

## local view

# Sister City Cup 1, World Cup 0



**Michael Kooi**

**A**fter 120 seemingly interminable minutes of World Cup soccer Sunday, I experienced an unexpected epiphany: America plays the best soccer in the world.

You see, a World Cup final is supposed to showcase soccer at its finest; it's to be the ultimate example of the sport's ability to cross cultures and bring together the entire globe.

Yet little of the "beautiful game" flowed forth in the World Cup final. Players on both sides racked up fouls and threw themselves onto the pitch in paroxysms of pantomimed pain in what was generally an execrable display of sportsmanship. One hoped Spain's goal in the 116th minute would put an end to the ugliness, but the Netherlands carried it beyond the final whistle by haranguing the referees as they tried to leave the field — no doubt exhausted by the effort of cataloging the sheer volume of Dutch foul play.

Now, contrast this vulgar spectacle with the recent Sister City Soccer Cup between Northland communities and Växjö, Sweden, and you may

share my conclusion about where the world's best soccer is played.

For about two weeks this summer, 100 or so high school-aged players from Duluth's Scandinavian sister city stayed with Northland families for the purpose of sharing cultures, making connections and, yes, holding a soccer tournament. Over three days, boys and girls from the Northland and Växjö met on the pitch to learn about each other through the medium of the game.

While the teams played to a number of those scoreless draws that so exasperate American soccer critics, the draws, like the games with winners and losers, seemed to pull everyone closer together. As Växjö-Sweden Chairman Magnus Athley told a television reporter on the exchange's final day, "We are exactly the same people."

I wonder how many Dutch fans watching in Amsterdam's Museumplein felt this way about their counterparts in Madrid's Plaza de Colón — or vice-versa — when the final whistle blew Sunday on the World Cup final.

Around the globe, soccer has traced the same developmental arc as big-time sports here in America. Like football and basketball, "futbol" has tilted so far away from the "game" end of the spectrum and so far toward the "business" end that much of its simple joy has been muscled aside by a winning-is-everything

mentality.

For the team owners, league officials, vendors, sponsors, media outlets and players, there's simply too much money at stake to treat the game like, well, like a game. For fans, there's often too much vicarious living, loving and loathing through their beloved teams to do likewise.

Ironically, professional soccer's failure to become a cash cow and marketing juggernaut in the U.S., on par with the NFL or Major League Baseball, actually has enabled it to occupy a unique — and I would say enviable — position in the American sports firmament. Relatively free of the supercharged rivalries, glorified swagger and crass hype stoked by a dominant, self-serving pro league, soccer has become the sport of choice for making connections and competing within the context of friendship. (And please do not send me letters about adult kickball leagues; I will NOT read them.)

Is it me, or does that bear an eerie resemblance to the original idea behind the World Cup?

The Sister City Cup certainly got it right. That's why one could argue that, for three days, right here in the U.S. — and right here in Duluth — those kids played the finest soccer in the world.

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