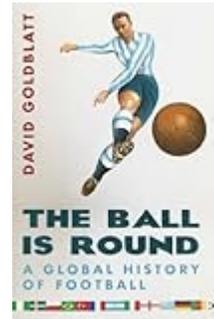




David Goldblatt. *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football.* London: Penguin Books, 2006. 997 S. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-91480-7.



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D. Goldblatt: The Ball is Round. A Global History of Football

The growth in the commercialisation, consumption and popularity of football over the past few decades has been so precipitous and extensive that today it is common currency to refer to this sport as a globalised activity. The globalisation of football in recent years has been driven by several interrelated factors: continued and predictable increases in the world's largest economies leading to real rises in disposable incomes and concomitant changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns there; the growing commercial significance of football tied to its increased consumption; the consolidation of international televising through the emergence of large multinational broadcasting firms that established market dominance; the increased corporatisation of football through the acquisition of football clubs by private capital; and finally, the growth in the significance of the football World Cup finals as more than a sporting event, but as major spectacles with international appeal.

In all of this, the economic facets of football – the ability to gain profit out of the organisation of competitions and the marketing of football loyalty – have been the driving forces for the globalisation of the sport over

the past thirty years. In truth, however, the globalisation of football had started much, much earlier, steered by a more fundamental element of the sport – the simple logic to the game and hence its ability to transpose from one culture to another without imposing conditions for adaptation or change. Football's simplicity, its power to captivate and its universal allure have been the primary reasons why it has reached the size it has, and why, at various times of its existence, it had gained significance as a political force, put to use by political actors. It is this part of football's story – its emergence as a physical activity, its early codification and regularisation as a sport, its adoption by diverse societies, and its eventual commercialisation and corporatisation to the extent it has reached today, but explained elementally in terms of the cultural appeal and transferability of the game – that occupies Goldblatt in this voluminous body of work.

Goldblatt's project is an ambitious one – to script not only the factors tied to the globalisation of football, but to document the history of the game throughout the circumference of the globe. At one level this task is relatively easy, for despite the 'global' nature of foot-

ball, it has real sporting significance on only three of the world's continents – Europe, South America, and Africa. Despite growth in participation (indeed at a level faster than any other sport) in the United States of America, football is still relatively marginal in a country which hosts many of the world's largest sport multinationals. And on the populous continent of Asia, and in the rapidly growing economies of China and India, it is cricket, or other sports that carry greater cultural value. The geographical extent of football therefore is not the major factor of football's globalisation, nor the main framework by which the international history of the game should be set. At another level, however, there are many overlapping and interwoven stories to football's growth, centred as it was historically in Europe, but soon diffusing to other parts of the world on the back of expanding trade routes, naval networks, and colonial conquests, that need to be recounted in order to provide a complete – if not dense – world history of football.

Goldblatt attempts to do this by structuring the book along three main axes of review – historically, geographically and commercially. Along these three axes there is an overarching narrative – contained in five parts – that presents a more or less coherent chronological account of the early origins of the game and its eventual geographical expansion. Part One picks up with the medieval origins of ball-based games in various settings, and the creation of modern football in Britain. Ascribing the prevailing of the specific variant of game played in Britain above other indigenous European or South American games to factors such as the manner in which early rules of play were laid down and accepted on the British Isles and later elsewhere, this part details the conditions by which football was able to gain its early features and which contributed to its appeal in other societies. Part Two focuses on the expansion and popularisation of football in the high era of British imperialism and industrialisation, between 1870 and 1934. Part Three expands on the cultural, economic and socio-political intricacies that were characteristic to the growth and later professionalisation of football in the main European, Latin American, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, African football countries. The major narrative thrust here is the manner in which football's expansion took shape alongside processes of state formation, nationalism, warfare, colonialism (in the case of Africa), industrial transformation and concomitant processes of urbanisation. This takes us up to 1974, from whence Part Four starts to recount the various forms of conversion and alterations that football experienced at the hands of the Fédération Internation-

tionale de Football Association, or FIFA, a body which in this period started to establish itself as an international organisation of political consequence. Part Five explores the nature – now fully globalised and commercialised – of football in the period 1990-2006. Football's entry into Asia as a commercial and cultural enterprise over the past half-decade marked its true internationalisation, but it also continued to build itself out in the established markets of Europe and South America. The concluding chapter ends with a prospective look toward the 2006 FIFA World Cup, an event which, in the end through its massive spectatorship, had outperformed all expectations of the real global reach of football.

In all, twenty-two chapters (twenty of which are substantive, a brief concluding chapter and briefer introductory chapter) provide account of the major historical phases in football's development, its advance across geographical frontiers and continents, and its increased commodification, tied to the cultural absorption of the game in different settings. The value of the book lies in its ability to weave football's history with other aspects of world history. Aside from the meta-narrative by which the book is structured, for instance, there are several other, smaller narratives of the forces that shaped world society – the fall of empires that helped stimulate a dynamism in football techniques and led for brief periods, at different historical points, to a pre-eminence of British, Austrian and Hungarian football; or the newfound status of Uruguay as a footballing power in the early part of the twentieth century, in no small part due to the greater ease of trans-Atlantic travel as a result of technological changes. As such the book presents a robust and lively account of the social history of football as shaped by major world events, smaller societal shifts and the influence of key personalities at key points in football's existence in given countries. Whether this amounts to a global history, however, is less certain.

Partly this derives from the scale and ambition of the book – it was always going to be a challenge to provide full account of all aspects of football's development. But it also arises from the fact that the book draws predominantly from secondary sources, and at that predominantly those appearing in English. In sum, while well-styled and entertainingly written, the book is a skilful and well-crafted assemblage of only a certain segment of scholarship on world football. The most important scholars in the field of sport are cited – for instance Alegi (for Africa), Dimeo (for Asia), Maguire (on the sociology of global sport)) – but the shortage of primary material reflects in a somewhat selective recounting of story and

past. This is not to detract from the overall worth of the book. It does present a picture of football which both goes some way to explain the significance of the sport in contemporary world society, and hints to a further extension by which the game could shape coming world events.

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