The promise of soccer in America: the open play of ethnic subcultures

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This essay juxtaposes the perceived lack of success of professional soccer in the United States with the nation’s rich history of ethnic and amateur soccer. It argues how soccer as ethnic subculture has provided a means for minority ethnic communities to construct a unique cultural identity while becoming a part of an emerging multicultural nation. In evidence of this more complex and nuanced process of cultural assimilation, the essay chronicles the rise of the Greek-American Athletic Club in the San Francisco Soccer Football League (SFSFL), the oldest American soccer league in continuous existence. Perhaps reflective of other urban ethnic soccer clubs and the immigrant communities supporting their team, the San Francisco Greek-Americans initially recruited players solely from their own community. Over time, however, the team began to recruit players based on their competitive potential rather than their ethnic heritage. With a mixture of non-Greek foreign-born and US-born players, the San Francisco Greek-Americans made the Bay Area Hellenic communities proud by becoming one of the most dominant amateur soccer teams in the history of the SFSFL and the United States.

Introduction

The dominant narrative of American soccer has been a tale of promise unfulfilled. The story runs something like this: despite more children playing soccer than any other sport in many American youth leagues, professional soccer has not gained a stronghold as a major spectator sport in the United States. The relative lack of success of the men’s national soccer team in international competition has also led to its limited public and media attention.1 This narrative is part of a larger dialogue framed within a sporting hegemony specific to the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This common sense understanding of an American sport ethic privileges men over women, power and performance over pleasure and participation, and national pastimes over imported sports.2 Where the dominant sports of baseball, basketball and American football captivate the masses and comprise the majority of media attention, soccer remains in the popular culture margins. American soccer’s marginalization, however, has allowed the sport to retain a certain richness of cultural and historical expression, particularly in soccer’s juxtaposition with American dominant sports.3 From a socially marginalized position, soccer as ethnic subculture4 has demonstrated a potential to redefine the dominant notion of sport as an agent of social assimilation and mobility. Thus, rather than a tale of promise unfulfilled, American soccer has provided an open terrain for new ethnicities to mark space in an emerging nation.

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The potential assimilation and integration of ethnic groups into dominant or core society through sports has been noted in the literature throughout the twentieth century. The power of sport as an assimilatory agent depends not only on the sport and the participating ethnic group, but also on the historical and cultural context within which the game is played. As Jarvie reminds us, ‘there may be a strong element of volunteerism and freedom of choice in sport, but it is only within a range of negotiated and socially produced limits and pressures’.

This subtle dialectic between agency and structure in sport selection is further confounded by the age of the participants and their relative freedom of choice. Children who are ‘signed up’ for Little League Baseball or Pop Warner Football will likely have qualitatively different cultural experiences than men and women volunteering to participate in an adult soccer league. In the United States and other countries, where soccer is subordinate to other national pastimes and often perceived as a foreign or ethnic game, the role of sport in cultural assimilation or fortification is nuanced and varied. In this regard, modern sport has been a powerful means for both ethnic restriction and release, disenfranchisement and enfranchisement.

Regarding adult urban soccer leagues, Pooley found that ethnic soccer clubs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin inhibited the structural assimilation of its team members into core society. McKay and Day found that heightened competition and player recruitment led to increased cultural assimilation within Canadian ethnic soccer leagues. For many clubs, the allure of having a winning record through the recruitment of non-ethnic but skilful players may be more important than maintaining a singular ethnic identity. These conflicting findings are not unusual, but seem to depend largely on the historical context of a given sporting practice in a given time and place. While Lever found that Brazilian soccer helped to integrate disparate social communities, Cheska argued that sport in the American southwest served to reaffirm ethnic boundaries among Native Americans.

Thus, drawing on the research of ethnicity and sport in the United States and elsewhere, it appears that sport, so commonly seen as a functional means for assimilation and integration, may maintain rather than integrate ethnic boundaries. This more complex reading of sport and ethnicity further problematizes the process of immigration and assimilation, where national boundaries and identities are blurred while steadfastly protected. As Hallinan and Krotee noted about non-Anglo Celtic soccer clubs in Wollongong, Australia, the sport has ‘provided something of an agency to suppress the process of being culturally drowned by the hegemonic Anglo-Celtic discourse’. This freedom to assert an oppositional ethnic identity to core or dominant society may have been part of the reason that Soccer Australia (formerly the Australian Soccer Federation) banned all A-League teams from ethnic team names, displaying ethnic insignia on uniforms and prohibited fans from bringing national flags into the stands in the early 1990s. Thus, Sydney Croatia became Sydney United, for example, in order to ‘de-ethnicize’ the sport and curb potential violence among opposing clubs and their respective fans. This effort to make more Australian ‘wogball’ or the ‘ethnic game’ is paralleled in the United States where soccer retains its rich ethnic traditions.

‘Americanizing’ the beautiful game

During its tumultuous tenure from 1968 to 1984, the North American Soccer League (NASL) likewise attempted to ‘Americanize’ the professional soccer league by altering the rules of the game and limiting its reliance on foreign players. The rules...
were changed in order to make soccer more exciting for American fans. A clock that counted down to zero rather than up to the standard 45-minute half was used. The traditional midfield line for off-sides was replaced with a 35-yard line, with the hopes of generating more scoring. Finally, a shoot-out was implemented to ensure a winner by deciding matches that ended in a draw.

Seeking greater excitement and more goals for the American fan, a hybrid-game of indoor soccer was also created in the United States in the 1970s, culminating in the establishment of the Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL) in 1978. The field resembles a regulation-size hockey rink, commonly 200’ by 85’, with goals recessed into the walls of an indoor arena. Goals, and the corresponding penalty area, are smaller than in standard soccer. Indoor soccer is generally played with six active players per team, one of which is the goalkeeper. Players can use the walls during competition and there is no off-sides rule, which promotes a higher-scoring game. Despite the attempted Americanization of soccer with the development of this hybrid-indoor game, the MISL and indoor soccer has also actively recruited foreign players. The league recognizes two teams of All-Stars, the MISL USA team, comprised of US citizens, and the MISL International squad, made up of foreign citizens. In their annual All-Star Game, these two teams compete for league dominance.

As such, American professional soccer has often had to address its over-reliance on foreign nationals. Ironically, however, the heyday of the NASL came in the mid to late 1970s when players such as Pelé, Eusébio, Franz Beckenbauer and Johan Cruyff were recruited to play for teams such as the New York Cosmos, St Louis Stars, Chicago Sting and the San Jose Earthquakes. Crowds in excess of 70,000 came to watch the Cosmos play when Pelé and other international stars were on the roster. But this popularity for professional soccer in America was fleeting. Soon, the crowds diminished and the league struggled financially, especially after paying some of these star players exorbitant salaries to play in the United States.

Responding to the desire by fans to watch American rather than foreign stars, the league implemented a rule in the early 1980s which required that each team have at least five American players on the field at all times during competition. The NASL also created a new club, Team America in 1983, comprised entirely of US national team players and based in the US capital, Washington DC. Despite the league’s attempt to further Americanize the game, several teams, most notably the New York Cosmos, refused to release their US national team players. Due to league infighting, competition with the Major Indoor Soccer League, declining attendance and the loss of their television contract with ABC, the NASL officially folded in 1985.

The current professional soccer league in the United States, Major League Soccer (MLS), established in 1993, has also tried to limit its reliance on foreign players. Originally comprised of ten teams, the league has expanded to 14 teams in 2008 and hopes to expand even further to 18 teams by 2010–11. With the expansion in 2008, the league’s foreign player rule, limiting the number of foreign nationals on a roster, has been revised to include eight rather than seven foreign players. While deputy commissioner Ivan Gazidis notes that ‘the reality of MLS budgets is that teams don’t have the money to go out and become Chelsea or Arsenal’, the purchase of celebrity international players such as David Beckham to play for the league’s Los Angeles Galaxy seem to suggest the beginnings of an economic arms race. Beckham’s contract with the Galaxy made him the highest paid MLS player in history and has upped the ante for buying soccer talent abroad. Thus, despite the game’s rich history of ethnic
and youth participation in the United States, American professional soccer continues to rely on foreign players.

**Playing America the beautiful: the San Francisco Soccer Football League (SFSFL)**

The historical efforts to ‘Americanize’ soccer in the United States appear to be connected to both reducing foreign influence on the game while espousing a commercialized sport ethic. While professional sport leagues in the United States, such as the National Football League (NFL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA), have been strikingly adept at expanding markets abroad and selling an American dream of commodified popular and material culture, soccer in America continues to be seen as an imported product. In the United States, importing the global game of soccer has been far less popular among American spectators than exporting so-called American sports and the dominant values associated with these sports. The fact that soccer was imported into the United States hundreds of years ago and played broadly by its new citizenship does not seem to lessen soccer’s perceived foreign character. Thus, this public perception of soccer as non-American is striking given the sport’s long history in the United States and its tremendous popularity among youth and adult amateur athletes today.

Prior to the proliferation of youth soccer leagues, adult amateur and semi-professional American soccer leagues have long relied on the ethnic participant and fan. Despite some form of the game being played in the early seventeenth century in the American colonies, the first written accounts of soccer matches involve intramural contests at major colleges and universities in the Northeast United States. The first intercollegiate game to adopt the London Football Association’s rules took place in 1869 between Princeton and Rutgers, in which Rutgers won 6-4. These rules allowed 25 players, a 24 foot wide goal and the use of all parts of the body, including hands. The ball could be batted or held but not carried or thrown, and the first team to score six goals was deemed the victor. Ironically, this game is also recognized as the first American football game.21

As immigration increased during the nineteenth century, so too did local and regional leagues begin to proliferate. The San Francisco Soccer Football League (SFSFL),22 established in 1902, provides a rich example of the complex ways in which sport and ethnicity intersect to give meaning to both over time. The SFSFL is one of the oldest and most cosmopolitan semi-professional and amateur leagues in the United States, predating the establishment of the Fédération of International Football Association (FIFA). Today, the SFSFL is the oldest American soccer league in continuous existence.

In a May 1948 local publication entitled *California Soccer Football*, J.N. Young describes the history of soccer in San Francisco. Noting that Association Football (soccer) had been played on the Pacific Coast since the late 1880s, the author describes the sport’s foreign influence. Young writes,

> Wherever you find a colony of Britishers you will find a Soccer ball and men to play with it. The introduction of the game to San Francisco can be traced back to the time when ‘windjammers’ plied the seas from foreign ports … Every ship had a football in its locker and when port was reached it was natural for the sailors to get out to a field and release some of the energy that had been pent up during the three or four months it took to make the trip here.23
Young describes how these seafaring men would meet at the Sailors Institute on Stuart Street, where ‘boys met and challenged each other to a game of soccer, their national pastime’. In addition to these sailors passing through, San Francisco was a city of immigrants. In 1852, more than half of all males in the city were foreign born. Many of these men likewise elected to play at what they sought to create as their new American pastime of soccer. As such, the SFSFL had old world or ethnic affiliations from its inception. The first league champions were the American British Rifles, but other teams in the league included the San Francisco Scottish Thistle Club, French Athletic Club and the Occidentals.

San Francisco witnessed various waves of immigration throughout the twentieth century; generally, the influx of immigrants led to increased club representation in the San Francisco Soccer Football League. Following the First World War, the league added a second division to accommodate the growing interest in fielding soccer teams comprised of German, Russian and other European immigrants to the city. The Teutonia Football Club (originally AAC Teutonia) was established in 1923 ‘by eight boys who came here from Germany’. Similarly, the Mercury Athletic Club was founded the same year, when, according to Boxer, three men met in church on Russian Easter: ‘All were new to this country so started asking each other where a Russian soccer club was. It turned out that there were none here so they organized the Russian Athletic Club – Mercury.’ Other ethnic clubs established during this time included Hakoah or the Jewish Athletic Club (1926), Unione Sportiva Italiana Virtus (1926) and Union Española Club (1926), ‘the pathfinder team for a growing Latin community in San Francisco’. In fact, Club Peru (1926) and Mexico AC (1927) soon followed as members of the San Francisco Soccer Football League (SFSFL).

After the Second World War, San Francisco experienced another wave of immigration, which prompted the addition of more teams and the establishment of a third division in the league. Athletic Clubs such as the Greek-Americans (1949) and the Sons of Italy (1950) were established and joined by additional Latin American teams such as El Salvador (1950), Columbia AC (1954), and Guadalajara (1956). Today, over one half a century later, the San Francisco Soccer Football League is comprised of 70 teams, represented across six divisions (Premier, Major, First, Second, Third and Fourth). Club names continue to be ethnically marked, with relative newcomers, such as Jalisco (1989), the Haitian Express (1998) and Bosnajci (1998), competing in the same league with the more traditional SFSFL clubs of El Salvador, Club Peru, Sons of Italy and the San Francisco Scots, among others.

Reshaping ethnicity as open terrain on a soccer pitch in San Francisco: the Greek-American Athletic Club

Just as sports vary from one historical period to another and from one culture to the next, and the choice to participate within a given sport is negotiated within socio-cultural limits and pressures, so too is ethnicity a negotiated terrain. As Stuart Hall argued in his seminal article ‘New Ethnicities’, ‘the term “ethnicity” acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual’. Ethnicity, like identities of class, race, gender and sexuality, are not fixed but fluid. These fluid identities are at play in the social construction of games and sports. Depending on the game, the participants, the place and historical moment, the range of intersecting social meanings is vast. As MacClancy writes, ‘The creative
possibilities by which people, via sports, can play with their identity is only limited by the sports available to them at any one time within their lived space. In other words, sports are ways of fabricating in a potentially complex manner a space for oneself in their social world. In today’s San Francisco Soccer Football League, soccer’s polysemic possibilities – the potential for multiple signification – marks ethnicity as primary within this open terrain of social identities. Thus, when discussing a male soccer player representing a team with an ethnic moniker, such as the Greek-Americans or the San Francisco Scots, the symbolic representation of ethnicity takes primary signification in the politics of identity, traversing frontiers of race, class, gender and sexuality. The fluidity of self articulation on the soccer field is not unlike the motion of the game itself, at times conservative, at others creative and open.

The complex play of ethnic identification through sport acknowledges a range of cultural possibilities within the same game. As Cronin and Mayall assert, ‘it is possible for immigrants to express their distinct ethnic identity by participating in or supporting a (native) sport or team, but otherwise and for the most part seeking, consciously and deliberately, to assimilate into the host society and to lose any signs of separateness in a multicultural whole.’ While some ethnic clubs or teams within the San Francisco Soccer Football League have made direct reference to their ethnically-based American citizenship, such as the British-American Rifles or the Greek-Americans, others identify solely with their native countries. Being American, whether hyphenated in name-sake or not, is perhaps assumed as part of league membership; however, being ethnic is distinctly marked in almost all club’s athletic production. This production is complicated as more and more members of the team no longer share their team’s ethnic affiliation. This team integration, as it turns out, may shed light on the actual process of becoming American. The Greek-Americans, for example, became the most dominant team in the history of the league, and perhaps the entire west coast of the United States, as evidenced by their league, state and national cup championships. But this athletic dominance witnessed a shift in player personnel that mirrored a particular ethnic community’s complex assimilation into a San Francisco sports league and American society overall. And yet, this shift from a team comprised solely of Greek players to a roster with not a single Greek-American player may have been more a reflection of wanting to win games than a strong desire to integrate fully into the dominant society.

The San Francisco Greek-American Athletic Club was organized by two Greek brothers ‘as a diversion for young Greek immigrants who had settled in the Bay Area after the war’. Established in 1949 as the Pan-Hellenes, the club was initially under the auspices of the Greek Orthodox Church of Annunciation in San Francisco, where many of the players were also members of the church choir. As the soccer team began to play on Sundays during season, an inherent conflict developed. An ethnic soccer team was established, but the team’s participation came at the expense of missed church services and a depleted choir. After two years of these Sunday conflicts, the team name was changed to the Greek-Americans under the leadership of the Greek-American Youth Club. Whether as the Pan-Hellenes or Greek-American Athletic Club, the team recruited players from their own ethnic community throughout the 1950s.

In 1952, the team was promoted to the First Division of the SFSFL, largely as the result of the 43 goals scored that season by Cypriot Mike Nicholas. Every player on that team was of Greek descent. After one year in the top division of the league, the team was demoted back to the Second Division. The team climbed back into the first division a few years later, only to be demoted again after the 1958–59 season. According to the original founders and owners of the Greek-American Athletic Club,
John and Jim Rally, these demotions proved to be a turning point as the club made the decision to recruit the best players for the club team, regardless of national heritage. It was only after this conscious decision to recruit non-Greek players that the club began to dominate the SFSFL. The late 1950s and early 1960s were dominated by the San Francisco Scots and Teutonia, the German-American club. Between 1958 and 1966, the San Francisco Scots won five league titles while Teutonia took three. But over the next seven years, the Greek-Americans won five titles and began to assert their league dominance. Alongside forward and Greek-American Kirk Apostolides, the club recruited former English professional player, Scottish striker Tommy Dawkins, to help score goals and win games.

Victories and league championships prompted continued recruitment of non-Greek players. The team won seven of ten league titles and eight of ten Northern California Open Cup championships during the 1980s. It was during this decade, in particular, that the Rally brothers built a soccer dynasty comprised of international and American-born players, many of whom had played in the local colleges and universities. At times, the team’s roster read like a United Nations assembly, with members from Europe, Africa, Central and South America and the Middle East. When the Greek-Americans won the Open Cup National Championship in 1984, the team was comprised of mostly foreign-born players who had emigrated from Sweden, Scotland, Holland, Belgium, Honduras, Nigeria, Turkey and Iran. There were only four American-born players on the team.

The Greek-American Athletic Club was clearly not opposed to recruiting immigrants who could play soccer well; the historical trend merely shifted from the recruit-
ment of Greek immigrants to those from other countries. Most of these international players had already been recruited to the San Francisco Bay Area to compete for local colleges and universities, particularly from the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit university and soccer powerhouse during this period. Professional coaches were likewise recruited and paid. During the San Francisco Greek-American’s heyday in the late 1980s and mid 1990s, the club hired Lothar Osiander, one-time US National team coach. In fact, Osiander managed the San Francisco Greek-American Soccer Club while representing the United States as national team coach. The Club’s strategy to recruit the best players and coach paid off in terms of wins and losses. During one period between 1986 and 1989, the San Francisco Greek-Americans were undefeated in 55 consecutive games.

The Club’s dominance continued into the 1990s, but another shift took place away from recruiting foreign players to finding American-born players. In 1994, when the American Professional Soccer League (APSL) had folded in anticipation of the US-hosted World Cup and the formal launching of Major League Soccer (MLS), the Greek-Americans fielded a roster of former and current United States national team players, former professional players, with the former US National team coach at the helm. Once again, the club won the prestigious United States Open Cup National Championship, the last time that an ‘amateur’ team has won the cup. The Greek-American Athletic Club’s roster for this national championship was comprised of 14 American-born citizens and four foreign-born immigrants. Only ten years earlier, when the club previously won the Open Cup, the ratio of foreign- to American-born players was reversed. By 1994, the American player had emerged in the SFSFL.

Figure 2. Greek American soccer team of the SFSFL, 1994. U.S. National Open Cup Champions. No players were of Greek origin.
If the soccer players are the primary producers and representatives of the club in the SFSFL, the owners and managers of the teams are the direct link to ethnic pride and their community. They either established the club in the first place or are tied to its cultural history. They also finance the costs incurred as part of competition, which can be extremely expensive when paying players, paying league fees and the costs of travelling to regional, national and international tournaments. After winning the Open Cup National Championship in 1984 and 1994, the Greek-Americans represented the United States in the CONCACAF’s (Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football) annual Gold Cup, the main soccer competition of the 40 men’s national soccer teams from North and Central America and the Caribbean. The team travelled in 1985 to Bermuda and to Mexico in 1995, financed entirely by the club. According to John Rally, President and founder of the Club, he spent approximately $75,000 a year for over 40 years of directing the team’s soccer success.

In terms of the fluidity or stability of ethnic representation through team affiliation, the consumers or fans of their team in the SFSFL are steadfast and loyal. Their stable loyalty, win or lose, is first and foremost a result of ethnic pride. Members of the ethnic community might not attend games, but they would take pride in their successes through direct or indirect contact with the team. The community members might interact with players at a clubhouse or an affiliated business after games, where they would provide their support for the players, whether they shared their ethnic backgrounds or not. Sponsors of the team are most often ethnically affiliated, as well, perhaps a local business, such as a restaurant or bar with direct ethnic ties. Greek-American Athletic Club owners, John and Jim Rally, organized an annual Dinner Dance for over 40 years, drawing on the sponsorship of the Greek-American community. In the Greeting of the Dinner Dance Program dated Saturday 26 January 1985, Chairman Jim Rally writes: ‘It is once again my great pleasure to welcome you all to our 35th Annual Dinner Dance, and to thank you for your continued moral and financial support. Our thanks are also extended to our advertisers in this yearbook, without whose generosity and understanding of our cause, the continuation of our work would be most difficult.’ The programme or yearbook, 5” x 8” in size, was approximately 15 pages long. In addition to the Greeting, the programme included pictures of the current and former teams, several pages devoted to the History of the Greek-American Soccer Team, as well as a page devoted to the Club’s Hall of Fame. The remainder of the programme was advertising from local proprietors such as Zeus Construction, Xenios Classic Greek Cuisine and Demetri’s Deli and Catering, to name a few sponsors. Chairman Rally estimated that the Dinner Dance netted between $5,000 and $10,000 a year in support of the team.36

In his greeting, Rally continues:

In thirty-five years of uninterrupted activity in soccer competition, our organization has accumulated a record that is unsurpassed in the annals of local athletics, having won a combined total of 28 league and cup championships. We are extremely proud of these achievements for it reflects well not only upon our organization, but upon our Bay Area Hellenic Communities and our glorious heritage.37

These words articulate the direct connection between ethnic pride and the athletic accomplishment of the club. That most of these championships have been won with
players outside of the Greek-American community does not seem to dampen the spirit and celebration of the ethnic community itself.

This trend towards multiculturalism and ethnic heterogeneity among players in the SFSFL occurred with most teams in the league throughout the twentieth century. While some teams made greater efforts to recruit players from their ethnic communities and/or had a greater pool of talent from which to draw, no team in the SFSFL prohibits players from other nationalities, particularly if they can play. As the case of the Greek-American Athletic Club attests, some teams actively recruit players based primarily on competitive soccer skill rather than ethnic heritage. Thus, while the majority of the teams in the SFSFL retain an ethnic identity today, the selection process of players to teams is not unidirectional or top-down. There is an element of volunteerism at play as well. While the club’s motivation may be to recruit players who share their ethnic background and/or are more competitive and skilful players, the players’ motivations might be financial (pay for play), aesthetic (style of play) and/or cultural, such as playing for a team representing their ethnic heritage. For example, an ethnic affiliated team might be represented in a lower (or even in the same) division, but a more skilful player of that same ethnic heritage may opt to compete at a higher level for a different team with a different ethnic affiliation. The opposite might also be true. Despite the ability to compete at a higher level, and the active recruitment from another team, a player may opt to remain with a team comprised of fellow countrymen. Ethnic integration and assimilation through sport was often created, therefore, as a result of the club’s active recruitment of players and the conscious decision of those players to compete for a more competitive team. Thus, there are often mixed allegiances by ethnicity, where a Scottish player might play for the Greek-Americans rather than the San Francisco Scots. The resultant heterogeneity of the players on these ethnic teams supports the possibilities of cultural integration and assimilation. The SFSFL therefore provides an American sporting experience in which national and ethnic identity is strengthened at the same time that a multicultural experience through sport is made possible.

The open play of ethnicity in the amateur or semi-professional adult SFSFL likewise confronts the dominant belief of sport as a vehicle for social mobility. Rags-to-riches stories through sport are rare even in major spectator sports, but achieving the American Dream through professional soccer is nearly impossible in the United States. In general, the San Francisco Soccer Football League is not a farm system for the professional ranks, although players have moved from the top division of the league onto professional and national team rosters. During the off season of the professional season and during periods when there was no American professional soccer league, the SFSFL, and other amateur urban leagues like it, provided the highest level of soccer in the United States. Over the years, therefore, there has been a blurring of the line between amateur and professional, whereby many of the recruited players were paid to play on Sundays. During the dominant reign of the Greek-Americans in the SFSFL, players received anywhere from $50 to $250 per game to play. In addition to seeking a more competitive level of play, this financial incentive may have trumped the desire to represent a club based upon ethnic affiliation. While playing for pay might be an incentive, none of these players perceived themselves as soccer professionals.

Many of the players in the SFSFL were college-educated and solidly middle class. Newly arrived immigrants were seeking their own economic security through work. Playing soccer was generally a diversion and not a primary means for financial gain.
As Martinez argues, ‘soccer in the USA remains both a sport of middle-aged immigrant men and of middle class boys who don’t need to succeed in sports in order to survive whatever adversity life has to throw at them.’ For the college-educated American soccer player, opting for a professional career in something other than soccer seems a rational decision. In 2007, the starting salary for a professional soccer player in Major League Soccer was $12,900, hardly a rags-to-riches story of upward social mobility. This meagre salary in the US premier professional soccer league can be juxtaposed with the contracts of international players such as British midfielder David Beckham (earning $6.5 million dollars guaranteed), Mexican striker Cuauhtémoc Blanco (earning $2.5 million dollars guaranteed) and Columbia striker Juan Pablo Ángel (earning $1.6 million dollars guaranteed).

Conclusion

Thus, on the one hand, we see professional American soccer perceived as too ‘foreign’, as the premiere soccer league in the United States actively recruits international stars while simultaneously enacting rules which limit the number of foreign players. Today’s David Beckham is yesterday’s Pelé for professional soccer in the United States. However, soccer in America has enjoyed a tremendously rich history as an ethnic and amateur sport, simultaneously promoting cultural fortification and assimilation. From a socially marginalized position, soccer as ethnic subculture has demonstrated the potential to both reinforce and challenge the dominant notion of sport as an agent of social integration and assimilation. As the Greek-American Athletic Club illustrates, during the latter half of the twentieth century, amateur soccer has allowed space for immigrants and ethnic communities to play for and support their particular team. Within the SFSFL, increased competition and the blurring of amateurism and professionalism has significantly altered the process of player recruitment and volunteerism. This nuanced process has likewise altered the cultural composition of many ethnically-marked clubs, to the extent that some clubs like the San Francisco Greek-Americans now field a team with not a single player of Greek descent. The recruitment first of non-Greek immigrants, followed by the selection of American-born players for the roster, highlights a clear process of team and league assimilation. Whether this process for one team within the SFSFL represents a more general process of ethnic assimilation and integration in San Francisco, and the United States overall, is less clear. Nonetheless, San Francisco soccer fields have indeed afforded space for communities to assemble around a common goal. Thus, rather than a tale of promise unfulfilled, the San Francisco Football Soccer League, and American soccer in general, has provided an open terrain for new ethnicities to play and compete for cultural space in an emerging nation.

Notes

1. As of September 2009, the US Men’s national soccer team is currently ranked eleventh in the world, based upon FIFA’s revised ranking system. This statistic suggests that the US men have been extremely successful in international competition. And, in fact, the national team has fared well overall. But while the US men have qualified for the past five World Cup tournaments, the team has only won three games out of the eighteen games played during those five tournament appearances (the full results are three wins, twelve losses and three draws). Conversely, the US women’s national team is currently ranked #1 in the world. The FIFA Women’s World Cup has been contested five times,
with the US women winning the tournament twice (1991, 1999). Following the US women’s first place finish in the 1999 World Cup, a professional women’s league was established. It is possible that American women’s success in soccer worldwide has negatively impacted the popularity of men’s professional soccer in the United States. As Dolores Martinez notes (2008, 239), “the success of women could well be the final nail in the coffin of male soccer participation—if women can triumph in the sport, it really must not be tough enough to qualify as a true test of American masculinity” (author’s italics).

2. See Sage (1998, 30) on hegemony in sport and the silent domination of subordinate groups through ‘commonsense’ and everyday practices. Thus, “modern sport, rather than being merely a diversionary entertainment, is considered to be an important popular culture practice upon which dominant ideologies are constructed, maintained, and reproduced.” This works to the advantage of men over women or male hegemony, where “the traditions, symbols, and values of sport have therefore tended to preserve patriarchy and women’s subordinate position in society” (64). See also Coakley (2011, 489-491) on the predominance of power and performance sports over pleasure and participation sports.

3. As Foer (2005, 237) points out, “soccer’s appeal lay in its opposition to the other popular sports. For children of the sixties, there was something abhorrent about enrolling kids in American football, a game where violence wasn’t just incidental but inherent. They didn’t want to teach the acceptability of violence, let alone subject their precious children to the risk of physical maiming. Baseball, where each batter must stand center stage four or five times a game, entailed too many stressful, potentially ego-deflating encounters.” This counter-cultural celebration of soccer and its positive socializing potential has led many parents, particularly fathers, to respond. Sport radio shock jock Jim Rome, who became popular in the mid-1990s, exemplifies this anti-soccer tirade, when he railed, “My son is not playing soccer. I will hand him ice skates and a shimmering sequined blouse before I hand him a soccer ball. Soccer is not a sport, does not need to be on my TV, and my son will not be playing it” (quoted in Foer, 242). Rome’s resistance to soccer as an oppositional sport culture demonstrates an American masculinist sport ethic that is troubling, but all too common.

   Soccer may not been seen by some fathers (or parents) as the best sport to instill conservative American values in their boys in particular, but other critics see the sport as anti-American from a geo-political perspective.

   Jack Kemp, former Buffalo Bills quarterback and nine-term U.S. Republican Representative, was opposed to a 1986 resolution put before the Congress of the United States to support a bid to host the World Cup. He argues: “I think that it is important for all those young out there, who someday hop to play real football, where you throw it and kick and run with it and put it in your hands, a distinction should be made that football is democratic, capitalist, whereas soccer is a European socialist [sport] “ (quoted in Foer, 241). Kemp was a leading Republican candidate for the Presidential election in 1988 and the Republican Vice Presidential candidate in 1996. He lost both of these bids for election, while the United States won the bid to host the 1994 World Cup despite his opposition.

4. Soccer has been described as the ‘ethnic game’ (Stoddart, Saturday Afternoon Fever; Hallinan and Krotee, ‘Conceptions of Nationalism’), particularly when the players and/or fans are drawn primarily from ethnic populations. Given its marginalization vis-à-vis the dominant spectator sports of baseball, basketball and American football in the United States, soccer is likewise an American sport subculture. In his article, ‘Subcultures in Sport: Resilience and Transformation’, Donnelly writes: ‘as cultural units that share in the dominant culture and maintain and produce a number of alternative cultural forms and ideologies, subcultures provide an ideal model with which to explore dominant, residual, and emergent aspects of culture’ (121). As such, I use the term ‘ethnic subculture’ to describe American soccer.

5. Rader, American Sports; Eisen, Ethnicity and Sport; Franks, Crossing Sidelines.
7. Mangan and Ritchie, Ethnicity, Sport, Identity.
11. Cheska, ‘Sport as Ethnic Boundary Maintenance’.
12. As Cronin and Mayall assert, ‘In its more “mature” form, a national identity can permit the blurring of differences and serve to unite a multi-ethnic people behind a single national ideal, as is encapsulated in the notion of the American Dream.’ Cronin and Mayall, *Sporting Nationalisms*, 3.
16. FIFA granted this rule change in the United States in 1973 but forced the NASL, and the American version of the game, to readopt the worldwide standard in 1983.
18. Major League Soccer (MLS) began play in 1996 but was formed on 17 December 1993, fulfilling a promise to FIFA from the US Soccer Federation to establish a ‘Division One’ professional soccer league in exchange for staging the 1994 FIFA World Cup.
19. Previously, the seven international players had to fall into two distinct groups of either senior (age 25 or older) or youth (age 24 or younger) players. Major League Soccer’s revised foreign player rule now allows each club eight international players with no youth or senior designation.
20. Quoted in Davis, ‘Desire to Maintain Quality’.
22. The San Francisco Soccer Football League (SFSFL) was originally known as the California Football League.
24. Ibid.
32. After their first SFSFL league championship in 1966–67, the Greek-Americans became the premier team in the league and one of the premier teams in both California and the nation. Between 1966 and 2006, the Greek-Americans amassed 55 trophies: SFSFL (16), Northern California National Open Cup (15), Northern California State Cup (15), California State Cup (4), National Open Cup (2), National Over-30 Open Cup (2) and National Over-40 Open Cup (1).
34. Much of the history of the Greek-American Athletic Club was obtained by interviews with the Club founders, John and Jim Rally, as well as the brief article, ‘The History of the Greek-Americans Soccer Team’, included in the 35th Annual Dinner Dance Program for the Greek-American Athletic Club.
35. McGeever, ‘San Francisco Soccer Football League’.
36. 35th Annual Dinner Dance Program for the Greek-American Athletic Club, dated Saturday 26 January 1985. Event held at Holy Cross Church Hall, Belmont, California.
37. Ibid.
38. Martinez, ‘Soccer in the USA’, 239.
39. Of the 359 players listed by the MLS Player’s Union in 2007, 55 earn $12,900 and an additional 35 earn $17,700. Nearly all who earn these paltry salaries are journeymen or developmental American players. In 2009, the minimum salary was raised to $20,100.

**References**


