

## AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?

Toby Miller

The 1998 World Cup gave U.S. residents some excellent opportunities to think through how the most isolated sports culture in the world (ours) views the product of openly competitive sports-TV markets, where the term *world champions* refers to more than the best among a handful of arbitrarily selected North American cities. Apart from the staggeringly intrusive telegenics of our English-language coverage, such as laying a graphic advertising NFL games scheduled for 3 months later over the quarter of the screen that contained the action and oxymoronically thanking companies for bringing the game free of commercials when their logos occupied the screen throughout, we were treated to an updated Monroe Doctrine. Remember that wonderful relic of the 1820s, revived by Reagan's "backyard" rhetoric? It supposedly justifies the United States' political destabilization and economic restructuring of an entire continent to our south. Well, Monroe's durability was on display in ESPN's bizarre, resolutely repeated insistence that 1958, when Brazil won the World Cup in Sweden, was the only occasion when a team had succeeded from outside its own hemisphere. Hullo? In 1994, as again we were told over and over this time around, Brazil won the World Cup in the United States. Aren't those two nations from different hemispheres? Sorry, I forgot, the North American Free Trade Agreement and Monroe Doctrine must apply to Brazil—to the point where they have shifted its place on the globe? Is that right? Could a fact-checking reader help me out here?

This was not my only encounter with ESPN. I went to ABC's studios in Hollywood before the U.S. game against Iran to record an interview, next door to what I thought was an emergency-room facility, but was actually the exterior set of "General Hospital." Whisked into a state-of-the-art newsroom, I talked by telephone to an ESPN interviewer from the East. Our high-tech communicative ecology involved his asking me questions while I had the phone to my ear, my hiding the phone in my crotch as I answered to a taping camera, and our repeating the ploy when people disturbed the sound recording as they walked in and out. Hence, my spectacular one-armed gestures in the segment that eventually went to air. That basically saw me giving a conciliatory message of the kind we expect from simpleton liberal humanists: It is wonderful when two nations can visualize one another as individuals competing fairly, with a neutral referee—sport allows understanding at a "people" level. How interesting.

*Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, Volume 22, No. 4, November 1998, pp. 347-349  
© 1998 Sage Publications, Inc.

As is so often the case, the original interview had been more interesting. My interlocutor was a clever, pleasant man who asked the right questions and issued the right challenges, but they ended up as unused tape. "Right" in what sense? He posed the hard-line antiliberal position that would have been the immediate reaction of many people—"Are you saying we should forgive them for what they did?" Without trying to be flippant, I replied with "What do you mean?" "The Iranian Revolution and the hostages" was his immediate answer. Now the second of these responses was obvious. The first was bizarre. It was as if the very idea of a popular revolution overthrowing a U.S.-backed tyrant was an affront to the citizens and residents of our country. My reaction was, I guess, predictable: "Well, we might forgive them in the sense that we expect the peoples of Chile, Grenada, Panama, and countless other countries to forgive the U.S. government for assassinating their democratically elected officials or invading their nations." (This was not to mention killing hundreds of Iranian airline travelers in 1988, of course.) My interviewer was absolutely on the mark in asking me in the way he did. I wish I had pointed out that our government's stupendous hubris offends the rest of the world in a way that lacked that very quality. Then, we might have made it on the air.

I watched the game under discussion in a Santa Monica bar. Numerous Iranian supporters were present. They seemed edgily nervous. When Iran had the advantage, they looked around to see that it was safe to express their joy, whereas the few men in stars-and-stripes wept in their beer and salt. The next game I watched was Colombia-England, this time in a Lower West Side Manhattan nightclub that opened its daytime doors to soccer fans. The crowd was all English. The man next to me was wearing a T-shirt identifying him as from a working-class area of London, and the voice went with it. We never spoke, but he clutched at me whenever England did well and embraced me with each goal and the ultimate victory. Initially uncomfortable, I found myself looking forward to these shows of emotion. That made me think about the masculinities on display in the competition, where we observe strange passions and passionate exchanges, from players blowing kisses and driving one another into the ground with projectile cuddles, through to adopting strange poses for the crowd, for all the world like fey, queer-acting models (think of Michael Laudrup celebrating his goal for Denmark against Brazil).

Further to this point, those who saw the wonderful England-Argentina game may have followed the later denunciations of David Beckham, the brilliant midfielder who had helped win the Colombia match. He was sent from the field for an act of retaliation against a foul. This left his team a player down. They went on to lose. The reaction in Britain was predictable, with lynchings threatened and the usual Fleet Street atrocities. I want to note something about this. On the morning of the match, prior to Beckham's dismissal, the egregious Rupert Murdoch's equally egregious newspaper, *The Sun*, had depicted Beckham as Eva Peron, perhaps because he had recently been photographed at a party in France dressed in a sarong

with his affianced, Posh Spice (yes), on his arm. So the knives were out before his mistake—and this was clearly to do with his masculinity and patriotism. Beckham was punished for being pretty and leading a pretty lifestyle. His looks and his sex life feminized him for the British tabloid papers and parts of the public. This was his crime—to be on the edge of conventional manliness.

Sound familiar? Come on down, Dennis Rodman and his hysterical male media critics. Maybe the United States is not so exceptional after all, despite playing its sports in a provincial North American corridor.