

Soccer is the perfect cosmopolitan antidote to Donald Trump

An answer to the isolationism and xenophobia sweeping the United States.

By [Andrés Martínez](#)

Donald Trump may be the “America First” president, but his youngest son is a rather worldly sports fan. Barron, 12, has been [spotted](#) wearing a full Arsenal kit, making him a boy of impeccable taste, if somewhat dashed hopes. It’s been a rough couple of years for the London-based soccer club in England’s Premier League, a team that [prides](#) itself on artistically pleasing, if not always efficient, play.

Barron is not alone. His is the first generation of American fans to be truly connected to the international game, not just as players but increasingly as followers. This fall of the sports iron curtain, drawing American kids (and their parents) into a globalized sports culture, is a powerful attitudinal antidote to the backlash against globalization in our politics. At a time when so many cultural and political forces are urging us to shrink our worldview, sports are expanding it.

For Americans, the nation’s sports isolationism, much like our defiant refusal to go metric, has historically served to strengthen American exceptionalism. Kids everywhere learn geography through sports. (It took one particularly confusing Cold War World Cup game, in 1974, for me to grasp the difference between the Democratic and the Federal German republics.) But when their entire sports universe is defined by domestic events, fans see far fewer dots on the map and discount what lies beyond. How sadly isolationist to call the championship of a domestic league a “[World Series](#).” How defiantly isolationist to appropriate the name of the planet’s most popular sport for an entirely different game that isn’t played anywhere else and doesn’t involve your feet that much. Americans in the past couldn’t talk sports with foreigners, a parochialism that always struck me as awkward for people studying or conducting business abroad.

Sports aren’t everything, of course, and there are plenty of other ways to learn about your place in the world and to connect with people elsewhere. But Americans’ historic absence from this important slice of global life has been especially jarring, given how much we shape other strands of pop culture. The United States isn’t North Korea, after all — our nation provides most of the world’s shared content. Take kids from Nigeria, Argentina, France and China, bring them together, and all their shared references will be American movies, TV shows and music, and they’ll probably talk about them in our language. Except sports.

But in contrast to previous generations, American kids Barron’s age won’t be left out of those conversations. I have a 13-year-old son, and I am astonished by how plugged-in his friends are to global sports. [So many of them](#) play soccer, and even if they don’t obsessively follow the Premier League or La Liga, they play the EA

Sports FIFA video game and follow the likes of [Cristiano Ronaldo](#) and [Lionel Messi](#) on Instagram. They'll watch some of the World Cup and are aware, even if they didn't tune into the European Champions League final two weeks ago, of the Liverpool goalkeeper's historic [meltdown](#) and [debates](#) over the perniciousness of Real Madrid's Sergio Ramos, who cynically [fouled](#) the Egyptian [Mo Salah](#), forcing him out of the game with an injury. Kids' social media feeds blew up with [memes](#) about the dramatic match.

Social media, the wildly popular FIFA video game, the ubiquity of international soccer on TV and the marketing of large U.S. companies all increase soccer's presence in mainstream culture. The degree to which your teenager's youth soccer is turning him or her into a citizen of the world will vary according to region and other demographic factors (NBC Sports viewership of the English Premier League still skews toward bicoastal elites, for instance). But there's no question that soccer's rising popularity is a nationwide phenomenon, and that playing the game and following it represent a sea change in how people are connecting to place and one another through sports: Even casual players and fans are fully aware that the sport doesn't revolve around the United States. We all know there are better players and better teams elsewhere; that the best a promising young American prospect like [Christian Pulisic](#) (a world-class talent) can aspire to isn't some college scholarship, as it would be in our domestic sports, but to cross the Atlantic at an early age and attach himself to a club like Germany's Borussia Dortmund — which he did.

America is becoming a soccer power, but we are far from dominant, and this year fans must [experience](#) the healthy heartache of the world's most popular sporting event taking place without the United States, after our national team's surprising failure to qualify last fall. It's not always about us.

Think about how subversive all this is to traditional "We're No. 1" American entitlement or to "America First" isolationism, and the historic suspicion of soccer in some quarters becomes more understandable. Better for Fortress America to play its own games and proclaim its winners "world champions," lest we end up with a fifth column of rootless cosmopolitans.

But that column exists, and every year it grows more robust — a salutary counterweight to so many trends pulling us inward and backward. Globalization, both as an economic fact and as a mind-set, is on the retreat everywhere, rolled back by the appeal of nostalgic, populist nationalism. Yet sports continue to expand people's connectivity and understanding across borders.

It's happening everywhere. In Britain, too, there is a tension, if not an outright contradiction, between the 2016 vote for a Brexit that signaled a national retrenchment and the enthusiasm for its ever-more-globalized Premier League, which draws all-star owners, coaches and players from all over the world. The [chants](#) of Liverpool fans that they will become Muslims too if their beloved Egyptian striker Salah scores a few more goals are a powerful antidote to the parochialism and xenophobia of English political discourse.

Back on this continent, sports belie the worsening of U.S.-Mexico relations triggered by Trump's visceral hostility toward our southern neighbor. Pro football, baseball and basketball teams are all planning to play more games in Mexico and expand their fan bases in that country. And while NAFTA is in peril because of the

Trump administration's animus toward trade, FIFA is **poised** on Wednesday to award the 2026 World Cup to a joint United States-Mexico-Canada bid. Meanwhile, the U.S.-Mexico soccer rivalry that had grown so heated when relations between the two countries were friendly has become an arena to **express** cross-border **solidarity**: Days after Trump's election, players from both teams posed together for a photo during the pre-match rituals, an unusual move.

Major European teams will continue to tour the United States in the summers, eager to win over American fans, and more and more of them will be taken over by U.S. sports tycoons, who are aware that soccer is the best way to take their businesses global (NFL owners already own Manchester United and Arsenal). American brands are another force pushing the globalization of sports and an end to our isolationism. Nike, for instance, realized decades ago that it could hardly be the world's leading sports brand if it wasn't a big player in the world's leading sport.

It's unlikely that the rise of soccer and the decline of sports isolationism in this country will vanquish xenophobia and American exceptionalism in the near future. But hard as it is to quantify, I know it will make a big difference in Americans' worldview, especially as this generation of kids gets older.

In the meantime, we have a "Make America Great Again" president who disdains the rest of the world and whose biggest sports preoccupation is whether NFL players kneel during the national anthem. But I'd like to think that his son's mind is far, far away, wondering, as mine is, whether new coach Unai Emery will make Arsenal great again.

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 **Comments**

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