

---

MURRAY, WILLIAM J., *The World's Game: A History of Soccer*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Pp. xix, 218. Includes appendix, glossary, bibliographic essay, and index, plus 12 pages of plates. \$27.95, cb.

Bill Murray is a scholar who combines the talents of a social historian with the passions of a knowledgeable fan. His grasp of the details of the game and of the events throughout the history of soccer is exceeded only by his conviction about the virtues of the game and the need to retain what is best in it against the threats of uninformed innovation. He has an almost evangelical fervor to convince the uninitiated and culturally deprived of the importance of soccer. These qualities provide both the strengths and the weaknesses, the unique insights and the frustrating single-mindedness of this very ambitious and valuable book. Murray approaches his subject with an interest in explaining what is different and special about soccer and how it developed into the "world game." All other sports run a distant second, and a society that fails to recognize that reality is somewhat deficient.

In the early chapters, Murray goes over territory that will be familiar to anyone with a knowledge of soccer. This is useful, especially since the book was revised for an American audience. The discussion of the spread of the "Very British" sport shows how widely and quickly it occurred, but it does not explain *why* the sport gained broad acceptance. Murray accepts as a matter of course that

soccer would have to be organized even at the lowest level. Why the British and their soccer disciples felt a need to bring a structure to their sport is a fascinating aspect of comparative social history that someone with Murray's background could bring into sharper focus.

Murray gets into top gear when he reaches the 1920s. The chapter is crammed with wonderful asides and descriptions of exciting incidents. But it lacks a central focus even when he raises the issue of professionalism, a concept that seems as troubling to Murray on moral grounds as it does on economic ones. Much of the book deals with the international soccer competitions, and Murray seems to draw no distinction between internationalization of the sport and games played between national teams. How important have the "national" sides been to supporters and players alike? If club supporters could make a Faustian bargain that would ensure league and cup titles in exchange for defeats of the national team, there might be a long line waiting to sign the contract.

At times, it is hard to be sure if Murray's almost matter-of-fact hyperbole is done for effect or represents his judgment. Did Germany's loss in soccer at the 1936 Olympics really bother Hitler more than the triumphs of the American track and field athletes? The answer probably depends less on the sport than on which nation Hitler wanted to impress. Was Chamberlain's attitude toward the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia the equivalent of the "British public's total disinterest in the World Cup"? (p. 84). In both cases, one might conclude that if a person is unwilling or afraid to play, he or she cannot have any impact on the results.

In all of his earlier work, Murray has shown a deep interest in and understanding of the social context of football. In this book, he has to spread his attention so broadly that the generalizations sometimes seem disconnected from the evidence. How did soccer hooligans "represent the darker side of the 1960s, the greed that unprecedented wealth in the western world encouraged, promoted in television advertisements, and flaunted in the lifestyles of the rich and famous"? (p. 125). If that was the case, what about the heroic qualities and individualism of the players Murray admires? For Murray, the real crime of commercialism was the introduction into sport of "the ugly 'winner' mentality" (p. 125). But what was so special or so ugly about footballers playing to win? The conclusion requires an explanation. Where does Murray locate a disinterested professional, or would he find more acceptable the condescending posturing of the Corinthians, who maintained that winning does not matter?

In a rare positive comment about televised sports, Murray states that commentators are more willing than in the past to condemn racism and other crudities even if they will not extend the same critiques to rampant commercialism. On balance, this seems a net gain both for soccer and for the broader society in which it operates. Murray's discussion of the relationship between football and politics raises interesting considerations, although his assertion that football, unlike rugby and cricket, was never a tool of apartheid is a rather backhanded compliment. Football, even at the international level, was so trivial to the South African elite that they never considered using it for their own purposes.

*The World's Game* is multiple books within one text. This can be frustrating for the reader who wants more on a particular subject, but it is also a compliment to Murray's reach and the extent of his knowledge. He shows us that football has been, in Arthur Hopcraft's phrase, much more than a "sideshow" around the world during this century. Although it certainly is not clear to me when, or if, a golden age of football ever existed, Murray seems sure that at minimum there was a time when things were less bad than they are today. If the purpose of a general history is to provoke questions, then Murray certainly has succeeded. His involvement with, and mastery of, his subject leads him to believe that soccer is so intrinsically important that it will triumph over the reluctance of some to understand its value; he believes it will even triumph over its own excesses.

—CHARLES P. KORR  
*University of Missouri-St. Louis*