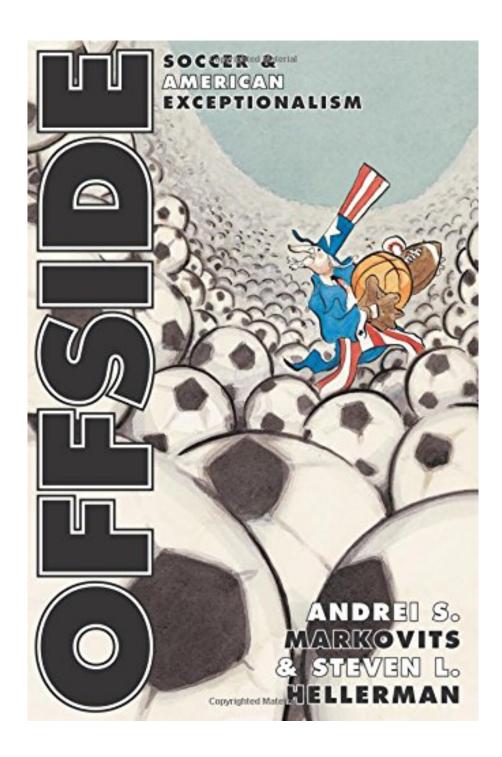


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Soccer is the world's favorite pastime, a passion for billions around the globe. In the United States, however, the sport is a distant also-ran behind football, baseball, basketball, and hockey. Why is America an exception? And why, despite America's leading role in popular culture, does most of the world ignore American sports in return? Offside is the first book to explain these peculiarities, taking us on a thoughtful and engaging tour of America's sports culture and connecting it with other fundamental American exceptionalisms. In so doing, it offers a comparative analysis of sports cultures in the industrial societies of North America and Europe.

The authors argue that when sports culture developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nativism and nationalism were shaping a distinctly American self-image that clashed with the non-American sport of soccer. Baseball and football crowded out the game. Then poor leadership, among other factors, prevented soccer from competing with basketball and hockey as they grew. By the 1920s, the United States was contentedly isolated from what was fast becoming an international obsession.

The book compares soccer's American history to that of the major sports that did catch on. It covers recent developments, including the hoopla surrounding the 1994 soccer World Cup in America, the creation of yet another professional soccer league, and American women's global preeminence in the sport. It concludes by considering the impact of soccer's growing popularity as a recreation, and what the future of sports culture in the country might say about U.S. exceptionalism in general.

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3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating study

By Beau Dure

If you're not enamored of academic language, consider this fair warning: It's loaded with it. But this book is one of those rare cases in which wading through the jargon is worth it. The two scholars involved use the tools of the academy to great effect here, explaining the role of sports in creating an American identity. American football and baseball weren't blatant attempts at nation-building (unlike, say, Irish football and hurling), but they served that purpose quite well.

This is indeed a powerful read for non-soccer fans as well. Ivory tower-dwellers drawn by the "American Exceptionalism" part of the title will get an eye-opening look at sports and American life.

Oh -- and soccer fans will consider it a good read as well, especially if you're curious about the game's history in the U.S.

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Offside is on target....

By Matthew Bolin

"Offside"'s authors have come up with a book that works both as a work of sports history, and socio-cultural criticism. Markovits and Hellerman paint a clear picture of American social behavior as it relates to the teams we follow, detailing the development of U.S. sports culture, and its expansion into the dominant role it currently holds in society. Clear without being dumb-downed, intellectual without being too "academic" (i.e. wordy, jargony, overly theory-based, etc.), "Offside" is a serious, enveloping work.

The main meat of the book lies in its center section, which goes into a historical account of the birth and development of the "big three & 1/2" sports in America (baseball, football, basketball and hockey). The

authors show how each sport had a "window of opportunity" to expand within the backdrop of America's cultural and financial explosion from apx. the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the Great Depression. Here, the book exposes something probably unknown today: that soccer had the opportunity to take part in this development in the 1920s, but due to politicing and in-fighting, was not able to keep a single, solid, professional league together, choosing to split instead into smaller, weaker, more insignifcant groups that could not sustain themselves long enough to gain a fan base and a presence in the American sports scene. Meanwhile, the "big sports" ended up a societal "necessity" in the 1930s: spectator-sports and movies boomed, giving people the best bang for their diminished bucks.

The later sections of the book explain how soccer may have been granted a new "window" due to (1) the World Cup in the U.S. in the past decade; (2) the establishment of the MSL, with the most capitol of any American soccer league yet; and (3) the dominance of the U.S. Women's team, thus giving a female form to the historically male world sport-space. There are new challenges a fledgling sports league faces that didn't exist at the beginning of the last century, some more obvious than others--I'll leave it to the authors and their grand piece of work to explain the rest.

13 of 14 people found the following review helpful.

For the couch potato with the active mind

By Jeremiah Riemer

If you're puzzled about why the country that dominates every other aspect of popular culture -- from fast food through Hollywood movies to rock 'n' roll -- lags behind the rest of the globe when it comes to the world's most popular mass sport, this is the book to read.

Andy Markovits dispenses in short order with all the cliches you've heard the sports pundits offer up by way of "explanation" for why soccer has not (yet) caught on in the U.S.: It's NOT because Americans are impatient with low-scoring games, or because kicking a ball down a field lacks strategy or skill, or because there's something about soccer that's incompatible with the American "character."

The real explanation has to do with the history of mass sports -- how marketers in both Europe and America took games played by gentlemen on college campuses or in local amateur clubs and turned them into popular, professional competition for paying (and, since television, watching) fans. It's not the "soccer moms" and Little League dads who determine whether a sport takes off: it's the franchises who organize consumption for the couch potatoes.

Markovits shows how the market for mass sports was already carved up among baseball, American football, and basketball when soccer tried to take root here. He doesn't downplay the growth areas that do exist for soccer in the U.S. -- in women's competition (where the U.S. leads), in colleges, and among new immigrants. But he's realistic about what it would take (such as a US team making it to the finals in a World Cup match) for soccer to break into America's already crowded "sports space."

One of the great things about this book is the author's enthuasiasm for ALL manner of sports. Andy Markovits is a big-time soccer fan, but he also loves to watch NFL and Big Ten football, NBA and NCAA basketball, the Yankees and the World Series. Because he understands what's exciting and graceful about all these games, he's able to dismiss all the anti-American and anti-European prejudices that dominate discussions about comparing sports.

In this book, you'll not only learn about the history of soccer; you'll also learns some things that Ken Burns didn't get around to telling you about baseball, or about why we can "blame Harvard" for writing the rules that made American football differ from its English cousins (rugby and "Association football" or soccer).

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