

The World Cup



Rioting breaks out in Brussels

by Gary Fouse

Now that the 2022 FIFA World Cup is in the history books (unless there are any more riots in Europe courtesy of the Moroccan diaspora) I feel like making a few observations.

Full disclosure first. As a 77-year-old American who never played soccer in his youth and could care less about the sport, I confess that I know little about the game though it is not really complicated. To me, watching soccer on television is akin to watching a golf tournament on TV and waiting to see a hole-in-one. Truth is, I played soccer one time in my life when I was in Ecuador at the age of 48, which is a story in itself. But that's just me. I am a tiny minority in a world that is crazy about soccer. But here in the US, I have a lot of company.

I only watched two matches in this World Cup (in both cases just the second half). I cheered the USA victory over Iran because of our history with that lousy regime, and I cheered the French victory over Morocco even though I knew that

thousands of miles away, someone would die because of Morocco's defeat. (I was right.) As for the final, I only watched the last few minutes of OT and the shootout (won by Argentina) because, it was, admittedly, a great match. Had the Argentines held their 2-0 lead, I would not even have turned it on.

The first point I would like to discuss is the political backdrop surrounding the games. Enter the president of FIFA, a curious Swiss fellow named Gianni Infantino. He put himself front and center of the political issues in his statement at the beginning of the games that the West should not give moral lectures to Arab countries (like Qatar), rather the West should apologize to the Arab/Muslim world.

Then, Mr. Infantino proceeded to portray himself as being in solidarity with all the victims of the world, migrant workers, gays, Muslims, Arabs, and others. But in the same breath, he cautioned the rest of us not to engage in political statements during the games. Enjoying soccer-or football, if you prefer-was more important. Protest on your own time. What was he referring to?

The sad fact is that there was nothing but controversy surrounding these games. First of all, the 2022 games were awarded to Qatar only after many palms were greased—as is usually the case with the notoriously corrupt FIFA. Infantino himself, has been the object of considerable allegations of corruption in his tenure as FIFA president.

In addition, the country (which is about the size of Connecticut) did not have enough stadiums to hold the games involving so many countries. Qatar solved that problem by having seven new stadiums hastily built by foreign workers laboring in slave-like conditions in 100+degree heat. People are still debating how many of these foreign workers died in building all these stadiums.

As if that wasn't bad enough, during the games, a scandal broke out of Belgium involving allegations of bribery of European Union politicians by-guess who-Qatar.

Qatar is a controversial country in its own right. They support the Muslim Brotherhood and groups like Hamas, all while pretending to be a moderate ally in the war on terror. They are also the home of the propaganda news network, *Al Jazeera*.

Another issue at play was gay rights-in a country that does not respect gay rights. Some teams and players wanted to don rainbow garb to show their respect for gay rights. That didn't go over well with the Qataris, so it didn't go over well with FIFA and Mr. Infantino.

Then there was the presence of Iran in the games at a time when that country is reeling over the police murder of a woman who wasn't wearing her hijab in the required manner. That has led to protests in the streets, arrests, shootings, and now hangings of protesters. The Iranian government actually threatened the families of the Iranian players with arrest and torture if the players "misbehaved." One had to feel bad for the Iranian players having to perform under such pressure.

I will probably be accused of hypocrisy here since I am not a supporter of the likes of Colin Kaepernick, Brittney Griner, and Megan Rapinoe for their refusal to stand for our National Anthem at their own sporting events due to grievances they have with certain aspects of our history. Maybe so, but I would argue that Qatar's treatment of gays and migrant workers, as well as their support for terrorist entities, are very current and relevant issues when they are hosting the World Cup, which they basically bought with bribes.

Then there is the matter of Morocco. Aside from the waving of Palestinian flags by the Moroccan team, what should have been a feel-good story of a cinderella team actually reaching the

semi-finals against mighty France was ruined by the comportment of its fans in Europe, specifically, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, where they have large communities. As the Moroccan team was knocking off countries like Belgium, Spain, and Portugal, joyous street celebrations in Europe turned into riots, with innocent people and police being assaulted, and resultant property damage.

That was when they were celebrating.

Then came the 2-0 defeat at the hands of the hated French. In numerous French cities like Paris, Lyon, Montpellier, Nice, and others, anger was the cause of the riots, the attacks, and the burning of cars and businesses. On Wednesday evening in Montpellier, a mob of Moroccan fans surrounded a car and proceeded to rip out a French flag hanging from a rear window. In panic, the driver took off to escape the mob, and in so doing, ran over and killed a 14-year-old Moroccan boy. It turns out that the driver (who is still being sought) was a member of the Gypsy community in Montpellier. That has led to assaults upon local Gypsies by young North African thugs.

The World Cup, Ladies and Gentlemen.

As things wrapped up, there was Gianni Infantino hailing this year's Cup as the greatest ever (he said that *before* the final match) and guaranteeing that after North America hosts the 2026 games, soccer will be the number one sport in America.

Sorry, Mr. Infantino. We have hosted the World Cup before (1994) and it still has not caught on here. Having actually attended the 1990 World Cup in Italy, I can well appreciate the fever of the fans. I have seen it and experienced it. But before soccer becomes number one in North America, it must first surpass American football, baseball, basketball, and even hockey. The "good news" is that President Biden's open border policies will soon result in millions of soccer fans arriving on our shores. But I digress.

