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OP-ED OP-ED OPINION

England's Premier League is globalized, but even Brexit-rattled Britain cheers. For now

By ANDRÉS MARTINEZ
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Manchester City players and fans celebrate after the English Premier League soccer match Tottenham Hotspur vs Manchester City at Wembley Stadium in London, Britain on April 14. (Will Oliver/EPA-EFE/REX)

Manchester City clinched the English Premier League title for 2017-2018 last weekend, a momentous occasion not only for soccer fans around the world, but also for anyone interested in the pressing debate about the relative merits of globalization's wonders and pitfalls, for which English soccer offers a poignant case study and metaphor.

In the last quarter-century, England's Premier League has gone from one of the world's most insular sports leagues to one of the most cosmopolitan. The result has been an astonishing improvement in the "consumer product" — the game itself — with an accompanying surge of Brexit-rattled anxieties about the nature of England's claim on the sport it bequeathed to the world.

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It's hard to overstate the extent to which the Premier League has become a world all-star league, thanks to an influx of capital and talent. When English soccer's top flight was rebranded the "Premier League" in the 1992-1993 season, it featured only 13 non-British or non-Irish players. Now a majority of starters across the league are foreigners, signed in all likelihood by foreign owners and coached by foreign managers.

Of the six "big" clubs (out of 20) — Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool, Tottenham, Chelsea and Arsenal — only Tottenham is English-owned. And these teams are directed by Argentinean, Portuguese, German, Italian, Spanish and French coaches. No English-owned club has captured the league title in the past decade.

Imagine if Major League Baseball were so dominated by overseas interests that the ballparks were named after foreign airlines.

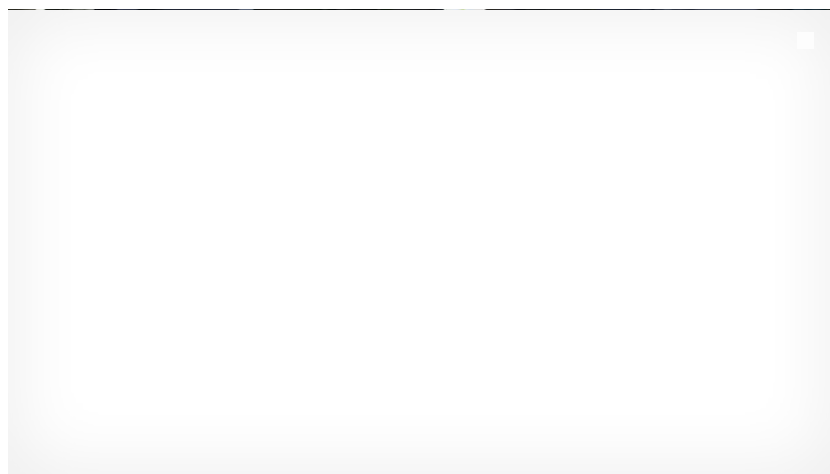
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Imagine if Major League Baseball were so dominated by overseas interests that the ballparks were named after foreign airlines, or that some players wore jerseys bearing Chinese characters associated with a corporate sponsor based in the People's Republic. From Americans tuning into NBC on weekend mornings to fans across East Asia watching late into the night, followers outside the United Kingdom are fueling the league's spectacular growth. English newspapers reported that there were only four countries in the world where you couldn't watch the Manchester "derby" between first- and second-place City and United earlier this month: North Korea, Cuba, Nevis and Moldova.

Manchester City, which lost that game but went on to secure the title last weekend when United stumbled against bottom-dweller West Brom, illustrates the upside of globalization in dramatic fashion, as well as some of the challenges it brings.

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The team was founded in 1880 by Anna Connell, the 25-year-old daughter of the rector of St. Mark's Church, in the industrial core of East Manchester to offer a wholesome diversion to young working men. For the next

century, and beyond, what would become known as Manchester City FC in 1894 prided itself on being the scrappy underdog to the more glamorous, deeper-pocketed Manchester United.

United, alongside Liverpool, became the giant of 20th century English soccer, and then the undisputed master of the Premier League at the turn of the last century. "Cityzens," meanwhile, had to be content with a club that alternated between brief spells of brilliance and long stretches of existential angst.

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Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi entered the scene in 2008, putting an end to City's existential woes. Sparing no expense, the sheikh assembled a dream team on and off the field, led by the world's most successful coach, Pep Guardiola, a Catalan who perfected his brand of sublime free-flowing, possession-cherishing, and attacking play in Barcelona. City has won its third Premier League title this season playing a stylish version of the game that even neutrals cheered on, while threatening to break most league records. (The season still has a few weeks to run, but no one can catch City.) In Manchester itself, the team and its Abu Dhabi owner have proven remarkably deferential to the club's local roots and its traditions. Except, of course, that these days no one would confuse City for a scrappy underdog.

In fact, despite the Premier League's foreign entanglements, its secret ingredient remains the authenticity provided by its teams' rooted traditions and storied rivalries. The clubs and their followers around the world take what globalization offers while pretending the product is artisanal, and locally sourced. Fans in California and in China tune in to watch because the stadiums in rainy Stoke and Newcastle still fill to the brim with fans chanting the same chants their fathers and grandfathers chanted.

The likes of the sheikh, the American Glazer family that owns cross-town rival Manchester United, and Chelsea's Russian owner, Roman Abramovich, could have started a "World Club League" from scratch that could play anywhere and everywhere, and signed the same players and coaches and paid them the same exorbitant salaries. But that would be unbridled globalization, devoid of any pretense of belonging, either to a particular place or past. The ambitious Manchester City project needs its rector's-daughter origin story.

This summer's World Cup in Russia will provide an opportunity for English fans to take stock of what globalization has done to their national pastime. England hasn't won the tournament since 1966. If its team, made up only of the best English nationals (facing plenty of Premier League foreign players who will be playing for their own countries of origin), fares poorly again, that will fuel critics who blame the globalization of England's domestic league for failing to produce and develop more talented native players. Think of it as sport's equivalent of the old import-substitution debates in the economic context.

But optimists are betting that the English team could go far in the tournament, in part because its players have become better for competing on a weekly basis with the best players, under the best coaches, from around the world. If these optimists are correct, and England does well in Russia, who knows, maybe Britain will want to revisit its Brexit vote. Otherwise, the Premier League's global underpinnings, and the world's, could take a new hit.

Andrés Martínez is a professor of practice at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University and a lifelong fútbol fan.

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A previous version of this article said Premier League teams were coached by two Argentinians; only one is. The list of coaches' nationalities also omitted one: Spanish.

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