American Soccer

Why would anyone watch soccer? Not only are the games excruciatingly long and boring, but they can even end in a tie. What is the point of playing a game if no one wins? These were all common gripes of American sports fans, until recently. America finds itself in the midst of a soccer revolution, as the entire American mindset towards sports is currently undergoing a significant transformation. The statistical evidence exposing the rise of soccer in the United States of America is indisputable, but the less acknowledged fact of the matter is that soccer is here to stay. This migration towards soccer has created many unknowns in the world of American sports. Perhaps the biggest unknown in this migration comes from the media, as many are left wondering how the sport will be covered in response to this boom in popularity. The media finds itself at the helm of sports fans, and traditional media powerhouses are scrambling to adjust accordingly.

Numbers never lie. That being said, most numbers are very favorable when it come to soccer viewership. During the 2015 Women’s World Cup, the United States National Team proved to be an absolute power, winning in the final against Japan 5-2 (FIFA). The game managed to draw more viewers than both the “NBA Finals (19.94 million viewers) and the Stanley Cup Finals (5.5 million viewers)” and only barely fell short of NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament Championship’s “28.3 million viewers” (Reddy, 2015). The numbers continue to
look favorable when looking at the 2015 Women’s World Cup in terms of ad revenue. During the 2011 Women’s World Cup, ESPN made $6 million dollars when it came to ad revenue (Reddy, 2015). Coverage then switched over to ESPN’s rival Fox Sports for coverage of the 2015 Women’s World Cup. Based on Fox Sport’s own projections, they were expected to almost triple ESPN’s $6 million in ad revenue. Fox ended up making $40 million in ad revenues, beating their own projection by $23 million and beating ESPN by $36 million dollar (Reddy, 2015). Fox Sports inability to properly project their own revenue proves that these large media conglomerates are undervaluing soccer. That undervaluation has left a huge market wide open and a lot of money on the table.

Those numbers prove viewers and money are present in soccer, but the what is more outstanding is the growth rates. Obviously the viewersh ip is not going to quadruple every four years, but these numbers still have potential to grow. These numbers become even more impressive if one were to take into account the dominance of men’s sports in America. Traditionally, Americans value men’s sports over women’s by a wide margin. So not only did a women’s sporting event manage to outperform men’s sporting events, but there is also potential for even more growth come time for the Men’s World Cup.

Before going forward, it is worth mentioning that there are three forms of soccer for Americans to follow: domestic and abroad. Major League Soccer (MLS) is the top tier of in the United States and behind it are two smaller leagues, the USL and NASL. MLS is known for lagging behind European soccer as it mainly features players from North and and lower quality players from South America. Since soccer is not the most popular sport in the United States, most high quality athletes have decided to play other sports and most world class soccer players
from South America choose to take their talents to Europe. This has created a talent gap between the United States and other European nations when it comes to soccer. MLS has begun the process of closing that gap as the expands to add teams in Miami and Los Angeles (Straus, 2016). The league has also grown in popularity in recent years as it has lured some American stars back home, and appealed to European stars on the tail end of their careers looking to cash a paycheck. All of these factors improved the quality of domestic soccer and contributed to the growing popularity.

Soccer abroad has long been off the radar of Americans, but currently finds itself peaking. NBC currently pays the Premier League (top soccer league in England) more than $80 million annually for the rights to broadcast their games in America (Gaines, 2014). There are currently twelve U.S. internationals playing in the top English and the top German leagues (ussoccerplayers.com). Factors like this have helped for Americans to get past the geographical limitations to following soccer abroad and have given Americans a reason to watch a different brand of soccer.

The third and final form of soccer is international soccer. This brings every player across the world from one country together to compete against other countries. This form of soccer thrives off the national pride that Americans live for. Many Americans came together to watch their team compete for a world cup and that event actually sparked the American soccer movement.

The numbers prove that soccer is in America, so how did it get here? Three key factors are responsible for the rise of American interest in soccer: technology, immigration, and youth.
These factors have created an audience for soccer, more access to soccer than ever before, and a sustainable fanbase.

The first and most important factor for soccer’s growth is technology. In the past, soccer fans have only been limited to following domestic soccer, supplying a lower quality, less appealing product. Now, with improved technology Americans are able to follow the higher quality soccer being played overseas with ease. Social media an entire new dimension for fans and teams in terms of following and connecting. Fan-operated accounts play an important role as they “dish out rumors, scores, news, blog posts, pictures and video clips” (Ponce, 2014). Some of these twitter accounts have gotten so big that they officially linked up with clubs and publish exclusive content with the team (Ponce, 2014). Meanwhile domestically, Major League Soccer clubs saw a 34% increase in social media buzz from 2014 to 2015 (Reddy, 2015). Social Media has created a new relationship and connected sports fans to the sport soccer. Another important form of technology when it comes to soccer fandom is the popular video game series, FIFA. FIFA is currently the top selling product for EA Sports (the same company responsible for making Madden NFL) and accounts for over 25% of its revenue (Markovits, 2016). So why does it matter that people are simply buying a video game? According to an ESPN poll, “34% of FIFA players became big pro soccer fans after playing the video game and 50% of players gained at least some interest in pro soccer due to their love of playing FIFA” (Markovits, 2016). Technology has helped bring soccer into this country and forged a bond between fans and clubs that was never possible before.

The increased presence of hispanics in the United States has contributed to the increased soccer fandom. Above 56% of Americans who identify themselves as “Hispanic, Latino or
African American” claim to follow soccer. Among that group of “soccer followers, 25% described soccer as their favorite spectator sports (Reddy, 2015). This creates another fan base which leads to game attendance, youth players, and more revenue within the business.

Youth movement has played a huge role in soccer popularity. Soccer finds itself at an all-time high among today’s youth, with participation “30 times higher than it use to be just 40 years ago” (Reddy, 2015). More than 3 million children registered to play soccer in 2014 (Reddy, 2015). Soccer participation is double the amount registered to play tackle football and almost a million more than baseball (Neil, 2016). The numbers do not just stop at participation, but soccer also polls very favorably among youth when it comes to popularity. According to a 2014 ESPN poll, 12-to-17-year-olds reported professional soccer as the second most followed sport, only behind football. Major League Soccer was also polled as popular as Major League Baseball among the very same age group of children (Reddy, 2015). With this youth movement towards soccer, the sport has much room for expansion in the coming years as these kids continue to grow up with it. An entire new era of American sports fandom could be created if these numbers are sustained.

When taking all of these numbers into consideration, one must be left wondering why there is not more soccer coverage in America. Sure soccer is still relatively new to the scene, but this revolution has occurred with little to no help from typical media powerhouses. Most dedicated soccer fans receive most of their information from underground media sources like blogs or podcasts. Podcasts account for five of the top 40 professional sports podcasts on podcast.okihika.com. If larger sports media organizations where to tap into this market with
their resources, they could corner the market. NBC sports has been the closest to attempt this, hiring *The Men in Blazers* podcast in 2014 (Ponce, 2014).

Most large sports media organizations have found soccer as a content, they just have yet to put out content around it. NBC Sports and the Barclay’s Premiere League agreed to a three year $250 million deal to broadcast games in the US, Fox Sports paid $425 million dollars for the next four World Cups (two men and two women tournaments), Major League Soccer and U.S. Soccer agreed to a $90 million-per-season deal with Fox, ESPN, and Univisión Deportes (Ponce, 2014). These leagues are selling their product for huge money, but the companies are not taking them to the next level. A lack of content surrounding these games waters down the product and hurts potential revenue.

The money surrounding this sport should only continue to grow in the coming years as the many young soccer fans grow up.

Imagine if ESPN paid for the rights to every NBA basketball game, but did not talk about basketball on sportscenter, publish articles to their websites, or promote the games through basic promotions. Without the added content, interest in the NBA would drop significantly and the league would instantly lose popularity. The ability for soccer to still rise up under these circumstances shows the strength and passion of the fanbases. The first media powerhouse to give soccer the respect it deserves, will find itself reaping the rewards of a culture dying to be acknowledged
Works Cited


