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Pavel Brunssen, Andrei S. Markovits | Essay | 12.06.2024

# Soccer in America: From Pele's Periphery to Messi's Semi-Periphery! But Will There Be an Entry into Football's Core?

## Introduction

This article provides an interpretative analysis of Association Football's fate in the USA over the course of the 21st century. Let us commence with a clarification of contested nomenclature, which will in and of itself signify the cultural and social insecurity of this sport on the firmament of the North American sports scene. The contested nature of the very term "Association Football" constitutes a clear sign of the game's cultural insecurity in the United States. In most countries, the game of Association Football goes by the name "football" and its many indigenous variants like the German "*Fußball*" or the Spanish *fútbol*. Therefore, the term enjoys a ubiquity and clarity of meaning. Not so in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ireland where "football" denotes a different code of the game that is related to its Association variant but is distinctly different and sovereign on its own. Above all, it always comprises THE dominant variant of this sport in these countries. Of course, we mean here American and Canadian Football, Rugby League, Rugby Union, Australian Rules Football, and Gaelic Football. It is in these contexts that the sport known as "football" in most countries goes by the noun "soccer", which is a shortened "association" in Oxbridge student slang of the 19th century, thus massively British in its very existence, even though it is now hated in Britain as a vile Americanization of a holy British cultural construct.

The contested nature of this word and the sport that it denotes can well be demonstrated by the history of its first country-wide association that purports to organize and comprise the game in the United States. At its founding in 1913, this organization was called the "United States Football Association", already a time when "football" signified a different and much more popular sport in the United States. In 1945, the organization added the word "soccer" to its name, thus rendering it the "United States Soccer Football Association". Not until 1974 did this umbrella organization drop the word "football" from its name, thus mutating into the "United States Soccer Federation", which it has maintained ever since. The point is clear: This sport's name and thus identity has remained contested throughout its history from the late 19th century to this very day. Somehow by calling it "soccer", the sport in many eyes both in the United States and around the world lacks a depth of authenticity that

the sport enjoys everywhere else and that many other sports enjoy in the United States. Indeed, the term “soccer” has become an unutterable *Schimpfwort* in Britain denoting the much hated and alleged Americanization of the sport. Until the 1980s, the word “soccer” existed in Britain alongside the more-commonly used “football”. For instance, the autobiography of legendary Manchester United coach Matt Busby, “Soccer at the Top: My Life in Football”, published in 1974, bears the unpronounceable term prominently in its title. But with the modernization of the game, which many of its hardcore English and British fans have perceived with hostility, and the concomitant rise of American soccer from the unthreatening “periphery” to the threatening “semi-periphery” of the sport, the word “soccer” attained a negative connotation that it has yet to shed.<sup>1</sup>

Confirming the massive tentacles of British colonialism is the fact that, in much of the English-speaking world to this day, bona fide commentators and pundits conveying and interpreting the sport with the needed authenticity must do so with a British accent, especially in the United States thus underlining the sport’s continued cultural insecurity in America. Soccer in contemporary America, as well as Canada and Australia, cannot have a locally-accented voice – at least not in English, though increasingly in Spanish. All foreign accents have in the meantime become acceptable in the massively international world of English football with one exception: American English. No other nationality invites the negative scrutiny in English football that is accorded as a matter of course to Americans. Many American footballers playing in England have often complained how simply by dint of their American accents they were not taken seriously by their English surroundings. America in the cultural construct of Association Football simply lacks basic authenticity in the European core, with this being nowhere more pronounced than in England and Britain in general. Even though the level of antipathy towards women’s football has decreased in the last few years on account of its immense success (which we will discuss later); to some football fans in Britain and Europe, the prowess of American women in this sport, and their representing the very core of that aspect of the game in notable contrast to the men’s relative marginality, has served as another item in the vast array of prima facie evidence for how the despised Yanks have sullied the sanctity of this glorious game and its culture.

Making America different still has been the fact that unlike in virtually every country in which Association Football has been culturally hegemonic, the United States Soccer Federation does not come close to covering all the sport’s existence in the country. The legendary pyramid that lords over the game monopolistically in Germany, England, Norway, and over 200 other countries, comes nowhere close to having a similar position in the United States. There are multiple professional leagues competing with one another, not

to mention a myriad of amateur leagues and competing youth organizations. There is no promotion and relegation in any of American soccer's organizations like they exist pretty much everywhere else in the world of Association Football. To make matters more different still, like in all other American team sports, in soccer, too, championships are always decided by post-season playoffs and not the games played in the regular season. To add further to soccer's organizational chaos in the United States, the vast web of high school and college soccer with thousands of teams exists totally outside of the USSF's and thus FIFA's purview.

Our article will focus on the substantial changes that have shaped this unique entity's presence in the United States throughout the 21st century. We will employ the famed Wallersteinian concept of core – semi-periphery – periphery relations to frame our work arguing that Association Football in America has transitioned from being a peripheral entity both in its global as well as domestic context to that of a semi-peripheral one with a few instances pointing to its entering the game's global core.

## **Core-Semi-Periphery-Periphery (and External Areas)**

In his seminal work *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* and subsequent crucial publications, Immanuel Wallerstein delineates an analysis of global capitalism in which he discerns countries comprising a clear core that dominate others belonging to a semi-periphery, and others still to a periphery, excluding a few rare places which are so marginal that they do not even belong to the capitalist world system and thus are categorized as “external areas”. Roughly delineated, the characteristics of these three entities are as follows: The core dominates in every aspect: it has the strongest economies, it has the requisite military might, it has the dominant culture (including language), all of which it uses to extract labor, natural resources, and other value from the semi-periphery and periphery to which it exports its finished products. All of this happens under terms that are advantageous to and dictated by the core that benefits in every imaginable aspect from this profoundly unequal relationship. In the course of history, some peripheral countries succeed in becoming what Wallerstein sees as “semi-peripheries” meaning that they establish positions in the economy, in culture, and in politics that render them less dependent on the core though still in the core's purview and domination. In this process, they establish core-like characteristics of domination that they exercise over less fortunate places that remain in the periphery.<sup>2</sup>

By employing the Wallersteinian system of core-semi-periphery-periphery to analyze the global presence of sports, there can be no question that, very much reflecting the situation in global politics, economy, and culture over the past 150 years, the United States, together with countries of northern Europe, embody the uncontested core. A glance at the medals table of the Olympic Games since their introduction in 1896 provides enough evidence for the fact that within this core the United States represents its inner sanctum.

Nation	Gold Medals	Silver Medals	Bronze Medals	Total Medals
United States	1061	836	738	2,635
Russia	609	514	504	1,627*
Germany	438	455	490	1,383**
Great Britain	285	316	315	916
China	262	199	173	634
France	222	253	274	749

**Summer Olympics Medal Table (1896-2020)**, Source: statista.com \*Including the Russian Federation, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, "Russian Olympic Committee" \*\*Including post-1990 Germany, the United Team of Germany, West Germany, and East Germany

Nation	Gold Medals	Silver Medals	Bronze Medals	Total Medals
Germany	162	155	118	435*
Norway	148	134	123	405
Russia	142	120	125	387**
United States	113	122	95	330
Canada	77	72	76	225
Austria	71	88	91	250

**Winter Olympics Medal Table (1924-2022)**, Source: statista.com \*Including post-1990 Germany, the United Team of Germany, West Germany, and East Germany \*\*Including the Russian Federation, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, as well as the “Russian Olympic Committee”

## The United States as Core: The NFL’s Dominance

Moreover, the United States and Canada have embodied the global core of the four team sports that have dominated the North American sports space and its sports culture for the past 150 years: baseball, American (and Canadian) Football, basketball, and ice hockey. The NFL, officially named the National Football League, is considered a national football league, but its champion is often recognized as a world champion. As the NFL seeks to expand its revenue from European markets, it consistently attracts larger audiences compared to the EFL (European Football League), which typically plays its games in front of small crowds at amateur soccer stadiums.

The NFL’s dominance both in the US and worldwide is difficult to overstate.<sup>3</sup> Super Bowl LVIII’s viewership figures of Sunday, February 11, 2024, set a record with 123.4 million, easily surpassing the previous record of 115.1 million set by Super Bowl LVII. It thus became the most-watched television show in United States history. Thirteen of the last 15 Super Bowls drew more than 100 million viewers, a bigger audience than in earlier decades. In 2023, the NFL accounted for a staggering 93 out of 100 most-watched television

broadcasts in the United States. And while still nascent, the NFL's power extends worldwide, feeding into American sports soft power. Over 56 million viewers tuned into Super Bowl LVII worldwide, including a total reach of over 20 million in Mexico, 17 million in Canada, and several million in countries across Europe — all marking significant year-on-year increases.<sup>4</sup>

But in the world of Association Football, the two North American countries of the United States and Canada have been relegated to peripheral positions in the cultural geography of this global sport, whose core lies unmistakably in Europe with places like England, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France receiving pride of place. From the game's very early days in the 1860s and 1870s until the arrival of the North American Soccer League (of Beckenbauer, Pele, Best, and Cruyff fame) between 1967 and 1985, soccer in America belonged solidly to what Wallerstein termed "external areas," meaning that its presence on this vast continent – despite defeating England in the 1950 World Cup in Brazil, which still remains one of the greatest upsets in World Cup history– had essentially zero impact and effect on the game's global development. But the NASL, together with hosting the World Cup tournament of 1994, which remains to this day the most successful of such events, propelled the game in the United States into the solid purview of its global periphery. The following outlines how, during the 21st century, Association Football in the United States has moved from the game's global periphery to its solid semi-periphery, with the impending World Cup of 2026 presenting a significant opportunity for it to join the game's global core.

## **Soccer's Semi-Peripheral Existence in the United States**

Soccer's transition from the periphery to the semi-peripheral stage is exemplified by the resounding success of the comedy-drama television series, "Ted Lasso," which premiered on Apple TV+ in August 2020. In this heartwarming narrative, Jason Sudeikis assumes the role of Ted Lasso, a modest college football coach from the United States unexpectedly thrust into the position of coaching a professional soccer team in England.

Even though Lasso has limited knowledge of soccer, he is deliberately hired as an act of "revenge" by the club's owner, with the expectation that he will lead the team to disastrous performances. However, what unfolds is a remarkable journey as Lasso skillfully transforms from an outsider greeted with skepticism to a beloved coach, leaving a profound impact on the team, the staff, and everyone in his orbit. Simultaneously, this newfound role serves as a catalyst for Lasso's personal growth, creating a compelling

dynamic that resonates throughout the series. Its tremendous popularity in the game's European core bespeaks a cultural cross-fertilization between semi-periphery and core that also attests to soccer's cultural growth in North America. Put simply: "Ted Lasso" would have been unimaginable in its production but, above all, its consumption in soccer's cultural reality in the United States preceding the last decade.

Soccer has been experiencing ever-growing popularity among American sports fans and, by certain important metrics, now rivals baseball and basketball – particularly among fans under 30.<sup>5</sup> Yet much of this growth, while broad-based, is directed away from the periphery – that is, the U.S. — and towards the sport's stalwart core: European soccer remains vastly more popular across the board than domestic leagues. Most telling is the ranking of most-watched soccer competitions on US TV: in 2022, the UEFA Champions League took first place with an average of 964,000 viewers per telecast. Liga MX in Mexico retained a similarly large Spanish-speaking following. The English Premier League was not far behind at 818,000. Only then did Major League Soccer (MLS) manage to place fourth with an average of 595,000.<sup>6</sup>

In general, the English Premier League continues to dominate American soccer fandom. Its meteoric rise continues, having now surpassed the stalwart popularity of Liga MX, even among Latino Americans, to become the single-most popular soccer league for American fans of all ethnicities and cultures. The English outfit has continued to register new viewership records, helped by lucrative streaming and broadcasting rights on NBC and Peacock. Viewership on flagship matches, among elite clubs like Liverpool, Arsenal and Manchester United, frequently approaches or even tops 1.5 million.<sup>7</sup>

Key media purveyors in soccer's core are putting their money where their mouths are considering the sport's growing popularity among American fans. Investments by streaming giants as well as the European leagues themselves point to this fact. Over the past few years, streamers have inked massive deals for rights to Big 5 leagues, including Disney's ESPN+ securing Germany's Bundesliga matches over six years in 2019 and Paramount+ buying rights to Italy's Serie A over 3 years for \$220 million. Of course, MLS is also a beneficiary of this trend. Apple shelled out a whopping \$2.5 billion for the rights to broadcast the league's matches over the next 10 years.<sup>8</sup> To put that in perspective though, the NFL – which boasts the most expensive and lucrative TV rights on the planet – is poised to net over \$125 billion over the next ten years in broadcasting deals.<sup>9</sup> While soccer's figures are a far cry from the multibillion-dollar deals seen in the Big Four of NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL, it has become evident that soccer leagues both domestically and overseas

perceive the U.S. market as a lucrative one. NBC paid \$2.7b to keep Premier League matches for another six years.<sup>10</sup> Streaming companies and broadcasters are willing to make these bets on the continued growth of the sport in the U.S. market, and European leagues are clearly looking to the U.S. as a source of encouraging growth as they seek new revenue streams.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence that soccer has convincingly entered the “main stage” of American sports is not just limited to television viewership. At the end of 2023, MLS Commissioner Don Garber celebrated an “epic, epic year” for the league: alongside the successful completion of its first year partnered with Apple for streaming rights, MLS saw record-breaking attendance at live games across the board, both for a single match (82,210 fans at the Angelino derby contested by Los Angeles FC and the Los Angeles Galaxy, held in the venerable Rose Bowl) as well as the season as a whole (nearly 11 million fans).<sup>12</sup> At least seven clubs broke their all-time attendance records, and teams across the country — including Philadelphia Union, LAFC, St. Louis City SC, and Austin FC – sold out every single regular season and playoff game in which they participated since joining MLS in 2021.<sup>13</sup> And the competition landscape has also come to more closely resemble that of the “core” in Europe — MLS actively participates in the CONCACAF Champions Cup, the governing body’s equivalent of the UEFA Champions League. There, American soccer clubs increasingly compete on a par level with once-dominant Mexican and Central American teams. The Seattle Sounders even managed to win the tournament in 2022 over the Mexico City-based UNAM, thereby becoming the very first North American based CONCACAF champion.

Of course, fans and their behavior are not the only metrics for a sport’s success – one must also look at the behavior of athletes themselves. In 2023, on top of good news regarding viewership and fan attendance, MLS scored a major coup as soccer legend Lionel Messi signed with Inter Miami. Since he arrived in June of 2023, his presence has captivated not only Miami but sports fans across the country, indeed the world. Messi’s bright pink No. 10 jersey quickly became “the hottest piece of sports merchandise on the planet”. It remains one of Adidas’s best-selling items and keeping up with demand is a top priority for the company globally.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Adidas reorganized its entire supply chain in Southeast Asia, including its sourcing of pink polyester fabric, to ensure maximum speed and efficiency in producing and selling this hot item.<sup>15</sup> And of course, a vibrant black market soon emerged for the coveted jersey, with knockoff bubblegum-color jerseys proliferating on streets from Miami to Buenos Aires to Manchester.<sup>16</sup>

Given all the excitement, it came as no surprise that ticket prices skyrocketed as fans

flocked to Messi. His MLS debut saw dozens of celebrities in the stands, including basketball superstar LeBron James, overall celebrity Kim Kardashian, and movie stars Owen Wilson, Selena Gomez, Gerard Butler, and Leonardo DiCaprio.<sup>17</sup> Previously around \$30 or \$40, prices for Inter Miami tickets rose into the three-digit range and the stadium seats for the 2024 season were sold out in less than two weeks after going on sale.<sup>18</sup>

Messi also brought fellow Barcelona powerhouses Jordi Alba, Luis Suarez, and Sergio Busquets with him, further deepening MLS's bench with elite players from the core. It, of course, is not the first time MLS has seen such a move: most famously, English superstar David Beckham joined the Los Angeles Galaxy in 2007 after a successful career in the Premier League and La Liga. It's part of a concerted strategy by the league: alongside Messi and Beckham, core greats including Bastian Schweinsteiger, Zlatan Ibrahimović, and Thierry Henry have been wooed across the Atlantic to boost the league's profile. Part of Inter Miami's – partly owned by Beckham, in fact – appeal to Messi was the chance to kickstart soccer's rise in the world's largest sports market. Furthermore, Messi was given important financial incentives linked to the club's future performance in the market, augmenting his whopping salary. Indeed, it was allegedly these prospects for the game's growth that became the deciding factor in encouraging Messi to decline the Saudi semi-periphery's enormous money in favor of the American semi-periphery's still considerable but much lesser amount.<sup>19</sup>

Messi's entry onto the US stage mirrors a similar sequence of events in 1975 when Pele boldly decided to join the New York Cosmos rather than an elite European club for the messianic purpose of growing the game in what was then a clear soccer periphery. But while Pele succeeded in filling Giants Stadium, his ambition to make soccer history by growing the game's cultural importance in the United States has to be gauged as an incomplete endeavor at best.

Whereas Pele's presence occurred in the game's peripheral presence both within the American sports firmament and American soccer's position in the global game; Beckham's and most certainly Messi's interventions happened in a much-enhanced location for soccer within America's sports space as well as American soccer's position in the world. American soccer has decidedly transitioned from Pele's periphery to Messi's semi-periphery.

While MLS's strategy of importing stars has undoubtedly allowed the league to boost its popularity and legitimacy in the eyes of the global soccer community, it must be careful so as not to be perceived merely as a place for aging European and Europe-based Latin

American superstars to spend their “golden years” as was famously and detrimentally the case with the North American Soccer League of 1967 to 1985. MLS once again faces a dilemma: on one hand, signing too many former top players has led to a perception of the league as a 'retirement home' that pays high salaries to disinterested veterans. On the other hand, not signing high-profile players risks diminishing its visibility in the star-studded landscape of American team sports.<sup>20</sup> Messi's dominant performance in his MLS career so far may, perhaps, demonstrate just how vast the void in quality between soccer's American semi-periphery and its European core remains.<sup>21</sup>

It will be a tightrope walk for MLS to continue attracting elite overseas players while raising standards across the board to bring about a more cohesively high-quality product. The league's strict salary caps preclude teams from consistently attracting the best talent: each MLS team receives three “designated player” slots, known as the Beckham rule, allowing teams to exclude these players from salary cap calculations. Teams will need far more of these slots, or a wholesale overhaul of the salary cap system, to allow for more investment: Miami, for instance, would face very difficult math attracting any other star players under the current framework. Yet in late 2023 Commissioner Garber specifically ruled out the addition of more designated slots.<sup>22</sup> This will prove to be a nagging challenge as the league continues to grow. Time will tell if MLS can truly rival the attractive force of the European leagues and become the preeminent outlet for soccer viewership in the United States.

As the popularity and prestige of soccer have reached new heights in the United States, the number of elite American players playing in the “Big 5” leagues of the sport's core (Premier League in England, Bundesliga in Germany, La Liga in Spain, Serie A in Italy, and Ligue 1 in France) or other forums in Europe has increased considerably.<sup>23</sup> Bespeaking the game's massive qualitative advances in America over the past few decades is the fact that an increasing number of highly-skilled American players departs from the American soccer landscape and finds success in the epicenter of the sport's talent and fandom. A clear sign of how the game has become entrenched in the United States is the fact that many of its purveyors seek their fortunes in the game's challenging core, happily abandoning the known safety of its home-bound semi-periphery. Just like the best European basketball and hockey players seek to abandon their semi-peripheral leagues for the NBA and the NHL, so do US-based soccer players wish to ply their trade in the game's European core. Of the 26-man roster fielded by the United States Men's National Team (USMNT) for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, 17 of them currently or most recently play for a European club.<sup>24</sup> This development also constitutes clear testimony of the impressive improvements in the

teaching of soccer in America, which imparted to these players the skills that are necessary for them to be hired by and succeed in the clubs of the game's European core.

In the transition of soccer from the periphery to the semi-periphery in the United States, a vibrant fan culture has blossomed, distinct from the traditional atmosphere of football, basketball, baseball, and hockey. Attentive observers note the emergence of organized soccer supporter subcultures in the US and Canada that are reminiscent of European and South American fandom.<sup>25</sup> These soccer supporter groups engage in continual chanting, flag-waving, and political activism within stadiums, a departure from the apolitical nature of the traditional fan culture of the established North American major sports leagues. In the shadow of the "Big Four" and due to soccer's status as a marginalized spectator sport, fans have created a highly organized and politically progressive supporters' community, marked by its vocal opposition to discrimination and its active lobbying for fan interests. These fans also raise their voices against MLS's leadership, for instance, over policies restricting political speech. In stadiums like Detroit City FC's Keyworth Stadium, one regularly sees "FCK MLS" t-shirts, displaying the fans' opposition to "commercial" MLS, against which they favor their supposedly more authentic USL Championship league.

The young, diverse, and broad-based nature of American soccer fandom has also allowed for the women's game to share in the growth seen by the sport across the board. A completely different set of assumptions underlies the trends seen in the women's game, of course: it can absolutely be argued that the United States constitutes the very core of women's soccer.<sup>26</sup> The United States Women's National Team (USWNT) has consistently been ranked best or second-best in the world for over 30 years and is the only national side in the world that has attained a medal or a trophy in nearly all women's World Cups and Olympics since 1991 and 1996 respectively. Through these enormous and consistent successes on the part of the USWNT, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) has become a respectable US-based domestic forum for the sport. While numbers are difficult to compare across countries, it is likely that the NWSL boasts the largest dedicated fan base for a women's professional soccer league given the overwhelmingly male fan bases outside the United States. European leagues, such as the Frauen-Bundesliga, struggle to attract more than a few hundred to a few thousand fans per match despite also showing signs of moderate growth.<sup>27</sup> More than 60% of football fans in Europe are men, while the sport's fan base in the United States features far more women – and even an often-disproportionate level of interest in the game among them.<sup>28</sup> The U.S. soccer fan's stereotype is highly educated, ethnically diverse, female, wealthy, concentrated in economically vibrant metropolitan areas and therefore contradicts the stereotype of the typical global soccer fan

as a male hooligan. In fact, its characteristics are closer to yet another American soccer phenomenon: the soccer mom!<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the league secured a valuable broadcast deal with CBS/Paramount+, and tens of thousands of NWSL fans at a minimum watch its match broadcasts. Over 1.3 million fans attended NWSL matches during the 2023 season, a record which builds on consistent growth (pandemic-era seasons excluded) that has accelerated since the 2010s. And let us not forget that NWSL's various precursors served as the clear global core of the women's game in which European countries furnished the semi-periphery with Latin America the periphery. Until very recently, virtually all great female footballers from Europe plied their club-based trade in the United States. Indeed, many of the best European players learned their skills in the American college game. With the female game gaining a huge boost in popularity and acceptance in Europe over the past 5 to 10 years, the former singular hegemony of the United States has begun to decline thus forming a multipolar core across both sides of the Atlantic for the women's game.

## Conclusion

In no other country – apart from Australia, perhaps, which parallels the United States in so many cultural constructs – has professional soccer entered that country's "sports space" occupied by at least four massively established team sports, all of which celebrate their sport's global core in the United States (and Canada). In no other country exists such a structure that continues to confront competing professional leagues in the game of soccer itself. And like all phenomena in semi-peripheries, soccer in America, too, displays a tension between the draws of the center and the perceived marginality of the periphery. Modern media render the presence of soccer's European core an everyday reality in the American sports space. Thus, it is no surprise that the forthcoming three crucial events constituting soccer's very global core will occur in the United States: the Copa America in 2024; the FIFA Club World Championship in 2025; and then the World Cup in 2026. These events will on the one hand, of course, constitute a blessing for the sport's enhanced popularity in the United States and thus push it closer to becoming the core. But on the other hand, these tournaments might also highlight the secondary existence of American soccer in the world. With teams of the pedigree of Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Manchester United, and Manchester City playing many games in the United States beyond the usual summer friendlies in a tournament that matters, MLS teams and their product might be relegated to the automatic irrelevance of the second or third best. Add to this the very real possibility that these core giants of the sport will soon play some of their regular league

championship games in the United States and the glare of these core entities could easily retard the semi-periphery's development of the sport and its culture within its borders.

Still, the benefits of these three massively important global tournaments will undoubtedly far surpass the potential shortcomings. While there have been major soccer events in the United States before, including the 1994 men's World Cup, still the most successful version of this quadrennial mega tournament, there has never been such a sustained sequence of events occurring in a regular yearly rhythm alongside such already extant explosive growth that soccer has experienced in the United States in the last 2 – 3 decades. MLS, NWSL, and the sport at-large have an unprecedented opportunity to solidify this progress and move toward joining the ranks of the "Big Four" sports in the United States and soccer's prominence in most of the rest of the world, thereby also entering the core world of soccer itself.

At the end of the day, nobody can correctly predict how these cultural flows between core and semi-periphery will affect soccer's future in the United States. But we venture an educated guess that the game will soon become a solid fifth in the North American firmament of popular team sports joining baseball, basketball, American (and Canadian) football, and ice hockey. The United States is culturally, socially, demographically, and regionally sufficiently diverse and dynamic to have its sports space welcome another permanent player in the form of the world's premier sport, soccer. Association Football will succeed alongside the traditional Big Four without displacing any of them. We predict that in the ensuing three to four decades American soccer – even on the men's side – will constitute an integral member of the American sports space and thus also become an integral member of the game's global core.

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