

Did you see that? Oh yes, we did

In America, viewership for the World Cup reached new heights—and so did the passion



This past month, ESPN implored Americans to “catch the World Cup on television, online, and on your phone,” and the country responded. More than 120 million Americans tuned in to witness the excitement from South Africa as World Cup fever swept across the country.

Both ESPN and the Spanish-language network Univision shattered previous viewership records. A combined 16.9 million people watched the United States’ opening match against England. Nearly 20 million switched on the USA-Ghana match on a Saturday afternoon—a number that matched prime-time ratings for last year’s World Series. The final between Spain and Holland attracted 24.3 million viewers, the biggest soccer audience in American history. Online, the World Cup quickly became the most-watched sports event in history, and thousands more hopped on their smartphones to follow the action. A conflict with a kids swim meet introduced me to the latter experience, and I loved every minute.

The numbers don’t lie: Americans followed this World Cup to an extent never seen here before. But what impact will this have on the future of the game in the United States?

There’s no doubt that a significant number of people tuned in because they were drawn to the spectacle and to show their nationalistic pride. Americans love big events, they are proud of their country, and they will support American athletes almost regardless of the sport. (We see this during the Olympics.) Interest spikes even higher when there is some adversity or perceived slight. And thanks to a couple of dubious refereeing decisions, a “the world is against us” mentality stoked many Americans’ interest in the matches. Are these people really soccer fans? Probably not. But bandwagon-jumping is a natural development and exposes the sport to millions of people. While no doubt a good thing for soccer, this is not the most valuable legacy of World Cup 2010.

There were other developments that will have a much more profound impact on the future of soccer

in the United States, developments that—like a wrecking ball to a brick barrier—lay waste to lingering perceptions that for decades have held the sport back.

June 23, 2010, will go down as one of the biggest days in American soccer. It will be seen as the day it became uncool for any American to suggest that soccer is boring, as well as the day it became uncool for anyone around the world to suggest that Americans are not passionate about this sport.

Scoring in South Africa was down from previous World Cups, but the excitements levels were dialed way up. Drama engulfed each of the United States’ four matches, with the intensity reaching its peak on June 23 during the Americans’ final group game against Algeria. For 90 minutes a 0-0 match—that’s right, a scoreless game—seized American fans and took them on an emotional roller-coaster ride before delivering them to ecstasy in the form of Landon Donovan’s last-gasp winner. Donovan’s dramatic goal vaulted the United States from the brink of elimination to the top of the group. Soccer instantly grabbed the headlines and monopolized conversations around the water cooler. Even soccer’s biggest critics had to acknowledge the excitement.

While Donovan shot to rock-star status, a man called Robby Donoho was making an equally important contribution to the future of American soccer. Who is Robby Donoho, you say? I don’t remember him scoring dramatic goals, making beautiful passes, or saving point-blank shots. That’s because Robby wasn’t in South Africa. He’s not a professional player or coach. He’s not a high-powered soccer administrator, leading sports executive, or influential media member. Robby Donoho is none of these, but chances are you’ve seen his work. See, Robby is the 21-year-old student at Purdue University who compiled the video montage of fans around the world reacting to Donovan’s game-winning goal against Algeria.

His video generated millions of views on YouTube almost overnight, and inspired reaction from players (including Donovan himself), fans and journalists

alike. This is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it confirmed to many a committed soccer fan that he or she is not alone. That the ritual of rising early on, say, a Saturday morning and marching down to the local soccer bar to watch the matches was not reserved for the die-hard crazies among us. It showcased the fact that soccer has gone—dare I say—mainstream and that people all over the country were united in support of the USA national team. Donoho’s video is also a strong rebuke to the particularly annoying misconception that Americans lack a passion for the game. Passion is hard to quantify, of course, but the faces in the video—engrossed and exulting—are most certainly those of real fans, not casual spectators. When you consider, too, that the United States bought more World Cup tickets than any other visiting country, the notion that Americans are ambivalent to the game seems a rather fragile assertion.

These World Cup experiences are important and quite timely when you consider that the next major milestone for American soccer is right around the corner. In December, FIFA will announce the host countries for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup tournaments. The United States is very much a contender, with clear advantages on the marketing and logistical fronts. According to reports, though, FIFA executives are among those who still question America’s passion for the beautiful game. The Donovan/Donoho one-two punch might just have squashed this perception once and for all and opened the door for the United States to again host the greatest soccer show on earth. Landon is destined for the US Soccer Hall of Fame, but Robby deserves his place in history, too.

Curious about the (unavoidable) intersection of soccer and business? You can email John Guppy at contact@gilteditgesoccer.com; or follow him on Twitter, where he goes by @SoccerMarketer

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