

## **Soccer: We need to set the ball rolling**

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The penalty imposed on Zinedine Zidane for his in-famous head-butt and on Marco Materazzi for his provocative remarks by FIFA has perhaps brought the curtains down on the soccer fever which gripped Europe for over a month. While I was in Europe participating in conferences and seminars during that period (they will be the themes of some of my subsequent writings), soccer rage was Europe's dominant mood. Unknown bystanders or taxi drivers routinely quizzed me on which team I was backing.

However, when I was in Florence to participate at the meeting of Aspen Institute Italia, a taxi driver, in surprisingly good English, enquired if Indians had interest in soccer. He seemed to almost imply with some amusement that a country of 1.1 billion people could not produce 11 players to make us a worthwhile world team. It is ironic that while cricket was introduced by the Britishers, the famous matches at Lords and the Ashes tournament which make headlines in Indian newspapers are under-reported even in England and certainly the pubs do not have live television coverages with enthusiastic supporters cheering and drinking. Of course, the shorter duration of a soccer match compared to cricket has the advantage of keeping viewers gripped.

Cricket versus soccer is hardly a worthwhile line to pursue, but we certainly need to consider why as a nation we have ignored perhaps the world's most popular game. There is no dispute that football is the most widely played and watched game in the world. Its strongholds—in terms of viewers and players—are in Latin America, Africa and Europe, but it is making deep inroads into Japan, China and the US.

Zizou's head-butt notwithstanding, the game has a uniting power. The World Cup provided a respite in Cote d'Ivoire's civil war, for example, when the team (with players from northern and southern regions) made it into the tournament, albeit briefly. In any case, the fact that heads of state bothered to express public opinions about Zidane's conduct demonstrates the fact that soccer is the ultimate international "ice-breaker". It is also an accessible game. Football is a low-capital, low-entry-barrier game that requires neither fancy equipment, nor specialised arenas to play in.

Take the success of African nations in football, for example, especially the top teams in Nigeria and Cameroon. The African Nations Cup, an all-Africa tournament, was covered by European television. Talent scouts regularly attend games on the continent, and a look at the pitch in any European game demonstrates that the game has truly global stars. Many French players are originally from Senegal and a Dutch team has bought a large stake in a South African football franchise in order to poach rising stars.

So why don't Indians pursue football with the same fervour as cricket? The nation is recognised as a "key viewer market" by FIFA and record numbers of Indians turned up at the recent World Cup (broadcast in Hindi over ESPN-STAR). After the World Cup buzz has died down, however, where is football in India? The game was introduced in India in the 1880s (along with cricket) far before the international body FIFA ever existed, and Calcutta had football teams years before the major European teams existed. India was even invited to the World Cup in 1950 and reached the Olympic semifinals in 1956!

Today, however, India's football team is ranked 130 in the world, having fallen 13 places in the FIFA rankings from last year. The last major achievement was reaching the quarterfinals of the Delhi Asian Games in 1982. Many children play football in the street, but most states

don't have any kind of programmes to bring them into the game more formally. Only one Indian, Bhaichung Bhutia of Sikkim, has ever played in the European professional leagues.

Not only is football a way to connect with the world, it is a way to connect across India. Consider that cricket players from rural areas have made headlines and soccer players would inevitably come from rural areas, and even learn and excel in the game there.

The first place to start is with youth programmes. The few programmes that do exist demonstrate enormous potential for bridging some of India's economic divides, as many of the children involved are runaways and orphans. The India Youth Soccer Association (IYSA) programmes in Delhi, for example, have over 1,000 kids involved—a number that pales in comparison to the population, but is notable for a relatively small organisation.

The Asian Football Confederation's Vision Asia initiative was to begin in India this year, with pilot projects in Delhi and Manipur, but it is unclear which of its elements—National Association & Clubs, Marketing, Grassroots & Youth, Coach Education, Referees, Sports Medicine, Competitions, Media, Fans, Women Football, and Futsal—will achieve concrete results to share with other states in the shorter term.

Another step would be to revitalise the All-India Football Federation (AIFF), the organisation that serves as the country's formal link to FIFA. This is the body that should ensure that schools form soccer (or five-person futsal) teams and set up matches, and should train referees and coaches to scale up play. It may also make sense to request FIFA funding for dynamic organisations such as IYSA or IndiaFootball.com. The Sports Authority of India may also consider providing funding: youth development facilities have not been improved for decades.

Sponsorships, big money, electronic coverage have brought fame and affluence to our cricket heroes. Cricket is both a sport and an enterprise. It has fired the imagination of the youth who aspire for success. We need a similar strategy to reposition India as a major soccer country.