

Football a National Mirror:

North Americans cannot understand why soccer (as they call it) is the most popular sport in the world (other than their own) and why it is considered to be “The Beautiful Game” North Americans consider it boring, slow, low scoring when compared to Hockey, (their) Football or even Baseball. What they completely fail to understand is that football (as it should properly be called) is an expression of each country’s culture – a National Mirror. The rules are the same, the stadiums are similar but the style of play is a reflection of the national culture: Football is a cultural expression. The French play this elegant way because they are French. The Brazilians play this rhythmic way because they are Brazilians, Spanish football style reminds you of a bull fighting dance, the Dutch play a spontaneous total football because they are Dutch, the British play a physical hard tackling game because they are British – get the point? This is less true of club football anymore because of the mobility of international top players to the highest bidding club, but that is another story. Since Sir Alex Ferguson retired in 2013 winning the Premier League title, Manchester United was not the same and went backward under David Moyes and his successor Luis van Gaal both whom have since been sacked because they attempted to change the culture and personality of United from an exciting dare Red Devils playing with pace, creativity, confidence to a cautious, defensive, constrained team. Club teams too have personalities, souls, traditions and culture. You cannot turn a company like Google to become AT&T. If you try you have to kill its soul first. Here is my favourite Football story of all times:

Many years ago, in fact it was the spring of 1983 when the top executive of the Corporation I worked for at the time, hosted a dinner for some twenty odd Country Managers in Mexico City. These were the days: posh restaurant, expansive and expensive wine but worth every drop and little to no conversation at all. Twenty people representing twenty nationalities are meeting with their new American Boss with only English to some degree or another as a common language. No wonder. It is then that the Boss threw this question on the table with instructions to respond in order and then debate. It was a very clever move. I have never forgotten it:

Who do you think was or is the most creative person who ever lived?

Talk about an ice breaker. By the time the question arrived at my Brazilian colleague seated next to me, multiple Einsteins, Da Vincis, Mozarts, and even Jesus were already mentioned. Without hesitation whatsoever my Brazilian friend uttered: **PELE**. The place got awkwardly quiet in an instance. Should we laugh? It a joke? Or in the words of John McEnroe: “You can’t be serious!” I had to break the ice again. “As a Soccer aficionado (a game better known and rightly so all over the world except for North America as football) and a major league soccer player in my youth I back my Brazilian colleague: “Pele creatively mastered the “O Jogo Bonito” (The beautiful game) like no other and became the iconic symbol and role model for players and fans of the most popular global sport in the world. Yes. Pele who’s signed painting continues to adorn, as my personal inspiration every office wall that I have ever worked in, including my home.

I thought that this will break the silence and indeed it almost broke the meeting. I am yet to witness as heated a debate as ensued. Twenty some odd colleagues initially angered, gradually listening and finally mostly agreeing not only on the validity of the answer but on its merit. One by one conceded albeit not necessarily changing their answer, that indeed Pele is one of the most creative people who ever lived. It was like a scene from Twelve Angry Men albeit in a totally different context. It is then that I realized what I always believed that soccer is more than a sport. It is an expression of international cultures and traditions, where each national soccer team is an ambassador of its distinct nation's history and tradition and predictably showcases same in its style, strategy and individual play. Soccer played in the image of the nation itself. I decided to research the hypothesis thus I invite you on this international journey: "Soccer - A National Mirror"