imagined collision of female players with such force and energy that the figures appear almost to shoot off the canvas.

"I've exaggerated the shape of these bodies because I want them to be flying or falling in different directions," Cousin said. "These forms are both heavy and weightless at the same time."

WOMEN'S GAME AS INSPIRATION

Women's football inspired British sculptor AC Larsen to create "Communion"—11 tea lights cast in concrete and arranged in the winning formation used by England at the UEFA Women's Euro 2025. (UEFA is the Union of European Football Associations, the sport's governing body in Europe.)

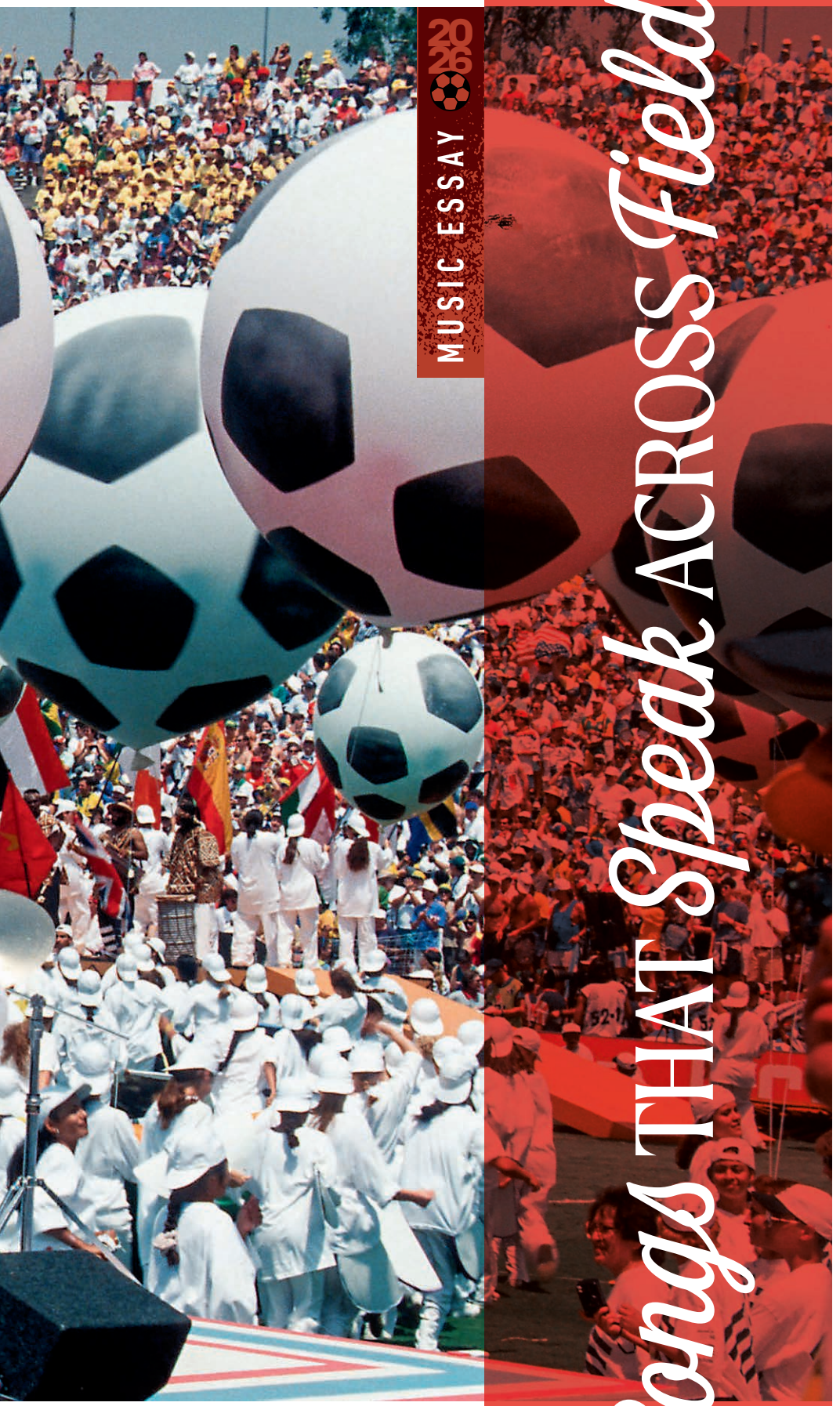
"I took this flame—something delicate and impermanent in real life—and cast it in concrete to give it weight," said Larsen.

"For me, it symbolizes hope."

Football continues to offer artists something rare: a shared experience powerful enough to hold beauty, belief and contradiction all at once: whether in the shadow of northern factories, on the walls of a southern city or in the shifting identities of a global game. AW

Based in London and Paris, **Jacky Rowland** is an actor, playwright and broadcaster who writes about art, theater, music and culture. She is a former correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation and Al Jazeera English.


14



MUSIC ESSAY 2026

Songs That Speak ACROSS Fields

HOW FOOTBALL'S *Global Soundtrack* BECAME THE GAME'S *Second Language*

WRITTEN BY ANDREW DANSBY

For just a moment, put aside thoughts of football and just consider the global reach of "Waka Waka (This Time for Africa)," the official song of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. Sixteen years after its release, Colombian pop star Shakira's song has been streamed more than 1 billion times, a fraction of its viewings on YouTube, prompting the Guinness Book of World Records in 2025 to designate it the World Cup's most popular song. This serves as a reminder of how deeply music has become embedded in the football tournament's identity.

Over more than two decades covering music, I've seen how songs like this come to define events that extend far beyond the stadium.

Consider the architecture behind "Waka Waka"—because it takes a village to create a pop song. Shakira, who boasts Lebanese ancestry, co-wrote it with producer John Hill, and they brought in Freshlyground, a South African band to add instrumentation. What was born was a multilingual, multicultural marvel of a song in Spanish, Xhosa (an indigenous South African language) and English with musical elements from the Congo, Cameroon, the Caribbean and South America.

It became a kind of global collaboration—a soundtrack built to reflect the scale of the tournament itself.

That approach has only expanded over time. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar—the first held in the Arab world—pushed it further, foregrounding artists from across the Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

PREVIOUS PAGES During each World Cup, people around the globe commune not only over the game but also over its music—sharing its pulses, chants and melodies in homes and arenas, including at the closing ceremony in 1994 in Los Angeles.

RIGHT Jung Kook, left, of South Korean band BTS and Qatari singer Fahad Al Kubaisi sing "Dreamers" during the opening ceremony of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

OPPOSITE TOP Colombian singer Shakira is joined by mascot Zakumi, ahead of the 2010 World Cup final in Soweto, a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa. The singer performed the World Cup anthem "Waka Waka" to open and close the tournament.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Members of German reggae/ragga band Seeed perform during opening festivities in 2006 at Munich's World Cup Stadium.

A GAME YOU HEAR AS MUCH AS SEE

Music and football have been intertwined since the game's earliest organized forms in 19th-century England, where chants and songs emerged alongside the sport itself. Long before the World Cup existed, football fans were already using music to create atmosphere, identity and belonging.

From the outset, football was as much something you heard as something you watched—a pattern that holds just as true in English terraces as it does in North African stadiums or Arabian Gulf arenas, where drums and chants shape the rhythm of the game.

The two, music and football, feel like natural counterparts. Confronted with silence, we tap out a rhythm. Presented with a spherical object on the ground, we kick.

Both rely on structure while leaving space for improvisation. Both can quicken the heart and cross language barriers. It stands to reason that these impulses—for song and for sport—would evolve together over time.

That connection, though, is not a single tradition so much as a collection of many. As David Goldblatt, the football historian and author of *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Football*, told me, football operates at multiple levels—from global spectacle to grassroots play—but music runs through them all.

"We often speak of football meaning the male professional spectacle," he says. "But you have women playing professional football. The game reaches all parts of the world. It's also a grassroots sport with kids kicking a ball around the pitch in South London. But obviously there's a lot of singing in football in all different cultures. ... When we speak of music and football, it's a varied thing."

Back in Uruguay in 1930, that synergy was more modest. The first World Cup was composed of 13 teams in an era of less advanced international travel. Due to inclement weather, Egypt literally missed its boat, leaving Africa without representation. But seven nations from South America, two from North America and four from Europe convened in Montevideo, where Uruguayan singer José "Pepino" Ministeri's performance of "Uruguayos Campeones"—widely considered the first World Cup song—introduced the world to the sounds of the host nation.

From these modest beginnings, the relationship between football and music grew steadily more elaborate. By the late 20th century, FIFA had begun commissioning official songs and anthems for each tournament, transforming the World Cup into one of the world's most visible musical stages.

Today the game is immersed in sound. Music envelops players as they emerge onto the pitch. When the game rests, music fills the void, inside stadiums, on broadcasts, in public spaces.

Goldblatt cites Pelé, the football icon and World Cup champion who also released an album of songs in 1977. He also mentions English internationals Glenn Hoddle and Chris Waddle, who scored a hit between them with "Diamond Lights" a decade later. These examples are curiosities, but they point to the porous boundary between sport and music.

Of course, not all of football's most enduring songs are tied to victory.

> "There's a lot of singing in football in all different cultures. ... When we speak of music and football, it's a varied thing."
>
> —DAVID GOLDBLATT

PREVIOUS PAGES: LUTZ BONGARTS/BONGARTS/GETTY IMAGES; ABOVE: EVRIM AYDIN/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

Mariano Siskind, a Harvard University professor who studies the cultural and emotional dimensions of the game, points to "Un'Estate Italiana," the official song of the 1990 World Cup in Italy, as a particularly powerful example.

"I was 17 at the time, and that was a mythical moment for [Diego] Maradona and the Argentinian national team," says Siskind, who grew up in Argentina. "That wasn't from a board room discussing Ricky Martin or Shakira or Robbie Williams. That was a piece of music that still explodes through Argentinian fans' hearts. If you play that song now in Argentina, even though it's in Italian, people will start crying and immediately sing in Italian and hug each other."

Siskind pauses, then begins singing the song himself. (The 1990 World Cup wasn't even Argentina's year. The defending champion lost to West Germany.) As FIFA's musical ambitions expanded, the most enduring songs often emerged from outside official channels.

"If you have a melody that sticks, fans will change the lyrics, and suddenly they've created an anthem that fans chant," Siskind says. "You see this in the U.K. in general, and it's becoming more common around the world.

"Football is such an effective medium. It's football, of course, but it's not just football. There's music and language that go with it. All these cultural things. So you have this manufactured globality in some music. But you also have songs invented by fans, which is local [as a phenomenon] and resonates in a different way with people that gets replicated in different cultures around the world."

In that sense, the World Cup's soundtrack operates on two levels at once. There are the official songs—carefully produced, globally distributed—and then there are the ones that rise organically from the stands, reshaped and reinterpreted by supporters.

Both travel. Both endure. And together they form a kind of parallel language to the game itself.

FROM THE MIDDLE EAST TO THE WORLD

That language has expanded most visibly in recent tournaments. The opening ceremony at the last World Cup, held in Qatar, reflected that shift when South

TOP: STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: MICHAEL KAPPELER/DDP/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Korean pop star Jung Kook performed "Dreamers" alongside Qatari singer Fahad Al Kubaisi, underscoring the tournament's increasingly global musical identity.

That approach extended across the tournament's official songs, namely tracks "Hayya Hayya (Better Together)," performed by Davido, Aisha and Trinidad Cardona, and "Light the Sky," featuring artists including Nora Fatehi and Balqees—collaborations that brought together artists from across the Middle East and North Africa, placing regional voices within a global pop framework.

Beyond FIFA's official releases, Algerian raï singer Khaled—one of the most prominent figures in Arabic-language music—became part of the tournament's wider musical orbit, introducing global audiences to a sound shaped by North African traditions and carried across borders through migration and diaspora.

Raï—a folk music dating back more than a century—and football were natural counterparts, much like hip-hop and football are, as the Algerian music makes use of brisk tempos and leans heavily on percussion. Chants, raps, anthemic choruses: These are the short, sharp, repetitive spaces where music overcomes language barriers, much like the sport.

GLOBAL ANTHEMS AND LOCAL SOUNDSCAPES

This year's World Cup musical endeavor attempts to unify the sprawling host nations of North America: Canada, Mexico and the United States.

FIFA has commissioned musicians from each of the 16 host cities to remix a 2026 World Cup theme, "infusing it," according to the sport's governing body, "with the distinct rhythm, vibe and cultural essence" of each one's respective city. The result is an anthology that showcases the host regions, taking fans on a unique auditory journey.

Some contributors are well-known entities like Kansas City rapper Tech N9ne and, perhaps the most inspired choice for this year, DJ Jazzy Jeff representing Philadelphia. Other cities offered contemporary music, including electronic/DJ project Mexican Institute of Sound in Mexico City. And the DJ collective Bombón in Houston, whose "Screwmbia"—a nod to the late, legendary hip-hop producer DJ Screw and the African-influenced South American dance music known as cumbia—speaks both to the past and present of a multicultural city.

Michael "Buckamore" Arbizu provided the vocal parts for Bombón's signature remix. He describes the opportunity as a chance to plug into something

Carlos Santana, Alexandre Pires and Wyclef Jean perform "Dar um Jeito (We Will Find a Way)," the official anthem of the 2014 World Cup, during the closing ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Music is integral to the pageantry that opens World Cup tournaments. Opera singer Aida Garifullina rides the firebird, a mythical symbol of Russia, ahead of the country's first-round match against Saudi Arabia at the 2018 World Cup in Moscow.

grand and global.

"I remember being a kid around the hood, and all the other kids would play 'FIFA,'" Arbizu says of the popular video game. "To hear what Bombón put together and brought me in to do, it felt like this full-circle moment. That's what's magic about music and sports: They take you back to these memories of being little and seeing and hearing things. Soccer was so important to our community, so meaningful to our people."

Alongside these local musical projects, FIFA still presents a traditional global anthem—the kind designed to echo across stadiums and broadcasts.

This year's entry, "Desire," recorded by Robbie Williams and Nicole Scherzinger, follows a familiar template: a slow build into a chorus engineered for collective release.

The lyrics give off high school coach vibes at intermission: "You've got the goal," Williams sings, "And you're driven by desire."

Will it age into a classic? Not all World Cup songs are created equally, so we may not know for years.

But it ticks a lot of boxes.

Inspirational and aspirational -isms? "The dream is coming true!" Check.

Reference to the game itself? "It's a beautiful game." Check.

A wordless "whoah" or "oooh" within the chorus, a chant or such to send arms swaying upward? Check.

While songs like these are deliberately constructed for maximum impact, sometimes pop music sneaks into football lore. U2's "One" was a 1991 hit for the Irish rock band. Thanks to ESPN, the song was grafted to World Cups in 2006 and 2010 for its "One Game Changes Everything" campaign.

Frenchman Jean-Michel Jarre's "Rendezvous" was composed in the 1980s with space exploration in mind. A dozen years after its release, the piece was resurrected and remixed into "Rendez-Vous 98" for the 1998 World Cup television coverage.

Jarre told me in 2018, "You compose, and you bring pieces of music into this world, but you don't know where they will go. Sometimes they live their own lives. I didn't write 'Rendezvous' for the World Cup. But something about the music spoke to somebody, and it got a new life."

More often, though, putting music to an event like the World Cup is a deliberate pursuit, with the breadth required of a truly international event. The list of musicians who have left fingerprints on the World Cup is vast and varied and runs through styles of music past and present: Queen, Il Divo, Ozuna, Darryl Hall, Giorgio Moroder, Tears for Fears.

Sometimes the artist already has achieved cross-cultural success. So a Colombian like Shakira is tasked with reversing a Babel-esque series of distinctions between us to create a song of commonality, as captured in "Waka Waka."

There rests some of the allure of both music and the beautiful game. Each country brings with it a songbook of anthems, chants, cheers and the bright colors of a team's kits and flags. A global game, like music, allows room for such regional revelry. But it also provides spaces for us to tap out a tune or to kick a ball that has rolled toward our feet. Both remind us that for all our celebrated differences, we feel a pull toward the same shared experiences. AW

Andrew Dansby is a freelance writer who worked as a senior reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* and for *Rolling Stone*. His work has also appeared in *MOJO*, *NME*, *URB*, *XXL* and other publications.

OPPOSITE: POOL/GETTY IMAGES; ABOVE: CHRISTIAN CHARISIUS/PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES

FOOTBALL, FOOD *and the* TASTE *of* HOME

Three Communities, One World Cup

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL SHAGOURY

On the corner of Steinway Street and 25th Avenue in Queens, New York, the smell of grilled merguez spills out of a small Algerian sandwich shop called Merguez and Frites. Behind the counter, 22-year-old Soufian Mekersi turns sausages on the grill while a young helper drops fresh french fries into a large metal bowl. The grill hisses as the sausages cook while conversations drift in from the sidewalk outside.

Across North America, immigrant communities will experience the 2026 FIFA World Cup far from the countries that shaped their traditions. In restaurants, homes and neighborhood cafés, supporters will gather around televisions and shared meals, re-creating the rituals of watching football at home. Food travels easily across borders. The culture of celebration that surrounds the game does not always travel as easily.

In this part of Astoria, Queens—not far from the New Jersey stadium hosting eight matches—North Africa never feels very far away. Storefront signs appear in both Arabic and English, the smell of grilled chicken drifts from sidewalk stands, and pastry shops display trays of honey-soaked baklava as conversations move fluidly between Arabic, English and French.

The shop itself remains modest: a narrow countertop above a refrigerated display case filled with fresh meats, Algerian soft drinks, pickles and sandwich condiments. Mekersi runs the restaurant his father opened after emigrating from Algeria over 20 years ago. The signature dish reflects the street food he grew up around—a fresh baguette packed with merguez sausages, fries and harissa, finished with mayonnaise and spicy aioli.

Mekersi grew up with both the food and the culture surrounding it. At home, his father cooked the street foods he remembered from Algeria, where football anchors everyday life. As Mekersi explains it, the two rarely separate. "Football is Algeria," he says. "That's how I would describe it."

He remembers as a young child visiting family in Algiers, Algeria's capital, and seeing the game everywhere: children improvising fields in narrow streets, playing without nets or equipment, simply wherever space allowed.

"The passion extends to stadiums as well," Mekersi says. "I remember driving past the stadium and seeing the red flares and people in the streets. It was a big experience."

In Astoria, echoes of that atmosphere appear during international matches. When Algeria plays, Steinway Street transforms. Coffee shops fill with fans, hookah lounges turn into viewing rooms,

ABOVE Soufian Mekersi holds a tray of grilled merguez at Merguez and Frites, the café in Queens, New York, that his father opened after emigrating from Algeria. It is known locally for its sausages, french fries and harissa. **OPPOSITE** Merguez and Frites serves fresh mtelou, a traditional Algerian bread.

GREG KAHN

Senegalese residents across the Canadian province of Ontario plan to share the foods of home over World Cup matches being staged in Toronto.

and entire sections of the street become informal gathering spaces. "The whole block will be filled with Algerians," Mekersi says. "You would think it's a parade—but we're just watching a soccer game."

But Astoria is only one example.

Several hundred kilometers northwest, Toronto too will host six World Cup matches, including games featuring West African teams such as Senegal, Ghana and Ivory Coast. Within Toronto's Senegalese community, families are already preparing for gatherings that will accompany the tournament. Homes, restaurants and community spaces will fill with supporters watching matches together while sharing familiar foods.

Mamadou Ndaw, a project manager who moved to Canada in 2015 after growing up in Senegal, helps organize some of these gatherings through SenOntario, a group that supports Senegalese residents across Ontario. Founded in 2000, the organization helps connect a Senegalese community in the Greater Toronto Area with a growing Senegalese population. Although the community spreads across the region, football creates opportunities for people to come together.

"Football is one of the favorite sports in Senegal," says Ndaw, the organization's interim president. "It's part of our culture."

In Senegal, the sport extends far beyond professional leagues. Neighborhood tournaments known as *navétane* bring together local teams during school holidays, creating months of competition between districts and towns. Match days also carry their own food traditions. Vendors circulate through stadium crowds selling snacks that spectators share among friends and family—beignets, roasted groundnuts and chilled hibiscus juice known as bissap.

As the World Cup approaches, Senegalese families across Toronto plan similar gatherings. Yet some flavors remain difficult to re-create abroad. Ndaw points to roasted groundnuts prepared after the rainy season in Senegal, when the harvest produces a flavor difficult to replicate elsewhere.

"In Senegal, the groundnuts you get after a rainy season have a special taste," he says. "They are just better."

Meanwhile in Houston, the largest city in Texas and host to seven World Cup matches, families across Mexican American communities will gather around televisions to watch the same tournament. Match days often turn into communal events, with relatives and friends arriving throughout the game.

Chef Domenic Laurenzo, co-owner of the restaurant group LTO Cantina, grew up surrounded by Mexican American culinary history. His grandmother, the late Ninfa Laurenzo, opened the well-known Ninfa's on Navigation restaurant in 1973 in Houston's East End, a neighborhood historically rooted in Mexican influence. Demand from

neighbors helped Mama Ninfa, as she was locally known, introduce fajitas to American diners.

Today, 44 percent of Houston's population has Hispanic heritage, according to Data USA, and for Laurenzo football carries a similar significance as it does within Mexican communities as in Algerian and Senegalese ones.

"Soccer is critically important," he says. "It brings a sense of national pride."

During major matches, families gather in homes or restaurants, turning the game into a communal event. Someone grills outside, someone prepares tortillas in the kitchen, and the meal grows collectively as friends and relatives arrive. Match-day menus commonly include tacos, tamales, grilled meats and guacamole.

Even here, however, some culinary traditions remain tied to place. Laurenzo points to barbacoa, a dish traditionally prepared by burying meat in an underground pit lined with agave leaves and cooking it slowly for hours—a technique rarely permitted under US health regulations.

"You literally dig a hole in the dirt," Laurenzo says. "You can't do that here."

During the World Cup, communities in New York, Toronto and Houston will gather around televisions and share meals, watching the same matches unfold far from the places that first shaped their traditions. In Queens, Algerian

ABOVE Friends gather in Toronto for *ndogou*, the word in Senegal's Wolof language for the meal that breaks the Ramadan fast. **LEFT** Mamadou Ndaw organizes gatherings as interim president of SenOntario, a group that supports local Senegalese residents of the area. "Football," he says, is "part of our culture."

SOPHIE BOUQUILLON; PAGE 34: KELLEY JENSEN FOR LTO CANTINA; PAGE 35: CARLOS RODRIGUEZ FOR LTO CANTINA

"Soccer ... brings a sense of national pride," says chef Domenic Laurenzo, who grew up surrounded by Mexican American culinary history, thanks to his grandmother, the late restaurateur "Mama" Ninfa Laurenzo. Match-day menus for El Tiempo Cantina restaurants he and his father run feature grilled meats, tacos, tamales, guacamole and more.

merguez sandwiches will fill tables along Steinway Street. In Toronto, Senegalese families will share beignets and roasted groundnuts while watching matches together. In Houston, tacos and tamales will accompany televised games.

Food helps re-create the atmosphere of home.

And when conversations with fans move beyond the menu, another theme emerges—one that has less to do with ingredients and more to do with memory.

For Mekersi, what immigrants miss most is not only the food but the neighborhood itself.

"If I came thousands of miles away from my country," he says, "I would miss my family … my neighborhood where I grew up."

Ndaw, who grew up 100 kilometers from Dakar, the capital of Senegal, describes a similar absence when thinking about celebrations after major victories.

"In Senegal we celebrate in the streets," he says. "Here you feel like you might disturb someone."

Laurenzo sees the same contrast when comparing Houston with Mexico. In Mexico, victories spill into public squares and city streets. In US cities, celebrations often remain inside homes and restaurants.

And the streets and neighborhoods where people learned how to celebrate the game together remain far away.

On Steinway Street, however, the feeling of home still flickers during big matches. Coffee shops fill with fans, televisions glow behind restaurant windows, and crowds spill onto the sidewalks as supporters watch together.

For a moment, the neighborhood begins to resemble the places many fans left behind. AW

Michael Shagoury is a multimedia journalist and media strategist based in Washington, D.C. He has covered stories across the Middle East and North America for outlets including AJ+ and CNN International. As managing director of SideKix Media, he leads projects at the intersection of storytelling, digital strategy and emerging technology.

For the recipes in this story, go to **AramcoWorld.com** ▶

Where Heritage Hits the Net: BUILT for the BEAUTIFUL GAME

WRITTEN BY HOMARA CHOUDHARY

What do football stadiums, culture and heritage have in common? More than you might think.

For much of modern history, stadiums were treated as "an engineering problem, primarily," says Benjamin Flowers, a professor of architecture at The Ohio State University. "The real shift to what we see now really starts in the early 2000s."

Venues such as Munich's Allianz Arena, which opened in 2005, signaled that change: Stadiums were no longer expected simply to work, but to speak.

Part of this evolution, Flowers says, is visibility. "It's impossible to overstate the influence of television and more particularly streaming." Stadiums are now designed for a world that watches endlessly, clips endlessly and rewinds endlessly. The leap is staggering: "In the 1960s, there were generally four camera positions. Today you have something between 26 and 32 camera locations, plus the aerial choreography of drones, tracking shots and those cinematic sweeps from the city into the stands."

The result is a new kind of pressure: According to Flowers, these broadcast demands have created the expectation that the venue has a distinctive identity, both on the interior and the exterior.

Once a stadium becomes a global image, cultural expression becomes part of the brief. Clubs want an "iconic identity," says Flowers, and at a national level, "state actors are expecting to see these venues broadcast an image, an identity of the nation-state."

QATAR: FROM SAND AND SEA TO STADIUM

When the world arrived in Qatar for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, it encountered stadiums that were anything but generic. The venues didn't feel like neutral shells dropped onto a map. They felt like deliberate translations of place, carrying references to desert life and Bedouin hospitality, seafaring heritage, traditional dress and Arab craft.

Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor made that point in one glance, turning the traditional Bedouin tent into a bold architectural statement. In addition to the tent depiction, the name itself reflects Bedouin heritage, as *bayt* means "house" in Arabic. Lusail Stadium, in the city of the same name, leaned into Arab pattern and light, using ornament and shadow that glows as much as it holds. But in Al Wakrah, Al Janoub Stadium shifted the reference from desert to sea, drawing on the dhow, a traditional Arabian Gulf sailing vessel, and the town's maritime memory.

For Jim Heverin, director of Zaha Hadid Architects, the goal was never to turn heritage into a prop. The starting point, he says, was to create something "culturally relevant but without reducing it to pastiche." That balance

BELOW Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor, Qatar, a venue for the FIFA Qatar World Cup 2022, nods to a traditional Bedouin tent. The architectural style was seen earlier in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's King Fahd Stadium, **OPPOSITE, TOP**, which opened in 1987 and is set to host the tournament in 2034.

matters in a building type that comes with so many nonnegotiables, and Heverin is candid about the constraints: The stadium has to satisfy global tournament requirements while still finding its own identity.

Al Janoub's references to the dhow and Qatar's maritime history are often cited, but Heverin is careful about how that story is told. "It was not about producing a boat," Heverin says. "The intention was to abstract those qualities, to build a contemporary stadium that still carried the memory of Al Wakrah's relationship with the sea, without becoming literal."

Heverin also stressed that in a place like Qatar, culture can't be separated from climate. The stadium needed "a protective shell" to manage the heat, and that practical reality shaped everything from the design to the way spectators experience shade and cooling. "You really need to find the expression in the functionality of the stadium," he says.

Rather than treating performance as separate from expression, the design integrated them. The façade strategy, including recessed glazing and outer screens, was driven by the heat and humidity, but it also allowed the architecture to nod toward traditions of screening and shading.

That is where Al Janoub becomes a particularly useful example in a wider global story. It shows how cultural references can be embedded into the logic of a building rather than applied like decoration—how the story can sit inside structure, surface and atmosphere.

STADIUMS AS STORYTELLERS

From there the question becomes bigger than any one country. What are stadiums being asked to do, and why do these cultural references matter so much?

Professor Christopher Gaffney from New York University, who studies stadiums as urban and cultural phenomena, calls them "powerful vehicles for cultural and national storytelling," describing them as "social and political objects." The architecture may be what draws the eye, he says, but "the stadium also carries a message about ambition, identity and how a place positions itself in the world."

Flowers agrees that intent is only part of the equation. "Intentions matter quite a bit in architecture, but how buildings

BELOW Al Janoub Stadium pays homage to Qatar's Arabian Gulf sailing heritage with its resemblance to a dhow.

TOP: WOLFGANG KAEHLER/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM AND OPPOSITE: MATTHEW ASHTON/AMA/GETTY IMAGES

are defined is really by the public." Occasionally, intention and reception align. "Sometimes," he notes, "there's a profound divergence." That gap is where cultural expression can either feel meaningful or slide into superficial symbolism.

EAST ASIA: HERITAGE IN MOTION

In "South Korea, heritage often shows up through atmosphere rather than monumentality. Seoul World Cup Stadium, also known as Sangam Stadium after its location in Sangam-dong, Mapo-gu, was built for the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Its design evokes a traditional Korean kite, with a roof associated with *hanji*, handmade Korean paper, creating a lanternlike glow at night.

It is a reminder, as Flowers says, that "the meanings we attach to buildings are dependent in large part on the nature of our interactions with them," whether in the physical space or "in the world media via screens." Heverin calls that first impression "the level that most people understand it at," before the deeper references reveal themselves.

On screen, that atmospheric quality becomes part of the stadium's identity, shaping how it is recognized far beyond Seoul.

SOUTH AFRICA: THE SHARED VESSEL

South Africa offers a bolder metaphor, wherein the stadium becomes a national object and communal symbol. Johannesburg's FNB Stadium, short for First National Bank Stadium and also known as Soccer City, was reimagined for the 2010 FIFA World Cup with a design inspired by the calabash, a traditional African pot.

Here, Gaffney draws on the old idea of bread and circuses to explain why stadiums still hold such sway: "They sit in the space where spectacle and public life meet." The phrase comes from ancient Rome, where public entertainment was used to distract from political discontent. The point is not that football is shallow, but that stadiums have always carried meaning beyond sport. "They signal ambition, and they project identity," he says.

EUROPE: HERITAGE IN THE LANDSCAPE

Europe often expresses identity through context rather than costume. Portugal, which will cohost the 2030 World Cup with Spain and Morocco, is no exception. Its Estádio Municipal de Braga, in the city of Braga, built for Euro 2004, is carved into a former quarry, with a dramatic rock face forming one end of the stadium. It doesn't rely on a literal cultural symbol. Instead, it folds the venue into the land, turning geology into architecture and giving the building the feeling of having emerged from its surroundings.

That choice reflects a more understated approach often seen in European stadium design. Heritage here is not stitched onto the façade but embedded in the ground. The stadium's most powerful reference is its relationship with place, drawing the landscape into the match-day experience and shaping the approach well

South Korea's Seoul World Cup Stadium, host of the 2002 tournament, evokes a traditional paper kite.

LEFT AND OPPOSITE: GETTY IMAGES

before the pitch comes into view.

"Braga's impact begins long before you reach your seat," Flowers says, "in the approach, the rock and the sense of place." It's a reminder that cultural expression in stadium design isn't always something you can name.

MEXICO: STADIUM AS CIVIC CANVAS

In Mexico City, Estadio Olímpico Universitario shows how cultural expression can be carried through art and nation-building. Built into volcanic terrain and marked by leading Mexican artist Diego Rivera's monumental mosaic, the stadium makes identity unavoidable. It turns it into a public artwork as much as a sports venue, carrying meaning even on non-match days.

As Flowers puts it, the most powerful stadiums are those that feel not like "an alien that has been dropped into the landscape" but "something that emerged seemingly around the same time as its surroundings."

Here, that encounter starts long before the turnstiles. The volcanic terrain underfoot and Rivera's mosaic on the façade assert a clear cultural identity from the outset, turning the approach into a civic statement. The stadium feels less like an object placed on a site and more like a landmark that belongs to it.

GROUNDED IN UNDERSTANDING

Across these examples, the same questions keep returning. "If it is a local architect designing the project, then one can say this is an authentic expression of local identity," Flowers notes. But "if it is a foreign architect designing it, then it raises the question of, is this merely quotation?" His follow-up hits the back of the net: "Appropriate for whom, and appropriate how?"

The question isn't theoretical. In Tokyo, Zaha Hadid's original design for the 2020 Olympic Stadium, officially Japan National Stadium, prompted exactly this

Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban, South Africa, hosted 2010 World Cup matches.
LEFT A construction worker blows a vuvuzela, a musical instrument symbolizing South Africa, in front of the partially built Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban ahead of the 2010 World Cup.
BELOW The completed multiuse stadium today hosts a variety of events.

An artist rendering depicts the future Aramco Stadium in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia, host of the 2034 World Cup. The venue's prioritized construction timeline means that in 2027 the country also will host the Asian Cup for the first time. Its look and feel reflect its coastal setting.

kind of debate, with critics asking whether such a prominent national venue, designed by a foreign architect, could truly speak in a local architectural language.

It is a question that pushes the conversation beyond easy symbolism. By "quotation," Flowers is referring to the risk of borrowing cultural forms, like patterns, materials or motifs, without grounding them in real understanding. A dhowlike gesture or reference to craft can feel meaningful, but it can also become surface level without cultural awareness. And in a global era when major venues are often delivered by international teams, that question only grows louder.

AFTER THE FIREWORKS

Then comes legacy, the part of the story where symbolism meets real life. Flowers is blunt about what separates a one-tournament venue from a stadium that truly lives. "The key to the legacy success of a venue is whether, two or three years after the event, it is still being used on a regular basis," he says. In his view, "it has to be multimodal. It can't just host games." Without a long-term plan, he warns, the economics catch up quickly because the "stadiums are not assets, stadiums are liabilities; they become a very expensive obligation."

There are examples of both outcomes. North London's Tottenham Hotspur Stadium has become a year-round venue, combining football with concerts, American National Football League games and other uses. By contrast, Brazil's Arena BRB Mané Garrincha, one of those that hosted the 2014 World Cup, symbolizes the post-tournament burden: striking in scale but harder to sustain in everyday life.

SAUDI ARABIA: THE NEXT CHAPTER

Saudi Arabia is where this story naturally turns, as a new wave of stadiums is being imagined in real time. In Al Khobar, designs for Aramco Stadium, one of the venues planned for the 2034 FIFA World Cup, place the project within a wider district vision. Here, the stadium acts as an anchor rather than a stand-alone object. The idea is not only a match-day destination but a place that works year-round.

Aramco Stadium's design language is explicitly tied to Al Khobar's coastal setting on the Arabian Gulf. Global sports architecture firm Populous describes an exterior shaped by the "graceful rotation of waves" and spiral motifs found in nature. These are expressed through overlapping translucent "sails" that allow natural light to filter into the stadium through openings in the façade.

Heverin is clear that the hardest part of modern stadium design is avoiding the feeling that a venue "could be anywhere." The reason, he says, is structural: "The standards are generic. What FIFA wants, what UEFA [Union of European Football Associations] wants, they're all the same kind of standards." His point is that when the brief is global, the effort has to be local. "To make it site-specific and culturally specific takes quite an effort because it still needs to perform as a football stadium."

For Heverin, that's where design becomes translation. "You take references, and you need to abstract them and then find a language that people can

MANUEL VELASQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: ARAMCOSTADIUM.COM

Mexico City's Estadio Olimpico Universitario, which hosted World Cup matches in 1970 and 1986, feels less like an object placed on a site and more like a landmark that belongs to it.

automatically feel is related to their culture but also related to a football stadium. In the end, it should feel unique. It should feel very different."

That thinking connects directly to the district model. Heverin says that on Qatar's Al Janoub, the approach went beyond the stadium footprint: "We also looked at not just the stadium but a wider precinct, how it works on tournament match days and, crucially, after the World Cup, how can it be a community facility?"

Then there is the part hosts can't avoid anymore, he says. "The whole legacy discussion is also something that's very much come to the forefront."

BUILT TO BE REMEMBERED

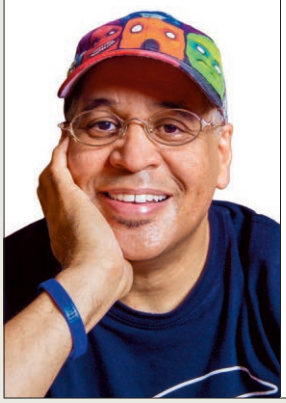
Flowers explains why he believes these places last emotionally: "Stadiums run on ritual and rhythm, with a symbolic cadence to your approach to the stadium, your inhabitation of it and then your departure." Inside, he adds, "we will hug and kiss and embrace total strangers in moments of joy and despair."

Heverin puts it in plain terms: "For a building to become deeply meaningful, it's not only the physical form, but it's the memories that are attached to it. That is the real afterlife of stadium design. Not just what it looks like on opening night but what it holds, year after year." AW

Homara Choudhary is an international journalist, presenter, moderator and executive producer trusted by global organizations and major broadcasters. She has worked with the BBC, ITV and Al Jazeera, and has moderated and produced editorial content for clients including Web Summit, Doha Debates and Qatar Foundation.

Events

ABOVE A detail of "Fútballet" depicts England's Bryan Robson blasting a goal past France's Jean-Luc Ettori in 1982; and **RIGHT** the sound of vuvuzelas fills the stadium as South Africa defeats France on home soil in 2010. **BELOW** Lyndon J. Barrois, Sr.



Larger-Than-Life Moments in Miniature

The stuff of dioramas: balsa wood, clay … and gum wrappers? ***Fútbol Is Life: Animated Sportraits by Lyndon J. Barrois, Sr.*** celebrates 2026 World Cup matches in Los Angeles with depictions of football history's big moments on a small scale—and via a unique medium.

New Orleans-born, Los Angeles-based artist Barrois creates 1-inch-tall sports figures out of gum wrappers, whose foil side provides structure and paper side he paints meticulously. "These toys that I make" pay homage to elite athletes, he tells *AramcoWorld*.

For this exhibition Barrois researched photos and videos, then spent seven months sculpting, painting and sealing gum wrappers with glue for 40 vignettes that re-create World Cup scenes spanning 1930 to 2023. Many depict "not the crowning moments but the crowning achievements for those teams"—among them Saudi Arabia's 2022 upset of powerhouse Argentina that prompted midfielder Salem Al-Dawsari's backflip.

Additionally, the show brings moments to life via stop-motion-animated short films by Barrois, who has contributed visual effects to "The Matrix" trilogy of films, among others.

"Sportraits" reach beyond what takes place on the pitch, he says. They remind us of the common ground that nations and cultures can share during play. "We can agree to disagree, but we don't have to get all tribal and hateful," Barrois says. "For those moments, sports do that."

▶ LACMA, **Los Angeles**, through July 12

Highlights from AramcoWorld.com. Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

Current / July

Football and Art. A Shared Emotion presents contemporary paintings, sculptures, installations, photographs and videos—both historical and produced specifically for the exhibition—to explore football's intersection with community, identity and universality. Coinciding with multiple World Cup matches in Mexico City, the exhibition encompasses 100 works by about 60 international artists from more than a dozen countries, including Mexico, the United States, France, Japan and South Africa.

▶ Museo Jumex, **Mexico City**, through July 26

RIGHT Jerónimo y su balón (Jerónimo and his ball)," 1963, Rodrigo Moya

Ongoing

Unidad: The World's Game celebrates the global cultural impact of "the beautiful game" and its unifying power across continents, cultures and generations. Created by the FIFA Museum, the exhibition in the World Cup host city of Miami mixes historical memorabilia, interactive displays and immersive installations that help visitors understand soccer's emotional and communal impact. The show looks at how the sport inspires connection around the world.

▶ Freedom Tower, **Miami**, part of permanent programming

ABOVE The symbolic "Rainbow of Shirts" displays jerseys from all 211 FIFA member associations.

Readers are welcome to submit event information for possible inclusion to proposals@aramcoamericas.com, subject line "Events."

TOP: FIFA MUSEUM; BOTTOM: GALERÍA LÓPEZ QUIROGA

Survey

We Asked; You Answered

AramcoWorld wanted to know what resonates culturally about football, or soccer. So we posed a question, "What does football mean to you?" Hundreds weighed in with memories and thoughts about the traditions and camaraderie they have experienced playing and/or watching. "It's evening time, back from school. Boys meet on football field, running and kicking a ball, laughing and enjoying. That's me as a 13-year-old—lots of fun!" recalled Nizar Alli, 86, of Tanzania. "Watching a professional match is like witnessing a living gallery of art while enjoying a precious moment of friendship," Aboutajedyne Slimane, 59, of Morrocco, said. What follows is a sampling of responses from around the globe.

Every match day, we re-create my grandmother's traditional pre-game meal, a ritual steeped in stories of past victories and shared hopes for the future. This simple act of cooking and eating together, while cheering on our team, binds us to each other and to our cultural roots, making the game a celebration of who we are.

—COMFORT AINA, 31, CANADA

Football brings the world together. Years ago I attended a World Cup game, and I met fans from Cameroon and Canada. We sang, we sobbed and made new friends. I don't remember the score.

—YVONNE, 50, UNITED STATES

In Wales, sport and culture are very close to each other in people's lives. When we qualified for the Men's World Cup in Qatar in 2022, the first time we qualified since 1958, this was accompanied by a cultural festival across Wales in villages and towns with new poetry, music and performances accompanying watching football together on television. The whole country got behind the team, and participation in football has risen substantially.

—CAROL BELL, 67, UNITED KINGDOM

Growing up in Rajasthan, football was never just a game—it was an excuse for the whole neighborhood to gather. We would watch big matches of the FIFA World Cup on a small TV, sharing chai and snacks late into the night. The cheers, the chants and the shared excitement made us feel connected to the world, reminding us that even from a small town, we are part of something global.

—HABIBSORGAR, 32, INDIA

When I was a kid, every two months we had to show our parents the school grades. At home, good grades meant my father would take me to the soccer game on a Wednesday night to see my team play. This was more than a prize, but our very special program I will never forget.

—BRENO LERNER, 71, BRAZIL

Football to me is the friendship and discipline that is part of being on a team. I also look for that in the major teams I follow.

—AUDEN BILLINGSLEY, 12, THAILAND

In Tunisia, the popular song "Ya Chadli ya Belhassen" captures our football spirit—it's the rhythm of unity that fills cafés and streets when the national team plays. Every beat turns cheering into celebration, reminding us that pride and joy are shared feelings. For Tunisians, football is where hearts beat as one.

—BARKA, 72, TUNISIA

For more responses, visit AramcoWorld.com.

Follow us on Facebook, Instagram.

***AramcoWorld* is a bimonthly publication available in print, web and mobile editions, and an email newsletter is published weekly. Two-year (12-issue) renewable subscriptions to the print edition are available without charge to a limited number of readers worldwide.**

To subscribe to the print edition:
AramcoWorld.com ⟶ Subscription Services ⟶ New Print Subscription

To subscribe to the email newsletter:
AramcoWorld.com ⟶ Subscription Services ⟶ Newsletter Subscription

Change of address:
AramcoWorld.com ⟶ Subscription Services ⟶ Print Subscription ⟶ Change of Address

Back issues, from 1960 onward, can be read in full online and downloaded from AramcoWorld.com ⟶ Past Issues

Article proposals:
AramcoWorld.com ⟶ About ⟶ Contributor Guidelines

Permissions:

Texts of articles may be reprinted without specific permission provided that the text be neither edited nor abridged, that the magazine and author be credited, and that a copy of the reprinted article or a link to it be provided to the editors.

Photographs and illustrations: Much of our photo archive is available on our website. Image licensing for approved uses is royalty free.

No spam:
Contact us with confidence. You will receive no unsolicited marketing email or postal mail as a result of your subscription or inquiry.

Privacy:
AramcoWorld.com ⟶ Privacy Policy

OPPOSITE: SHUTTERSTOCK; MATTHEW BROMLEY

‘FOOTBALL’ VS. ‘SOCCER’

Fans of Great Unifying Sport Divided on What To Call It

A clash as ferocious as any on the pitch rages: Is it “football” or “soccer”?

Most of Europe, Africa, Asia and South America call it “football.” A not insignificant number elsewhere uses “soccer,” which, notably, sprang up from the very place that birthed the game, Great Britain. But even Britons, by and large, say “football.”

Confused?

While some see the debate as lighthearted fun, others consider it a serious matter of cultural identity. Ahead of this edition of *AramcoWorld*, reader Michael W. Roberts of Australia and Sri Lanka warned us against getting off on the, er, wrong foot because of the multiple games called football: “‘Football’ means SOCCER and/or RUGGER,” he wrote, “not Footie [Australian rules football]!! So there.”

To avoid creating an international incident, a little historical knowledge might help.

The game as we know it, according to History.com, began in 1863, when England’s Football Association wrote down a set of rules. Played under those rules, the game became known as “association football” to distinguish it from “rugby football,” a variation that allowed players to carry and run with the ball.

“Linguistically creative students at the University of Oxford in the 1880s distinguished between the sports of ‘rugger’ (rugby football) and ‘assoccer’ (association football),” Encyclopedia Britannica explains. “The latter term was further shortened to ‘soccer’ … However, ‘soccer’ never became much more than a nickname in Great Britain. By the 20th century, rugby football was more commonly called rugby, while association football earned the right to be known as just plain football.”

Today “soccer” comes in handy where other forms of football exist: The United States and Canada play gridiron football; Ireland plays Gaelic football, and Australian rules football is derived from rugby, Britannica notes.

The love of those games makes it hard to imagine the differing monikers ever disappearing. Still, you certainly can’t go wrong with “football”—a game played with the feet, after all.

AramcoWorld

ABOVE The 1994 World Cup opening ceremony, held in the US city of Chicago, brought the Saudi Folklore Team to Soldier Field, where participating nations performed.

AramcoWorld.com