



The World is a Ball: The Joy, Madness and Meaning of Soccer

John Doyle

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***Globe and Mail* columnist John Doyle explores the international phenomenon of soccer**

In **A Great Feast of Light**, John Doyle viewed his childhood in Ireland through the television screen. Now, he turns his eye to the most popular sport on the planet: soccer. It's a journey that begins with the first game John saw, in 1960s-era Ireland, through soccer in the 21st century - the World Cups in 02, 06, and 10, the European Championships in 04 and 08. In between the drunken fans, crazed taxi drivers, leprechauns and lederhosen, Doyle muses on the evolution of soccer as a global phenomenon. He shows a sport where for 90 minutes on the pitch anything seems possible. A game where colonized nations can tackle the power of their colonizers; where oppressed immigrant groups can thoroughly trounce their host countries. This book examines soccer from a new angle. John Doyle offers a compelling social history of the ultimate sport, each country and team competing in the historic 2010 World Cup, and how the game has kept pace as the global village has sprung up around the playing field.

From the Hardcover edition.

The World is a Ball: The Joy, Madness and Meaning of Soccer Details

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Renuka Mendis says

Football in Primary Colours - a short note on The World Is A Ball: The Joy, Madness And Meaning Of Soccer by John Doyle

There are four primary colours. Red, green, blue and football. And Doyle colours the whole world football. The paintbrush his heart. I cannot remember a book that made me so happy of late. A joyous, funny, warm and informative caravanserai through two World Cups and two Euros; deliciously larded with biting satire and sometimes spiked with heartbreak.

A travelogue and commentary interspersed with rich reportage and some behind the scenes nuggets and mostly beautiful people – some on the tops of lampposts and others holding forth over the drinks counter in railway cars; all amidst the din made by a woman on a balcony hammering away on pots and pans in celebration. Christine, the street-sleepers. Trevor and Jack (and Julie) on the train. Then back home in Toronto on Niagara Street where boys play football with sweater pile goals as snowflakes freeze. The evocative tiny paragraph of an entirely unforeseen memorial for the Hillsborough Disaster which took me entirely unawares. Short flash backs on Toronto street cars. Sedate Portuguese men watching football in Toronto bars. The common touch. Most of all for me Doyle's accounting of Zidane's moments of fury in Berlin; a personal catharsis and a straight line from me and my TV screen under smoke-stack towers in the Berlin Olympiastadion to a kind of justice in an unjust world. Yup. I remember where I was. I could go on.

I have not had such fun reading a travelogue since perhaps reading From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet by Vikram Seth in another place and another time. But this was more personal because of football and it is from Toronto and also from somewhere else like many of us here given Doyle's close ties to Ireland. That constant need to bridge the gulf between the here and the there. The book for some hours filled up that chasm us outsiders carry around as we trudge around this City dragging around fragile roots.

If you have even a passing fancy for football and a generous heart; an absolute must read. Doyle opens up a whole world that we never see on TV. I await the sequel for 2010 and 2014 World Cups and the Euros in between. If ever I run into the author on the streetcar guess that will be my first question. Where is the clock that Maria gave you in Porto? And that is kinda how I feel; a bit like Maria with her plastic bag and present. Thank you.

And to Brazil 2014 - *Tenho saudades de você*.

Shane says

I'll start out with the caveat that I have never been into soccer. But I decided that I want to learn more about this sport and try and get into the World Cup this year. This book was recommended on reddit, and I figured this was a good place to start by finding out why it was such a big deal. Doyle perfectly captured what soccer means to the people who watch it as they live and die with their team. The emotions, the camaraderie, the atmosphere, and just the sport itself were excellently described in terms even a layperson such as me could enjoy. This book was definitely the perfect introduction and has gotten me amped for the World Cup to start

tomorrow. Definitely recommend it.

Susanne says

Terrific. Loved it.

Tom says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Maybe I am just in the thrall of the World Cup, but it was great to relive past Euro and World Cups. If you are looking for something to get you excited about Brazil 2014, this is the book to read.

John says

I saw an extended interview with Doyle on the Fox Soccer Report and was very impressed. I always have a long queue of books to read, but the interview was enough to jump this book to the head of the line. I was lucky enough to get a copy from my library with a week. I was excited to read it, but my interest went through the roof when Doyle compared America's interaction with world soccer to the writing of Henry James. Wow!

Doyle writes little about tactics and players, instead the book focuses on the spirit of international soccer and the fans who attend matches. Over and over Doyle shares what he has seen: International soccer unites people. It has become what the Olympics set out to be. It is a shared experience for the world. It propagates peace and well-being. Are there some violent incidents between fans of different countries? Once in a while. But far and away there is more love and goodwill. Fans share smiles, hugs, photos and drinks.

Doyle is a people watcher. He captures people and their actions when they are mostly unaware he is watching. I felt a connection to him in this way as I love to people watch.

More than a few times I got tears in my eyes at Doyle's descriptions. He captures the pure passion, the joy, the exuberance and the gut wrenching pain of fandom. Soccer leads humans on the gambit of emotions and I could relate.

I thought the book's opening chapters were its strongest. Perhaps because the book opens with the 2002 World Cup, which took place in Korea & Japan. It was a tournament I should have been at. I won a lottery and had tickets, but the loss of my job meant I could not attend. The US shockingly went on to reach the quarterfinals, and I regret not being able to see it in person. Doyle provided for me a glimpse of what it could have been like.

I enjoyed Doyle calling out the overhyped English team. Too many North Americans seem to adopt England as a team to cheer for. I don't get it. They are consistently built up to be much greater than they are individually or as a team. It was refreshing to read someone who is not afraid to write that the emperor has no clothes.

I think anyone would enjoy this book. It will help explain the world in a non-American centric view. And many of the anecdotes are enjoyable regardless of context. This is a must read for soccer fans. Next to Nick Hornsby's Fever Pitch, this is the best soccer book I have read.

Marc Xuereb says

as a soccer fan, you can't help but love this book. Anyone who as every felt the thrill of being in a crowd of enthusiastic fans at a soccer game, living and dying with the fortunes of your favourite team on the field, will appreciate the many personal stories of John Doyle covering international soccer games as a journalist.

Chris says

I have always enjoyed John Doyle's newspaper articles and this book was more of the same. He has a unique and honest view of the games and celebrations.

Alexandra says

Really enjoyed the enthusiasm and love for the beautiful game in this book. Relived some memories of past Euro Cups and World Cups and now I'm excited for the World Cup in 2014!

Jason says

Great read for soccer fans ahead of the World Cup. The chapters about England were hilarious.

Ron Davidson says

A decent first-person account of some of the biggest soccer tournaments -- several World Cups and European Championships -- and what they meant to the author and the people he encountered. The book is good for both knowledgeable fans of the sport and for beginners who are still learning about the beauty (and ugliness) of the game.

The author is an Irish-born Canadian who grew up with the game, but often at a distance -- coming of age in an Ireland that still distrusted this "English" game, then moving to Canada, where it was a game mainly for the immigrants in the city. I am looking forward to comparing this perspective with that of the next book on my list, "Eight World Cups," by U.S.-born sportswriter George Vecsey.

Jacob Jones-Goldstein says

This was a lovely book to read during World Cup 2014. As something of a new convert to football I've been reading quite a few books about the sport of late and this was decidedly different than most. It is more of a football travelog about fans and tournaments and what makes them great than it is a book about the sport itself. Doyle does a wonderful job in making that case that tournaments like the World Cup have a magical quality that transcends sport and even national political rivalries.

I would heartily recommend this to anyone feeling a bit empty now that the world cup is over for the year or anyone thinking of doing any sport related travel.

One warning, if you're a fan of the England national team, gird your loins. Doyle is pretty tough on them (and mostly rightly so).

jedioffsidetrap says

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Jessica says

The World Is A Ball is, at its heart, a book about fans and fandom. It is written in the context of soccer fans, but fans are the same, no matter the fandom. It's the excitement, the joy, the enthusiasm, the stress, the heartache, the letdown, the continuously going back even though logic dictates you shouldn't. It's all that and more. That was what I was able to take from this book. (Not anything new, considering I'm really big on being a fan!)

It's all put in the context of soccer events, especially World Cups from different years. In that regard, the book was tedious to get through. In fairness, I knew it would be. You see, I decided to become a soccer fan, and I decided my approach would be to read about it. Mistake. I suggest being a fan before picking up a book about sports.

After all, the fun is in the fandom, the social aspect, hugging random strangers because your team just scored. Once this becomes a habit, then the book will be far more enjoyable and will make a whole lot more sense.

Carlos Santos says

Great book about the aura of the game around some of the biggest Soccer events on the planet...it captures that special feeling

Donovan Richards says

Culture Soup

I've always thought it would be fun to attend a world event like the Olympic Games or a World Cup. The idea of a myriad of cultures converging on one city fascinates me. The sheer numbers, though, terrify me. I'm not a huge fan of large crowds.

Perhaps, for me, the World Cup provides the most intriguing spectacle. With soccer – the sport adored by the majority of the world, the world championship matters.

In *The World Is a Ball*, John Doyle explores this worldwide phenomenon. With a decade of soccer coverage for North American publications, Doyle provides a first-hand account of these tournaments and the convergence of cultures.

Watching Those Watching the Game

Interestingly, while one would think that Doyle would focus predominately on the tactics and analysis of the players on the pitch, he seems more interested in the fans. As the world watches the game, Doyle watches the supporters.

For ages, the media focus on hooliganism. With fear dispensed in small to medium doses, many foreigners avoid soccer matches for panic of fan-to-fan violence. Yet Doyle perceives these sporting events as moments of celebration no matter the end result.

On the field, Brazil plays with flair and beauty; in the stands, Brazilian fans act the same. On the field, Italy plays a slow, methodical game; in the stands, the fans are lazy and confident. On this principle, Doyle expands,

“That’s part of the complicated meaning of the World Cup. There is an elaborate synergy between the traveling fans and their country’s team. A nation projects itself, all its hopes and dreams and tangled histories, onto the team. And the team somehow embodies all the complex characteristics of the nation” (18).

Global Soccer

Moreover, views of nationalistic hooliganism fail in the face of globalized soccer. Where nationalism in the past existed with players remaining inside its countries borders, the new strategy for most national teams is to seek players and coaches from all over the world. Doyle writes,

“At the end, just before the Estádio da Luz erupts in colorful, spectacular fireworks displays, the TV commentator reminds viewers that the Greek coach, Otto Rehhagel, is German and Portugal’s coach, Luiz Felipe Scolari, is Brazilian. The point is to tell us that, even at this intensely competitive, nationalistic level, soccer transcends borders and nationality” (132).

Field Notes

However, *The World Is a Ball* flows poorly. As the book details international soccer matches over the last decade, the stories become repetitive and resemble field notes for the stories Doyle obviously filed for his paid gig.

Additionally, Doyle romanticizes the notion of fan and team unity. While international matches of yesteryear exhibited teams with a national style and identity, modern soccer has found tactics to become increasingly crowd-sourced. Successful national teams blend the possession-style total football of the Netherlands with the defensive tenacity of Italy and the aggressive set play style of Germany. In other words, the way teams play soccer today is becoming tactically similar.

Finally, Doyle writes with basic assumptions about soccer. For those interested in becoming acquainted with the sport, Doyle's writing will leave you dazed and confused. While no one suggests that a soccer writer must begin a book with a basic explanation of soccer, Doyle uses soccer-specific terms without defining them for a broader audience. Although I understood him, I don't think his lexicon of terms allows inclusion of non-soccer fans.

A Tragic View of the Universe

Despite my reservations, Doyle contemplates some of the deeper meanings behind the joys of soccer. With low scoring games, spotty refereeing, and theatrical flopping, soccer is not an Americanized sport. Yet, these very issues point to core artistic values. Doyle pens,

"Soccer is a sport perfectly designed to reinforce a tragic view of the universe, because basically it is a long series of frustrations leading up to near certain heartbreak" (311).

This sentiments ring true with the observance of one game. A team can play the perfect game and lose. While a pitcher in baseball gains muscle memory with practice in order to throw the same pitch in the same location whenever he desires it, a soccer player relies on luck. The best for which he or she can hope is to create enough chances to get a positive result.

On the topic of poor refereeing – an experience that United States Men's National Team fans know full-well with the disallowed goal on a phantom foul against Slovenia in the last World Cup – Doyle writes,

"Injustice happens, but time passes, the world turns just as the ball does during the game. The whole point of the game is that the ball turns, moves forward, much like we do" (315).

Although *The World Is a Ball* plods somewhat without much stylistic difference and mischaracterizes the connections between the styling of fans and national teams, I enjoyed the first-hand account of the World Cup. With a convergence of culture in one country, we see something bigger than a sporting event; we see a global culture. If you can get past the difficulties and understand the basic terms in soccer, *The World Is a Ball* is an entertaining read. Nevertheless, I suggest starting somewhere else in soccer literature.

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