

The World's Game Divided: The Cultural and Structural Differences Between Professional
Soccer in the United States and Europe

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Introduction

Sports is one of the biggest industries on the planet (Global Institute of Sport, 2024) and soccer is by far the most popular sport in the world with FIFA estimating that there are 5 billion soccer fans in the world (FIFA, 2021). 1.5 billion of those fans tuned in to the 2022 World Cup final, the most watched World Cup final in history (FIFA, 2022). However, soccer's place within the United States remains a far cry from its status in Europe. Soccer is the most popular sport in almost every European country (Maps of World, n.d.), but ranks 4th in popularity in the United States (Wilson, 2025). Although the United States is the dominant force in most sports, its global standing in men's soccer continues to lag behind many other nations ranking 14th in the world as of November 19th, 2025 (FIFA, 2025). With the notable exception of the women's national team, soccer just doesn't seem to be our thing. As someone who has dedicated his life to the sport of soccer and been fortunate enough to travel to Europe to play and coach the sport, I have witnessed firsthand the many differences between the sport on each continent.

This capstone project investigates these differences by combining my personal observations with empirical data collected through an international survey. Respondents from multiple countries, backgrounds, and roles within the sport of soccer provided insight into things like accessibility, cultural significance, quality of programs, and perceptions of the sport's growth. These perspectives help shine a light on what it is that shapes the trajectory of the sport of soccer in each region. With the largest World Cup in history set to take place across North America next summer, examining these patterns is both timely and relevant. Understanding the distinctions between American and European soccer provides valuable context for anticipating how the sport may continue to grow and evolve in each region in the years to come.

Positionality Statement

My perspective on the differences between American and European soccer is shaped by more than two decades of involvement in the sport across multiple roles and competitive levels. I began playing soccer at the age of four and progressed through recreational, academy, and club environments before competing at the high school level on both junior varsity and varsity teams, serving as varsity captain my senior year. After a brief hiatus from playing soccer when I played American football at the collegiate level, I came back to play at the semi-professional level in the United Premier Soccer League (UPSL). My long-term engagement also extends beyond playing; for nine years I have worked as a certified United States Soccer Federation (USSF) referee and, for five of those years, as a high school official for both the Texas Association of Sports Officials (TASO) and the Wyoming High School Activities Association (WHSAA) whom with I was selected as one of the officials for the 2024 state tournament.

Coaching has also played a significant role in shaping my understanding of the sport's developmental structures. I have coached for over five years in a variety of settings, including serving for two years as a goalkeeper coach, coaching a 2011/2012 boys competitive team for approximately 18 months, and working for another 18 months as a coach and director within a club intramural program. I even earned my U.S. Soccer National D Coaching License.

I collected my data for this project while I was a member of the coaching staff on the Stars 'n Stripes (SnS) soccer tour led by Ed Puskarich. A tour that I have had the pleasure of playing on 4 times as a player. This tour takes teams around Europe doing things such as sightseeing, training, playing in tournaments, and so much more. This tour has taken me to countries such as Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, San Marino, and

Sweden. On this year's trip we landed in Amsterdam, Netherlands where we did some sightseeing before going to Aurich, Germany where we had training camp. After training camp we moved to Frederikshavn, Denmark to play in Cup No. 1 before crossing over the Kattegat via Ferry to play in the Gothia Cup in Gothenburg, Sweden which is the largest youth soccer tournament in the world proudly donning the moniker of the World Youth Cup. After the Gothia Cup we crossed back over the Kattegat to Hjørring, Denmark to play in the Dana Cup before heading back home.

Throughout the time I spent gathering data for this project, I attended numerous games, spent a lot of time coaching, spoke to countless people, and even managed to survey a few. These experiences helped me really be able to see what the picture looks like on both sides of the Atlantic. I got to witness the passion of the different fanbases, the different tactics and play styles as well as the different warm-up routines and training methods used by teams from different countries, the friendliness of people in the soccer community, and the unique ability that the sport of soccer has to bring the world together. I have seen a lot of similarities and I have seen a lot of differences, and these experiences have fueled the desire I have to understand what really sets the game apart in both of these regions.

Methods

My Subjective Bias

Given this background, it is important to acknowledge that my interpretations of the data may be influenced by my personal experiences. My familiarity with the American system, both its strengths and inherent challenges combined with firsthand exposure to European soccer culture, shapes the lens through which I analyze the meaning of the differences between the two

regions that I find in the empirical and short-answer response data. Recognizing this positionality provides transparency in how I approach and interpret the findings of this project.

Research Design

This capstone project utilized a mixed-methods descriptive design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative thematic analysis. The goal was to examine how things like cultural values, organizational structures, fan engagement, and developmental systems differ between American and European soccer, and what these differences imply for the sport's future in each region. The project draws on both my personal experiences within American and European soccer environments and data collected through an international online survey.

Instrumentation

Data was collected using an online survey designed to measure individuals' perceptions of soccer accessibility, coaching and player quality, opportunities to advance or develop in the sport, cultural significance, and structural differences between the American and European soccer systems. The survey included: Quantitative questions measured on numerical rating scales (1–10), Forced-choice categorical items (e.g., Yes/No or selecting key differences), and Open-ended qualitative prompts requesting explanations for participants' ratings or opinions. Survey items were organized around core themes relevant to the research question, including accessibility, quality of developmental systems, cultural influence, organizational structures, and the anticipated impact of the 2026 World Cup. The following link is a link to the survey instrument that was used to collect data for the study:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSctiSGuPxIlly72WYUO44uprQX3aTx1Bm9Vs-qMiUvqM0FyeQ/viewform?usp=header>).

Procedure

The survey was distributed electronically through Google Forms with individuals scanning a QR code to access the survey. Participation in this survey was voluntary and participants could stop at any time. Respondents in this survey were made aware of the information on the capstone project before being allowed to complete it as they first had to consent to taking the survey before proceeding to the response form. Responses were collected anonymously to reduce social-desirability bias and encourage honest feedback regarding their opinions on the sport in both the United States and their own country.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed by calculating descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, for both the overall sample and the United States and European subsamples. These statistics were used to compare perceptions of key variables such as accessibility, player and coach quality, developmental opportunities, and cultural influence.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using ChatGPT to find themes within the sample as a whole and within each subsample. Common themes were identified based on recurring concepts across participant explanations. Themes included cultural importance, visibility and popularity, historical roots, community connection, structural differences, economic impact, and perceptions of competitiveness. These themes were used to contextualize and interpret the quantitative findings.

Results

Participants

A total of 119 individuals participated in the survey. Respondents represented a diverse sample across nationality, age, gender, and involvement in soccer. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 69 years old, with an overall mean age of 35.01 years (SD = 12.19). The average age of U.S. respondents was 36 years (SD = 12.54), while the average age of European respondents was 33.32 years (SD = 11.51). The sample included 68 males and 51 females which represented 57.1% and 42.9% of the survey population respectively. The participants represented 12 different countries, with the breakdown of how many responses came from each country below:

- United States (n = 75)
- Sweden (n = 13)
- Denmark (n = 12)
- Norway (n = 4)
- Malta (n = 3)
- Scotland (n = 3)
- England (n = 2)
- Germany (n = 2)
- Italy (n = 2)
- France (n = 1)
- Netherlands (n = 1)
- Poland (n = 1)

Respondents also represented a wide range of roles within the sport with most respondents holding multiple roles. The following is how each role was represented in the data: fans (n = 113), players (n = 107), coaches (n = 67), referees (n = 36), and other roles (n = 5). The diversity of the population for this study is beneficial for being able to have responses from

individuals who perceive the game from the different and unique lenses that the sport has to offer.

History of Player and Coach Quality

Participants were asked to reflect on their youth soccer experiences and then rate the quality of the players they played with and the coaches they played for on a 1-10 scale. The average perceived quality of players that respondents played with was 6.71 across the entire sample (SD = 1.05). U.S. respondents reported a slightly lower mean of 6.5 (SD = 1.16), whereas European respondents rated their peers higher at 7.07 (SD = 0.68). Similarly, respondents rated the overall quality of the coaches they played for higher in Europe than in the United States. The total sample mean was 6.75 (SD = 1.50), but Europeans reported a mean of 7.43 (SD = 1.09) compared to 6.35 (SD = 1.57) for U.S. respondents. Both findings indicate that survey participants from Europe perceive the quality of their developmental systems to be higher than their American counterparts.

Accessibility/Opportunity for Development

On a 1–10 scale, respondents rated the overall accessibility of the sport of soccer in their respective countries at an average of 8.24 (SD = 1.15). European respondents rated accessibility higher (8.79, SD = 0.98) than participants from the United States (7.91, SD = 1.12). Participants were also asked to evaluate the opportunities provided by their clubs to develop and advance as players through the means of things like including training, camps, tournaments, and chances to be seen by scouts. The overall mean for this item was 6.71 (SD = 1.84). European respondents again rated their opportunities more positively (7.19, SD = 1.40) than those in the United States (6.43, SD = 2.01). However, when asked about opportunities to remain involved in soccer

outside of playing such as refereeing, coaching, or other pathways, ratings were nearly identical. The overall mean was 7.86 (SD = 1.44), with U.S. respondents reporting a mean of 7.88 (SD = 1.46) and Europeans reporting 7.84 (SD = 1.41). This suggests that soccer may be more accessible in Europe and Europe may give players more opportunities to grow and develop while the data is pretty comparable between the regions for staying involved within the sport outside of playing.

Cultural Context of Soccer

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that European professional clubs play a larger role in society than professional clubs in the United States with 99.2% of participants agreeing. Qualitative responses highlighted five major themes as to what this perceived difference could be attributed to: cultural importance, visibility and popularity, history and tradition, community connection, structural differences. These themes consistently emphasized the broader cultural and historical foundations of the sport in Europe. One respondent wrote: “I think it's because traditionally and historically football has been a part of the daily life of Europeans. It's a "cheaper" sport and therefore accessible to the masses. And finally we professionalized the game early.” This illustrates the gap that still lingers between what the sport means to European society versus what it means in American society. Not only has the sport been around longer, but it is easier to play, access, and view in Europe than it is in the United States.

Structural Differences

When asked to identify the biggest difference between American and European soccer, 50% of respondents selected league structure, making it the most frequently chosen option. League structure refers to the makeup of a league and the rules in place that determine how that league operates. Other categories included: Number of professional teams at 22%, Quality of

players and coaches at 20.3%, and Other factors at 7.7%. These findings reinforce the view that the closed-league model in the United States stands apart from Europe's system.

Support for promotion and relegation in the United States was nearly unanimous with 98.3% of respondents believing it would benefit the sport in the United States. Qualitative responses pointed to several recurring themes that respondents reported as to why they feel it would benefit the game in the United States: Increased competition and quality which suggests that respondents believe that using this system will make the games and league as a whole more competitive. Greater accountability for owners and clubs which shows that respondents believe that a promotion and relation system would force owners to make careful and responsible moves that actually benefit their team because now there are consequences for failure. This is a pretty foreign concept to the United States where in most cases the worst team in the league actually gets rewarded with the top draft pick meaning they have the opportunity to sign the best prospect to their team. Expanded opportunities for players, coaches, and cities. This suggests that adopting a promotion/relegation system would provide more chances for people to play, coach, or see their team play at the top level. Your team can start from the bottom and work their way to the top similar to the way that Wrexham A.F.C. has been operated under the ownership of actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney where they took them from the 5th tier league in English professional soccer to the 2nd division. Other common themes were enhanced entertainment value and alignment with global norms. These suggest that not only will this system make the game more entertaining for the fans, but it is just the normal thing in the world to have this system. However, there was some concern about U.S. readiness due to financial monopolies in the world of sports. Overall, the data indicates a strong belief in the developmental, cultural, and competitive benefits of adopting a promotion/relegation system in the United States.

Competition With Major U.S. Sports

On a 1–10 scale, respondents rated the degree to which competition among the five major American sports (American football, baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer) limits soccer's potential. The overall mean was 7.85 (SD = 1.53). U.S. respondents rated this impact higher (8.31, SD = 1.38) than Europeans (7.07, SD = 1.47), suggesting that American participants perceive inter-sport competition as a significant barrier to soccer growth. Common themes arising from the qualitative responses were: Slowed soccer development due to attention and resource competition, Competition for financial investment, The belief that multi-sport participation creates stronger athletes, Cultural prioritization of other sports

Impact of the 2026 World Cup

Respondents were asked how they felt the upcoming 48-team World Cup, hosted predominantly in the United States, will help grow the sport in the United States. The overall mean was 8.5 (SD = 1.52). U.S. respondents were more optimistic (8.71, SD = 1.50) than Europeans (8.16, SD = 1.49), suggesting strong domestic confidence in the event's impact. Common themes as to why they chose the rating they did were: Increased visibility and awareness which suggests that hosting the event will draw a lot more attention than the game usually gets, Expansion of the fanbase meaning it could help increase the popularity of the sport over a longer term, Cultural shifts toward soccer acceptance which suggests that hosting the World Cup could be the first domino to getting soccer to the top of the sports mountain in the United States. Other reasons respondents gave were economic benefits, global connection, community engagement, and exposure to high-quality soccer. These suggest that respondents think that hosting the 2026 World Cup will bring in a lot of revenue that could be used to help grow the game. It could also help people connect with other people around the world and give

them a resource for how they can engage with like-minded fans from all corners of the globe while we all gather to watch the best players in the world compete for the ultimate prize in sports.

Participants from outside the United States were also asked how they felt the upcoming World Cup would impact their own countries. Their mean response was 6.91 (SD = 1.74), reflecting moderate optimism which was influenced by factors such as an already high level of popularity of the sport in their country and the increased likelihood of additional teams qualifying. This is pretty understandable because soccer is already the most popular sport in every European country with the exception of the Baltic States and Finland. The ability for additional teams to qualify is a great point, out of the 55 member nations of UEFA (the national governing body of European soccer), there are 22 nations who have never qualified for a World Cup. However, at the time of writing, there are 3 UEFA countries that still have the opportunity to qualify for the 2026 World Cup in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia which would make it their first World Cup appearance along with Curacao, Cape Verde, Jordan, and Uzbekistan who have already confirmed their spot in their first ever World Cup. The new format with an additional 16 teams allows more teams to qualify and compete on soccer's biggest stage. However it is worth noting that out of the 11 different European nations that responded to this survey, Malta is the only country that has never qualified for the World Cup. The expanded format does however make it easier for some teams to qualify on a more consistent basis.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly show that participants perceive a distinguishable gap between numerous aspects of the sport when comparing the United States and Europe. Research shows that soccer in the United States has remained pretty stagnant in recent years in terms of

participation in the sport (U.S. Soccer Federation, 2025), but has shown a significant increase in the interest in professional soccer (White, 2025), respondents still perceive that there is a significant gap between the overall outlook of the game between the United States and Europe.

While it feels like the gap in quality of players and coaching is starting to drop between the United States and Europe with the recent surge of American players playing at top level clubs such as Christian Pulisic at AC Milan, Weston McKennie at Juventus, Tyler Adams at Bournemouth, Chris Richards at Crystal Palace, and Antonee Robinson at Fulham just to name a few. While the data shows a gap between the average quality of players that respondents played with in Europe versus the United States, It does seem like that gap in player quality is closing, at least at the top level. That belief is affirmed by the ability of the United States Men's National Team being able to attract an internationally recognized manager in Mauricio Pochettino, a young Argentinian who has experience at some of the biggest clubs in the world set to lead the team into the upcoming World Cup. It is notable that respondents from the United States rated the average quality of players they played with as higher than the average quality of the coaches they played for. This tells us that the US is producing more talented players faster than it is producing quality coaches. This is backed up by the fact that there is a severe lack of American coaches involved in the professional game at the moment, especially on the Men's side. If you were to ask someone to name the most notable American born soccer coach, most people would probably say Ted Lasso. While I do love Ted Lasso, he is a fictional character. However the most prominent American born soccer coach at present is Jesse Marsch. Jesse Marsch formerly coached at both Red Bull Salzburg and Leeds United and is the current coach of the Canadian Men's National Team. However, he is really the only notable American coach currently coaching at the professional level. There are a good number of American coaches coaching in Major

League Soccer (MLS), but that pales in comparison to the amount of American players playing at the elite level, so Jesse Marsch is really the only elite level coach we have produced in the United States as of late, and when you compare the results of the study to this, I think it lines up perfectly because Europe has produced so many elite level coaches and players and absolutely dominates the sport in that area.

Respondents from both countries rated soccer as a highly accessible sport in their respective regions, but the data shows that the sport is still more accessible in Europe. This could be attributed to the difference in population density in both regions. The United States is roughly the same size as Europe as a whole, but Europe boasts nearly double the population of the United States. There are a lot of regions in the United States that are far away from any major cities, this could potentially be what is affecting the data. Speaking from my own experience, I grew up 20 miles outside of Dallas, Texas, but I still found myself having to drive an hour to practices and most games so that I could play in a competitive environment. In a less densely populated area of the United States like Wyoming for example, soccer can be a much harder sport to access, especially at a quality level.

Building off of this data trend, U.S. respondents reported a lower average rating for opportunities to develop as players meaning that they felt that the teams they played for did not train as frequently, play in as many tournaments, or be given opportunities to be seen by scouts as much as their European counterparts. This lack of opportunity for player development could connect back to the difference in perceived quality of the players in each region. However, both countries reported similar average ratings for how they felt their country gave people the opportunity to progress in the sport outside of playing through things like coaching education courses and referee courses. This shows that while the quality of coaching is not yet up to the

level of European coaches, the United States is doing a great job at providing opportunities to get involved.

An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that European professional clubs play a bigger role in society than American clubs reporting common themes of culture, visibility, and history as to why they chose their answer. Professional soccer has been around in Europe since the late 19th century with England creating the first professional soccer league in the world in 1888. On the other hand, professional soccer in the United States took a little longer to come about with a few failed attempts at creating a league in the early 1900s. The North American Soccer League (NASL) which players like Pelé, Johan Cruyff, and Franz Beckenbauer famously in, was founded in 1968, but quickly collapsed in 1984 due to financial instability. Professional soccer would return to the United States as a requirement for being able to host the 1994 World Cup which led to the creation of the MLS in 1996 which still stands to this day (U.S. Soccer Federation, 2025). This means that Europe has had a consistent and stable professional soccer league operating for over a century longer than the United States. There have been generations of history, fans, and players that have helped shape the sport in Europe into what it is today. However, it is worth noting that the 1994 World Cup hosted in the United States, still holds the record for the highest attendance of any world cup with 3.5 million attending games in person (Statistica, 2023).

Another reason that respondents reported as to why they chose their answer is the popularity and visibility of the European leagues and teams. Some of the biggest and best teams in the world are from Europe, and the popularity of the European iterations of the game only seem to be increasing in the United States (White, 2025). According to Sports Business Journal (2025), the MLS has actually seen a decrease in attendance over the last few seasons, despite

this, it has still demonstrated overall growth due to the arrival of global superstars like Lionel Messi at Inter Miami, better TV and media deals, and merchandise sales. The number of viewers for MLS games are still dwarfed by the viewing numbers for other leagues in the United States with the MLS ranking as the distant 3rd most popular professional soccer league behind the Premier League (England) by some margin and LigaMX (Mexico) (Fansler, 2024). This is interesting because a large part of the current popularity of the sport of soccer in the United States is due to how successful the sport is in Europe. I was in attendance for the United States Men's National Team game in the Gold Cup group stage against Saudi Arabia in Austin this past summer, and it was attended by only 11,000 people. Comparing that to a pre-season game that I went to in the summer of 2022 when Manchester City played Club America in Houston, that game drew over 60,000 fans. We are drawing more than 5 times the amount of fans to see a big club team from Europe play in a meaningless pre-season game then we are for some of our national team games which is crazy to think about.

When asked what respondents felt the biggest difference between professional soccer in the United States and Europe, 50% of respondents chose league structure as the biggest difference, 22% chose the number of professional teams, 20.3% saying it is the quality of coaches/players, and 7.7% choosing other reasons. This trend is continued by an overwhelming majority of respondents saying that adopting a promotion/relegation system in the United States would benefit the game. Some common reasons respondents gave for their answer is that implementing the promotion/relegation system would improve the quality of the teams and leagues by holding them accountable for their performances and helping the sport grow by increasing opportunities for other teams to rise up. Given the success of the promotion/relegation system in almost every professional league system in the world, it is hard to argue that it would

not be a benefit to the United States. However, the small minority that said it would hurt the game in the United States cited that we are simply not ready for it as their reasoning. I think that promotion and relegation is a much more fair system because it holds everyone equally accountable for their performances. If teams play well then they get rewarded, if teams play poorly they get punished. In the United States however, we mess that up in a lot of our sports by rewarding the teams who finish last. This is where the concept of tanking comes from. If a team knows that they aren't going to make the playoffs, they actually try to finish as low as possible because in the United States if you finish last you are likely to get the top draft pick in the next draft meaning your team gets rewarded by receiving the best prospect available. To me that just doesn't seem like a fair way to do things, so I think that it will definitely increase accountability because if your team is performing poorly on the season, then you have to do something because facing relegation has massive financial consequences which helps play a role in making the sport more entertaining too.

When participants were asked about the American sports culture, and how they felt the prevalence of 5 major sports competing for dominance in the American Sports market impacted the potential for soccer in the country. Americans reported an average rating of 8.31 while Europeans reported only a 7.07. The difference in this data could be attributed to the difference in knowledge levels of American sport culture. Most Europeans are only likely to have a very small knowledge base of American sports especially compared to their American counterparts. There was a very common theme that arose in the short-answer response that asked participants to explain their answer to the rating they gave. Most responses were related to the difference in culture between sports in the United States in Europe with a lot of people suggesting that American Sports are run more like businesses than actual professional sports teams. Responses

seeded that having a lot of popular sports in the country can help develop more diverse athletes which can be a good thing, but it also takes time away from the athlete in the sport of soccer. Many respondents also compared the popularity of soccer in Europe to the popularity of American football in the United States. At the end of the day, having that many major sports in the country that are all very popular takes both athletes and money away from the sport. Speaking from my own experience, I have played soccer for almost my entire life. I did not start playing American Football until I was in middle school, but when I graduated high school I committed to play American Football in college. I ended up realizing that I had made the wrong decision and ended up coming back to the sport of soccer, but that just goes to show how that competition between the major sports can be a bad thing because we have so many great athletes here in the United States, but not a lot of them end up pursuing soccer.

There was also a considerable population that chose the number of professional teams as the biggest difference which is something that not many people realize just how big of a gap there is in this area. The United States has 94 professional men's soccer clubs while the country of England alone has 164 professional men's soccer clubs. This is emphasized by the fact that the United States also has roughly 6 times the population of England and roughly 75 times bigger by land area. The data shows that England has a professional soccer team for roughly every 350,000 people while the United States has one for roughly every 3.5 million people (Fansler, 2024). Additionally, England has one professional team for roughly every 300 square miles of land while the US has one for roughly every 40,500 square miles which is about 80% of the size of England.

The 2026 World Cup will take place predominantly in the United States who is jointly hosting the tournament with Canada and Mexico. With the new format, the World Cup will host

a new high of 48 teams next summer. When participants were asked about how they felt the World Cup would impact the sport in the United States, American respondents reported an average rating of 8.71 while Europeans gave an average rating of 8.16. This shows that Americans are more confident that hosting the World Cup would have a positive impact on their country. Respondents reported that having the best soccer players in the world take over American television and media for over a month. This will also help grow the sport and make more people want to get involved along with the economic impact that hosting the tournament has.

On the other hand, Europeans reported an average rating of 6.91 for how they felt the upcoming World Cup would grow the game in their own country. This is an understandably low rating as the sport is already very popular in Europe so the game will likely not grow a lot, especially in the bigger soccer nations which is something that a lot of respondents pointed out in their rationale. Some participants mentioned that the new format allows for more teams to qualify, and while popularity may not increase much, it brings rival fans who support different clubs together to support their nation.

The frequently occurring theme of culture could not be ignored in the data. Soccer in Europe is more than a game, it is a way of life. It can be compared to a religion with the stadiums being their chapels, chants being their hymns, and teams being their deities. There is a shared history between the fans who experience every moment together. In the United States, sports do not feel as if they are anywhere near as important. Atmospheres feel simulated, fans don't feel as engaged, and teams don't feel like a community in the way they do in Europe.

I attended a Gold Cup group stage game in June between the United States and Saudi Arabia in Austin, Texas. The attendance was under 12,000, the stadium was barely half full, and

besides a small pocket of fans behind the goal, it was pretty quiet throughout the game. Comparing that to the professional game I went to in Europe when Swedish club BK Häcken hosted Spartak Trnava, a Slovakian side in a qualifying match for the Europa Conference League. The stadium was packed, the atmosphere was loud, and when the host side scored a late equalizing goal to help secure their place in the next round, you could have heard that stadium erupt for miles. That was one of 3 professional games that I have been to on European soil, and each one was as memorable as the last.

One of my favorite experiences from the trip was the opening ceremony from the Gothia Cup. Each place we went to welcomed us with open arms, and each tournament had an opening ceremony, but the Gothia Cup opening ceremony was something to behold. The tournament included nearly 2,000 teams from 74 different nations and had 1 team from each nation represent their country in the ceremony. Held in Ullevi Stadium, the very same stadium that Pelé graced in the 1958 World Cup was full of people from all around the world. The vibrant and enthusiastic host of the ceremony introduced every single nation, led chants, and held a moment of silence for the recently deceased Diogo Jota before ending in a fireworks show to complete an opening ceremony that rivals that of the Olympics.

Conclusions

The data from this study shows that participants thought that the biggest difference is in the lack of a promotion/relegation system in the United States. While the data shows that there are some other considerable differences such as quality of players and coaches, differences in accessibility of the sport, and the culture between each region, participants from both regions are optimistic that the World Cup in 2026 will only serve to benefit the sport in the United States. There are meaningful differences that exist between the soccer environments of the United States

and Europe, shaped by cultural expectations, structural systems, and player development pathways. Through both international survey responses and my own long-term involvement as a player, coach, and official, a consistent pattern emerged: while Europe maintains a deeply rooted, community-driven soccer culture that shows no signs of changing in the near future, the United States continues to operate within a more fragmented and commercialized system. These differences influence not only how players develop, but also how communities engage with the sport.

However, the data also suggest strong potential for growth within the American soccer landscape. Studies show that the sport of soccer is one of the fastest growing sports in the United States with more people participating in the sport and viewing the sport than before. The MLS is expanding with 6 teams being added to the league since 2020 (Inter Miami, Nashville SC, Austin FC, Charlotte FC, St. Louis City SC, and San Diego FC). The upcoming World Cup also presents a massive opportunity for the growth of the sport with the new format there will be more games and more fans meaning that the United States is poised to break their own record for attendance at a World Cup that they set back in 1994. This plays a part into why the 2026 World Cup is projected to profit upwards of \$10 billion (The Athletic, 2025). If the United States can address the issues it faces and continue to improve on what it is already doing right in the sport of soccer, then I see no reason why the sport can't become just as big in the United States as anywhere else and the Men's National Team can't compete for the coveted World Cup trophy. While the data may show that the game is healthier in Europe, the future of soccer in the United States is bright.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this project.

First, the survey sample, while international, was based on voluntary participation and therefore may not fully represent the broader populations of American or European soccer stakeholders. Respondents with stronger opinions or prior experience with the sport may have been more likely to complete the survey, potentially influencing the distribution of responses. This project also relied on self-reported data, so the data may not be perfectly accurate as it was heavily reliant on the perceptions of the participants who took part in the study, and those perceptions and levels of understanding can be quite varied.

Second, the project relied partly on my personal experiences from playing and coaching in the United States and Europe. While these experiences provide valuable context and firsthand insight, they are subjective and may not reflect the full range of environments across either region. Differences in clubs, countries, and levels of competition mean that individual experiences can vary widely.

Third, the scope of this project focused primarily on broad themes such as accessibility, culture, and developmental structures rather than detailed statistical performance metrics or long-term developmental outcomes. Future research with larger, more controlled datasets may yield more generalizable or quantitative conclusions.

Lastly, because the project involved cross-cultural comparison, differences in terminology, expectations, and local soccer systems may have influenced how respondents interpreted certain questions. These factors should be considered when evaluating the results.

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