

Foreword

BUILDING A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS QUESTIONS IN SPORT

By Jens Sejer Andersen, international director, Play the Game

In January 2009, 12 years after Play the Game's initial conference, I was invited for the first time to a meeting at the headquarters of the International Olympic Committee at Château de Vidy in Lausanne. The purpose was to explore if there was a basis for regular dialogue and for giving Play the Game accreditation to the IOC Congress later that year in Copenhagen.

I was received by a polite, stern, and serious political adviser from the very top of the IOC hierarchy who opened the conversation by telling me in no uncertain terms how the Olympic family regarded Play the Game: As a group of negative people who – by means of exaggeration – tried to make themselves a career by damaging the good sport.

In other words, Play the Game was good for nothing.

The same year, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, a small group of people began studying Play the Game's website and the outcome of our first six conferences in the utmost secrecy. They were detectives from the FBI and the IRS tax service who had been inspired by one of Play the Game's trusted journalist friends, the late Andrew Jennings,

and now were looking for angles and evidence in a case, they had just started building against the governing body of world football, FIFA.

“Your website was our entry to understand how international sports politics was working,” one of them told me many years later.

In other words, even if unknowingly, Play the Game was good for something.

After more than 25 years, 12 international conferences, numerous international research projects, and endless interventions at meetings, seminars, and conferences worldwide, the question is still open for discussion:

What is Play the Game good for?

The answer will probably still depend on whom you are asking. We are not entitled to define the answer on behalf of anyone else, but let me try to explain why we started and what we strive to be good for.

Local start, global relevance

Like all things global, the seeds for Play the Game were sown at a genuinely local level, at a regional radio station of the National Danish Broadcasting Cooperation 100 kilometres outside Copenhagen. A colleague threw a book on my desk with research on one of the most popular TV programmes, the Saturday afternoon broadcasting of English football garnered with sports news.

The author, the late Jørn Møller from the nearby Idrætsforsk Sports Research Institute, suggested that by focusing less on results and events and more on background and features, the programme could attract new and more diverse audiences. Women, for instance.

The way colleagues at the corporation’s sports desk reacted to this study of their work taught me a lesson I would be reminded of for decades to come. As I was led to understand, sports journalism had reached the apex of its development, it was untouchable and, by definition, it could not be improved.

The attitude was very different when Jørn Møller welcomed me to Idrætsforsk and its home base at Gerlev Sports Academy where I spent some years as a freelance consultant. There, the teachers and students worked intensely with a diversity of aspects of sport that you would rarely hear about in the media – in particular, the historical, political, and cultural aspects of sports.



What is Play the Game good for? That is the question the founder and international director Jens Sejer Andersen has asked himself for many years and attempts to answer in this foreword. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

For me, fresh out of the Danish School of Journalism, the perspectives offered by Gerlev Sports Academy looked like a goldmine of journalistic opportunities.

Young and hopeful, I decided to share the potential exploits of this goldmine by organising mid-career training courses for journalists in cooperation with the folks at Gerlev.

I was convinced my colleagues would rush to this haven for journalistic development. They did not. We could barely gather the minimum number of 12 participants per course, and the sports journalists attending the course were much more on the defensive than more generally oriented journalists when they were confronted with issues they knew little about.

Was it interesting news that more people in the 1990s chose the fitness gym over the handball court? Not really. Could it be discussed how Danish elite sport and grassroots sport was financed? Not my job. Would reintroducing traditional games and modern lifestyle activities help sports associations reach new target groups? Who cares? Was the inefficient fight against doping a topic journalists should deal with? Maybe one day.

After three attempts to energise sports journalism, I gave up and decided to focus on my new position as editor-in-chief of the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations (DGI).



The democratic association tradition connected to gymnastics is still alive in Denmark and manifests itself for instance at DGI's Landsstævne sports festivals every four years. Photo: Lars Horn/DGI

This was not a typical editorial position as guardian of the publisher's public reputation (although I know a few people who thought I did exactly that). One of the duties of the weekly magazine 'Ungdom & idræt' ('Youth & Sport') was to challenge not only the outside sports environment but also to hold DGI itself and its leaders accountable to the values of the organisation.

Sport and nation-building

DGI builds on a tradition of mixing sport and politics. Or to put it another way, integrating body culture into nation-building.

This mix was not a particularly Danish feature. In many other European countries, private associations offering sports based on nationalistic, religious, or educational goals once flourished. But in most cases, these organisations lost out as society was urbanised, either because they became irrelevant or merged with the rising Olympic movement – voluntarily or by force.

So, in most countries today, sport speaks with only one voice, to the detriment of a lively debate. As for DGI in its changing historic configurations, it maintained a powerful position and was by the 1990s a national umbrella for grassroots sports and was just as well-financed as the Danish national Olympic system of sports federations.

The roots of DGI date back to the late 19th century when the nation-state of Denmark had shrunk following a lost war to the Prussian neighbour, and team gymnastics and rifle shooting became an integral element of a nationwide movement in the countryside.

This movement sought not only to restore a diminished nation but also to strengthen democracy and the rights of the small farmers at a time when the Danish parliament was suspended by a conservative government representing big landowners and industrialists.

The remedies were, among other things, hundreds of small local cooperative enterprises like butcheries and dairies, independent folk high schools (folkehøjskoler), and a political party called 'The Left'.

Rifle shooting and gymnastics gave a bodily expression to the ideals and aspirations of the people's enlightenment movement. Shooting served to give ordinary people an essential capability to defend the country, and team gymnastics reflected the same balance between the individual and the collective that could be found in the cooperations.

For a democratic movement, freedom of expression was a cherished quality, and for DGI's weekly magazine this translated into editorial freedom.

All freedoms, however, come with a responsibility. For me, this meant maintaining and developing sport as an asset for democracy – with a view to the activity itself and the association life that forms the organisational framework.

Architecture and sport

To that end, I could continue to build on the inspiration I had found at Idrætsforsk and Gerlev Sports Academy. Most fundamentally, I was inspired by the then headmaster of Gerlev, now professor emeritus, Ove Korsgaard, who described the interaction between sport and society by comparing it to architecture.

Every epoch in human history has created buildings for housing, industry, culture, and other activities linked to human existence, but the shape and symbols of the buildings vary over the centuries. We express our ideals and norms in clay, bricks, concrete, steel and glass, so to speak.

Likewise, our movement cultures change with the times. The only constant is that we are born with a body and an impulse to move it. How we shape the movement varies from century to century, from culture to culture, from person to person.

Modern sport is a relatively new phenomenon in human history, dating back only some 150 years. Earlier societal forms gave rise to other body cultures such as the traditional games of the peasants or the nobility's dances and equestrian vaulting. Sport arose with the industrialisation in Europe and spread globally via commerce and colonialisation.

We organise our movements in ways that produce images of the norms and ideals that characterise our time. And our choices in turn influence the times we live in.



The ideals expressed in body culture vary over time. Here young noblemen attend fencing school at the University of Leiden in 1610. Source: British Museum

From a democratic viewpoint, this implies that every sports participant, every athlete, should be empowered to decide about their own sporting life and enjoy the fullest possible freedom to unfold the values that they believe in, on their own, in a team or communities. With due consideration for the freedom of other athletes, of course.

The fact that sport is not static or God-given, makes sport and movement culture an intense, never-ending battlefield about the values and norms that we want to guide our individual and collective lives.

The Bermuda Triangle of sport

This battle was not very visible in the sports landscape of the 1990s, neither at home in Denmark nor abroad. The Danish journalist Poul Albret called out the ‘Bermuda Triangle of Sport’ – the alliance between the sports organisations, the sponsors, and the media in which all critical stories seemed to mysteriously disappear.

The British journalists Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson received a five-day suspended jail sentence in Switzerland “for defaming the IOC” after revealing widespread corruption in the Olympic family. When the Norwegian skier Vegard Ulvang expressed discontent with the fascist past of the then IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch, the latter warned him “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” The explosive commercialisation of football was rarely questioned, because it was “good for football”.

Doping was regarded as an individual sin committed by people with loose morals. Although more and more cases of doping in cycling appeared, my country’s leading anti-doping official waved me off: “Yes, but cycling is an exception.”



Play the Game was originally conceived to celebrate 100 years of editorial freedom for the gymnastics movement's magazine 'Youth & Sport'.

In a counterattack that particularly provoked me, the Danish NOC president Kai Holm suggested doping control among the 40,000 participants at DGI's grassroots sports festival.

In this atmosphere, DGI's weekly magazine 'Ungdom & Idræt' ('Youth & Sport') was about to celebrate its first 100 years of editorial freedom in 1997. As it was evident to me that sport and journalism shared the same prerequisite – freedom of expression – and that both suffered from the lack of it, I proposed that we tried to gather a group of like-minded sports journalists from Europe to see if we could repair the situation together.



Reporter Rosalind Amoh from Ghana was one of the many journalists who energised this first event where academics, journalists, and sports leaders from five continents gathered for open and fact-based debates on sensitive issues in sport. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game

Sharing an ambition to break Olympic dominance over the public debate, the board of DGI accepted this quite considerable investment as a birthday present to the magazine.

With the help of, among others, a few understanding journalists in Denmark, including the president of the International Federation of Journalists, Jens Linde, the president of the Association of Danish Sports Journalists, Steen Ankerdal, and the headmaster of the Danish School of Journalism, Kim Minke, we started issuing invitations to speakers and launched an international seminar entitled ‘Sport, media and civil society’.

An outlandish idea

We did not understand how outlandish this idea was. Nobody had tried it before. How would we reach potential participants? At DGI we had only recently gotten our first email addresses. Although we did put a Word file on a new thing called the World Wide Web, would there be anyone at the other end to pick it up? We spent days and nights packing envelopes and sending telefax copies through unstable transcontinental phone lines.

But even if somebody would read our messages, how would they make it to Denmark? If they were not mainstream sports journalists, how would they get support to travel and participate in the conference? We did manage to get some resources from the Danish government to invite participants from developing countries and Eastern Europe, but what about the rest?

Today, I am unable to explain how it happened but in June 1997, 109 people from 34 countries gathered at the Vingsted Sports Centre next to DGI’s headquarters for what turned out to be the first international event ever where journalists, academics, sports leaders, government officials and other stakeholders would have open, independent, and fact-based discussions on the relationship between sport and society.

Although the atmosphere throughout the four days was ecstatic, I remember our own thoughts when the lights went out: 1) Never again! The stress of organising such an event was something I would never go through again. 2) Fortunately, it would not be necessary to do it again, because now that issues like Olympic corruption, widespread doping, homophobia, and spiralling broadcasting prices were out in the open, they would be taken care of.



When the Danish minister of culture, Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen, opened Play the Game 2000 with a warning to sport against unethical practices, she soon received a letter from president Sepp Blatter defending FIFA.

Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game

Neither of the two predictions were particularly precise.

In the end, we decided to give the event another try, not only because the participants enthusiastically called for it. Two tiny events showed us that our little event in the Danish province had hit a nerve among the power brokers of international sport.

The day before the opening, I received a call from the International Sports Press Association (AIPS). They wanted to make sure we would *not* credit the AIPS for anything. An interesting request from an organisation that was supposed to support quality journalism.

There was also a response, even if not direct, to a young, recently retired athletics president from Norway, Lars Martin Kaupang, who had entertained the audience with stories about how the World Athletics president, Primo Nebiolo from Italy, practised his very personal version of democracy. A few weeks later, the IAAF found a pretext to threaten to ban Norwegian athletes from the upcoming World Championships – a ban that was fortunately not carried out in practice.

Should Sepp Blatter decide?

But there were also positive motivation factors. Sports editor Ip Ting Wah Shan from Mauritius invited me to a sports journalists' seminar in his home country where I could bring an expert of my own choice, and Sandro Donati from Italy made sure the Mauritians got an unforgettable experience.

And thanks to an energetic, talented sports marketing expert from Cape Town, Ravi Naidoo, we could start preparing a new, full-scale conference in South Africa in February 2000 with the approval of the sports minister and ANC veteran Steve Tshwete and a long list of confirmed international expert speakers. All looked promising until Ravi Naidoo in early 1999 was hired by the South African Football Association to be part of the marketing arm for South Africa's bid for the FIFA World Cup.

At that moment, it became clear to me we would not go to South Africa, because the South African authorities would not politically be able to host a gathering of FIFA's sharpest critics one month and receive FIFA president Sepp Blatter with pomp and circumstance the next. As expected, the interest from Cape Town dried out, allegedly because of a lack of sponsors, and we had to cancel the venue and the speakers.

This situation provoked a question to ourselves: Would we in fact let FIFA and Sepp Blatter decide if we should have a free forum for international public sports debate?

That was more than I could accept, and fortunately, DGI gave its backing to get the shipwreck afloat. After another round of fundraising in and around DGI, and with backing from a deeply committed minister of culture, Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen, we could open the first conference named 'Play the Game' at the new sports centre 'DGI-byen' in Copenhagen in November 2000.

A few weeks later, the minister received a long Christmas letter explaining that sport could not be exempt from the vices of society in general. The sender was.... Sepp Blatter.

An arena for the battle

Since then, Play the Game has taken on the role of a convener for those who wish to join the battle over the values sport should embody in its practice and its governance. The term 'play the game' stems from the childhood of modern sport, from a time when sport was meant to build noble characters and healthy communities. It means to play by the rules, to play fairly.

Three key values – democracy, transparency, and freedom of expression – have guided our work. You would believe these values were embraced by national and international sports organisations who all build on a democratic structure. In theory, there is a direct chain of democratic command between the individual athlete in the local association via regional and national federations up to the very top of the international governing body.

However, reality has proved very different. As hundreds of testimonies at our conferences have shown, and as carefully constructed benchmarking tools – like the Sports Governance Observer tools which we have had the privilege of developing in collaboration with some of the best experts in the world – have further documented, the chain of democratic legitimacy is broken and seems beyond repair.

We do not pass such judgements without trying at every conference to attract international sports leaders and ask them how they intend to promote their proclaimed ideals of fair play, democracy, equality, non-discrimination, public health, human rights, and world peace. At every conference, we invite those powerful men and women to confront and contest what their critics say in a direct dialogue that we can all learn from.

But with a few remarkable and encouraging exceptions, international sports officials have largely turned their back on the kind of debate Play the Game puts on stage, where the outcome is not managed in advance by highly paid public affairs consultants. The motto is ‘may the best argument win’ and the outcome is just as unpredictable as any other properly arranged game in the field of sports.

Time has taught us to focus on those who engage in the open and public debate rather than those who stay away. It was impossible not to. The hundreds of deeply committed, knowledgeable, and forward-looking people who have come to share their stories, at times overwhelmed us with their presence.

When Andrew Jennings set the audience on fire with stories of Olympic corruption and called for networking among journalists. When the Italian doping detective Sandro Donati unveiled international conspiracies to dope with resources paid by the state. When Laura Robinson shared appalling stories of sexual abuse in Canadian sport. When Mario Goijman documented the unbelievably corrupt styles of the world volleyball president. When the bike racer Jörg Jaksche confronted UCI president Pat McQuaid with the organisation’s lack of anti-doping efforts.

When the former gangster Michael Franzese told how boxing games were fixed and the violent means that secured it. When Russian whistleblowing couple Yuliya and Vitaly Stepanov appeared on a live stream from their hiding in who-knows-where. When Khalida Popal and Friba Rezayee shared their heart-breaking stories on how Afghan women are deprived from playing sports. When the international operations of illegal gambling companies were laid bare by a collective of investigative journalists ...



The former gangster Michael Franzese is one of the many speakers who have shaken the audience at Play the Game conferences. In 2009, he talked about fixing games in the underworld of New York. Photo: Jens Astrup/Play the Game

These and numerous other testimonies at Play the Game conferences have left the audience – and the hosts – in a mix of disbelief and amazement. As this book also shows, reality at times surpasses what the imagination can produce, and when the facts and the truth come to light, they do not always support an optimistic view of the sports world we live in.

But even when the most depressing stories have been shared, there has been a human being behind the story whose insistence on telling the truth inspired hope.

Winning or losing

The battle has not been in vain, but are we winning or losing it?

The international sports debate has undergone dramatic changes in the times of Play the Game. At our first conference in 1997, the systemic nature of doping abuse had not yet been revealed, and international coordination of anti-doping was almost non-existent. Match-fixing was not even a word in the sports political vocabulary.

The combination of the doping scandal at the Tour de France in 1998 and the simultaneous corruption scandal at the IOC triggered a vivid international debate, but following a moderate reform of the IOC and the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency in a partnership between the Olympic movement and governments worldwide, things went back to normal.



In the 2010s, state prosecutors raised their interest in sports crime. Here, former IOC ExCo member Patrick Hickey is guided out of the hospital by the police, following illness after a surprise arrest during the Rio 2016 Olympics. Photo: Brendan Moran/Sportsfiles/Getty Images

Although evidence of systemic fraud and abuse was brought forward again and again by courageous whistleblowers and investigative journalists for more than a decade, the Olympic family could successfully answer all the issues Play the Game raised with one simple gesture:

Silence.

Against this backdrop, Play the Game could rightly call itself a ‘home for the homeless questions in sport’.

But a turning point came in late 2010 when the media uncovered corruption in FIFA’s process for selecting the World Cup hosts for 2018 and 2022, and FIFA subsequently selected the least transparent and technically prepared bids from Russia and Qatar, respectively.

This decision happened to disappoint the media, football leaders, politicians, and business interests in three other applicant countries with a dominant position in setting the international agenda: England, the United States of America, and Australia.

In the months ahead, FIFA continued to produce new scandals. At the same time, a growing awareness of match-fixing was spreading over most parts of the world. The already contested image of international sport as a force for the good was further shaken, and this time the connection between sport and corruption would not go away from the public perception.

If someone had told you by the end of 2010 that the following decade would:

- show at least one million Brazilians taking to the streets, combining their outrage over government policies with protests against the FIFA World Cup, and sending shock waves through the Olympic movement
- have 15 cities around the world withdraw their bid for hosting the Olympic Games after referendums, or out of fear of how taxpayers and voters would react
- reveal a long-term, systemic doping programme orchestrated by one of the world’s most powerful nations in sport and politics, the Russian Federation, forcing prominent whistleblowers to seek asylum elsewhere and causing deep divisions in international anti-doping
- see the US federal police raid a FIFA congress in Switzerland, exposing unknown corruption scandals worth hundreds of millions of US dollars, eventually imposing huge fines and long jail sentences on numerous football officials

- see an Executive Board member of the IOC arrested during the Olympic Games with cameras rolling, and a handful of other members of the inner Olympic power circles retire due to criminal investigations across the world
- hear over 250 women testify about the massive scale of sexual abuse they were exposed to over two decades by a physician of the USA Gymnastics team and Michigan State University, adding their stories to dozens of similar cases affecting the lives of boys and girls in the UK, France, Norway, Nigeria, Mali, the Netherlands ...

... would you have believed it?



The relations between IOC president Bach and Russia's president Putin may have become frosty, but the IOC did much to minimise the consequences for Russia after the doping scandal.

Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game. Photo on screen: Ian Walton/Getty Images

Too early to celebrate

These deplorable events can of course not be used as a benchmark of success. But bringing the shady sides of sport into the public domain so they can be discussed and hopefully dealt with, does represent a positive and much-needed evolution of international sport and sports journalism.

By assisting in breaking the silence and talking about the taboos in sport, Play the Game has played on the winning side, thanks to the wonderful and courageous people who dared to speak up even at the risk of their health, reputation, or career.

It is, however, much too early to celebrate. There are still homeless questions that need a home, and opening the debate has not automatically led to efficient solutions.

While the public commitment to better governance and human rights in sport has grown and the sports debate today is unfolding in all corners of the world, the international organisations responsible for sport seem to take another direction. Much of this is documented in this book, but just a few examples:

The IOC has made great efforts to minimise the sanctions against Russia in the Russian international doping scandal. During three consecutive Olympic Games in 2018, 2021, and 2022, Russian athletes have been allowed to display all kinds of national symbols despite the official IOC decision that they should appear as neutrals.

As this book goes to print, we wait in excitement to see if this neutrality charade will be repeated when Russian and Belarusian athletes are allowed to compete as neutrals at the Paris 2024 Olympics.

Although top officials of numerous Olympic federations have been exposed in corruption scandals, far too little is done by the IOC to efficiently fulfil its self-declared role as guardians of Olympic principles and good governance.

FIFA has not delivered on its promises to secure effective improvement of working conditions for the migrant workers involved in stadium construction before its 2022 World Cup in Qatar, nor has FIFA taken steps to compensate migrant workers and their families for disease and deaths related to their working conditions.

Disproportionate volume of money

Perhaps the biggest challenge to international sport in modern times is now coming from the Middle East where state leaders in the Arabian Peninsula have invested billions of

dollars in international sport, buying events, clubs, players, tournaments, and even sports federations.

We have probably only seen the beginning of these investments that seem to come from an otherworldly ocean of resources.

It is nothing new that sport is attractive to wealthy investors. Billionaires from the Western Hemisphere have been around for a while. Nor is the close affiliation between international sport and autocratic regimes something that came yesterday.

What is new, is the disproportionate volume of money offered to sport by authoritarian states with ambitions of geopolitical influence.

This development is set to undermine everything that democratic forces have tried to achieve in this century. It will eliminate the very same humanistic ideals that sports leaders claim to represent.

The governance reforms, the human rights commitment, the environmental responsibility – all these promises given over the past few years may not have been convincingly fulfilled, but now they may be completely ignored.

Moreover, in the darkest corners of society, far from the public limelight, organised crime groups are using international sport to build what international experts regard as the world's biggest crime scene. Illegal gambling companies are infiltrating professional sport like never before, using match-fixing, cryptocurrencies, front companies, and human trafficking to an extent we have only started to understand.

Democratic alliances needed

If we don't want these years to become a new turning point that rolls back the course of history, we must continue to strengthen those forces who have increasingly pushed for democratic change and the rule of law.

Elite athletes have raised their voices with increasing strength in recent years, calling for social and political change in and outside sport, using their celebrity status to leverage their message or organising collectively in unions and activist groups.

Fan groups have engaged in pressuring clubs and national teams to respect human rights and exert social responsibility.

Experts in fighting corruption and crime are voicing their impatience more often than

before, like in Play the Game's ClearingSport survey, and state prosecutors have formed a new network to strengthen international cooperation against sports crime.

Journalists have become more aware of the crucial role they play in defining the sports political agenda, and although the media industry is still woven into the fabric of entertainment sports, many investigative journalists prioritise a quest for facts and truth over a comfortable career as sports fans with press accreditation.

But these groups cannot make the difference alone. Democratic governments need to up their game and put resources and action behind the good intentions expressed in countless declarations, resolutions, charters, policy papers, press releases, and public statements.

Relying on international sports organisations to police themselves according to the principle of autonomy has proved to be a failing strategy. No major sports governing body has ever reformed itself without pressure from the outside, be it in the form of criminal investigations, public outrage, new legislation, or other threats to their daily business.

If democratic governments do not act with much more determination through organisations like the European Union, the Council of Europe, OECD, and other ways of collective action, sport will continue to lose its relevance as an asset for democracy, and the potential of sport to lift individuals and communities to new levels of life quality will be further eroded.

The battle over the values of sport is a battle over the values of life. Play the Game will continue to engage in promoting democracy, transparency, and freedom of expression by setting an independent stage for an open, unrestricted, and fact-based debate. That is what we wish to be good for.

May the best argument win. Let's Play the Game.



Sports stars are increasingly using their fame to push for social change and human rights, like former US soccer captain Megan Rapinoe. Photo: Lexie Moreland/WWD/Penske Media/Getty Images



Football, myth and reality

As the first Play the Game conference – called ‘Sport, Media and Civil Society’ came to a close in June 1997, a famous Latin American author read his speech in Spanish while the conference host, Jens Sejer Andersen, was running sheets with the translation into English on an overhead projector. The author was Eduardo Galeano (1940-2015), author of several books on Latin American history as well as ‘Football in Sun and Shadow’. Galeano’s low-key, warm and melodic voice kept the audience spellbound in a silence that was only disturbed by the cracking sound when the transparent plastic sheets were shifted on the projector.

Here is the first part of Galeano’s speech.



The silence in the room was intense as the Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano closed the first edition of the conference with a riveting account of football’s societal importance. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game

In April 1997, when commandos broke into the Japanese ambassador's residence in the city of Lima and carried out their spectacular lightning butchery of the occupying guerrillas, the rebels were playing football. The leader, Néstor Cerpa Cartolini, died wearing the colours of Alianza, the club he loved.

At the same time in Montevideo, the city announced it would hire 150 garbage collectors. Exactly 26,748 young people applied. The only way to handle such a crowd was to hold a lottery in the city's largest football stadium, Centenario, where in 1930, Uruguay won the first-ever World Cup. The site of that joyful event of long ago was besieged by unemployed youths. Instead of goals, the electronic scoreboard displayed the numbers of the lucky few who got hired.

Not much occurs in Latin America that doesn't bear directly or indirectly on football. It occupies an important place – at times the most important of places – despite the denials of ideologues who love humanity but can't stand people. For intellectuals of the right, football simply proves that the people think with their feet; and for intellectuals of the left, it's the reason why the people don't think at all.

But such contempt holds no sway with flesh-and-blood reality. When collective emotions take root in the earth and bear fruit in the human body, they become a shared celebration or a shared disaster, and they exist without self-justification or apology. Like it or not, for better or worse, in these days of doubt and desperation, football-club colours are for many Latin Americans the only certainty worthy of absolute faith,

the true source of the greatest jubilation and deepest sadness. "Racing, an inexplicable passion", I read on a wall in Buenos Aires. And on a wall in Rio de Janeiro, a fan of Fluminense had scrawled: "My beloved poison".

Some anonymous hand, in a paroxysm of fervour, left its testimony on a wall in Montevideo: "Peñarol, you're like AIDS. I carry you in my blood." I read that and I wondered. Is love for a shirt as dangerous as love for a woman? Tangos don't shed any light on this.

A serious pact of love

In any case, it seems a fan's pact of love is more serious than any nuptial agreement because vows of fidelity to the club rule out even the shadow of a suspicion of a potential wrong move. And not only in Latin America.

A friend of mine, Angel Vásquez de la Cruz, wrote me from Galicia: "I have always been with Celta de Vigo. Now I've gone over to their worst enemy, Deportivo de la Coruña. Everybody knows you can change cities, women, jobs or political affiliation, perhaps even you ought to ... but never, ever can you change teams. I'm a traitor, I know. I beg of you, believe me: I did it for my children. My children convinced me. I may be a traitor, but I'm a great father."

For fanatics, those fans who live perpetually on the edge of a nervous breakdown, love is experienced through hatred of the adversary. When the Argentine footballer Ruggieri abandoned his team Boca Juniors and joined the ranks of their traditional rival River Plate, fanatics set fire to his home. His parents, who happened to be at home, were saved by a miracle.

Last March in peaceful Holland, four hundred fanatics of the clubs Ajax and Feyenoord met in an empty lot near Amsterdam. The bloody ritual left one dead and many wounded. “They set it up on the internet,” commented Argentine reporter Ezequiel Fernández Moores, “but the battle took place like in the Middle Ages, with sticks.”

Violence stains football the way it stains everything else in this world where, in the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm, “killing, torture and mass exile have become daily experiences which no longer surprise anyone.”

The mass media tend to voice alarm at the evil influences of football. Does the game cause a flock of tame sheep to turn into a pack of bloodthirsty wolves? The answer lies in plain view for those who don’t refuse to see it: Stadium crowds sometimes do turn ugly from the accumulation of desperation and solitude which characterises this end-of-century in the North and the South, the East and the West. And such tensions overflow in the stadiums no more and no less than in any other arena of the violent lives we lead.

In Greece, in the time of Pericles, there were three courts, one of which judged things: it punished the knife, for example, that was the weapon in a crime by breaking it into pieces or throwing it into the sea. Today, would it be fair to condemn the ball? Is football guilty of the crimes committed in its name?

Those who demonise football and confuse it with Jack the Ripper’s father can be just as irrationally fana-

tic as football fanatics. And they make the same mistake as those who believe football is no more than the opiate of the people and good business for merchants and politicians: They all imagine stadiums as islands and fail to recognise that they are mirrors of the world to which they belong. Can you name a single human passion that is not used and manipulated by the powers that rule the world?

Respect for reality obliges us to recognise that, despite everything, the football pitch is much more than a scene of violence or a source of money, political prestige, and collective Valium. The playing field also provides a space for displaying skill and, on occasion, beauty, a locus of encounter and communication, and a spot – one of the few – where, if only for a moment, the invisible can make themselves seen, a feat nearly impossible now for poor people and weak countries.

Collective cultural identity

As long as we’re paying tribute to the prestige of Hellenic culture, let’s recall the Olympics 2,500 years before the era of Juan Antonio Samaranch. Back then, when athletes competed in the nude and without a single commercial tattoo on their bodies, Greek civilization formed a mosaic of a thousand cities, each with its own laws and its own armies. The games celebrated in the stadiums of Olympia were religious ceremonies that reaffirmed national identity as an amalgam that linked diverse peoples and subsumed their conflicts: a way of saying, “We are Greek” that made playing sports

akin to reciting the verses of the Iliad or the Odyssey, the poems on which the nation was founded.

Perhaps football fulfils a similar function in our days, to a greater degree than any other sport. The industrialisation of football, which television has turned into the most successful of mass spectacles, tends to impose a uniform style of play and to erase its many profiles. But diversity stubbornly and miraculously continues to survive and to astonish. Like it or not, believe it or not, football remains one of the most important expressions of collective cultural identity, something which in this era of obligatory globalisation reminds us that the best of the world lies in the quantity of worlds that the world contains.

Certainly, there is no abundance of places where the countries of the south can affirm their identity, condemned as they are to imitate lifestyles of obligatory consumption imposed on a universal scale. With national industry having disappeared, plans for autonomous development all but forgotten, the state virtually dismantled, symbols of sovereignty abolished, the countries which make up the vast shantytowns of the world have few opportunities to affirm their pride of existence and their right to be. And their right to be tends to stand in frank opposition to the role of servitude they have been assigned by the international division of labour, and to the pitiful part the mass media obliges them to play [...]

If football were limited to the countries that pay the most for it, there would be no reason for the fervour

it generates around the world. South America, which pays little and is condemned to ply Europe with players, has won and continues to win more world championships of both national teams and clubs than Europe, no matter how much Europe pays. And African football, the poorest in the world, is coming on the scene in the most humbling and joyous way imaginable, and no one can stop it. Professional football – that lucrative industry of spectacles, that implacable machinery – is set up so that money rules, but it remains a universal passion because by some miracle it continues to possess the capacity to surprise us.

Read the full text at www.playthegame.org



Football “reminds us that the best of the world lies in the quantity of worlds that the world contains”. Logo-photo from Play the Game 2011: Tine Harden