

FIFA World Cup 2022

Reports By The Left Hook



Hard Crackers: Chronicles of Everyday Life

KICK OFF By the Left Hook



For football (soccer) fans, the big moment is upon us, the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar. *Hard Crackers* is on the beat, and there should be tons of raw material to write about. Are you familiar with the story about the full brown envelope being secretly tucked into the blazer breast pocket? What is it for...more weapons trade, joining the alliance, or just plain old graft? It could be any of those reasons, but there's a bigger prize for the promoters...we are supposedly all in it together and everything is fair and square. The chosen venue for this World Cup makes that preposterous.

So who are you with: France, Brazil, England, Argentina, Portugal, Germany, Spain, etc., the usual suspects? I'm not going there, and it's not the point of this. Aside from football, there is something else happening. Some of it is comedic, most of it is cheap, but all of it smells of money.

There is the Qatar madness. With palms greased aplenty by the House of Thani, the ruling family of Qatar, FIFA went ahead and awarded the 2022 World Cup to Qatar. Qatar has two separate populations, the smaller local Arab bourgeoisie and everybody else, who all happen to be migrant laborers from countries like India, Bangladesh, Ghana, and as far away as the Philippines. These are the construction workers, the taxi-drivers, the street sweepers, the cleaners, the lowly clerks, the maintenance people, the road builders, the ditch diggers, the housemaids and nannies...the grunts. Already close to a couple of thousand workers have died erecting stadiums in the desert heat. Most of these people are trapped documents-wise in this fiefdom, unable to return home, whether they want to or not. Let me tell you, if the World Cup had been hosted by South Africa in 1986 during the apartheid era, there would have been an international outcry, rightfully so. Qatar today sounds eerily similar to South Africa then, a minority ruling elite with the usual flunkies, and a majority of desperate people on hand to serve them. It's a genuine five-star

bwana/missus construct. This is the place that FIFA believes is deserving of a World Cup. That should tell you everything you need to know about FIFA.

FIFA is rotten to the core. This is almost universally accepted. FIFA is so corrupt that even its apologists have a tough time defending it. Here is a small example. My sister Bronnie and her husband Norms live in Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha), South Africa. South Africa held the World Cup in 2010 (post apartheid). Some World Cup games were played in Port Elizabeth, including the one when Holland beat Brazil in the quarterfinals. Everybody in Port Elizabeth was excited, the big show was coming to town. Small business people optimistically thought that this might be their payday. FIFA, with its inimitable sense of community needs, banned all local street vendors within blocks of the Nelson Mandela Stadium. The choice of available drinks was limited to Coca-Cola and Budweiser, a.k.a. formaldehyde, ensuring that the corporate sponsors were the only ones getting a payday. And that was 12 years ago. They've had plenty of time to get a lot worse

Here's a pisser. There are reports of fans from various nations carrying on in the streets of Doha outside of the five-star hotels, English, German and Brazilian. They are singing stupid English anthems, German beer hall favorites, and dancing the Brazilian samba. Some people are questioning whether these pantomimes are genuine. First off, most of these performers are all rather swarthy looking, which flies in the face of pasty English, well-fed Germans, but maybe sexy South Americans. They are all men too. Secondly, spectators have noticed that the same folks who were cheering for England on one day, were punting for Germany on the next one. Accusations are flying around that they might be actors. Apparently, the Qatari government has induced certain English and Welsh fans with free tickets along with all expenses paid, as long as they promote the regime and the venue, and tweet as such. But the promised stipend for this has now been nixed. It gets better. Booze has been banned, something that the English and Germans will find impossible to swallow. And then a Danish TV squad that wandered off the highway was beaten up by plainclothes cops for being in the right or wrong place at the wrong or right time. I have little sympathy for football fanatics, there is more to life, and nationality is not the more that revs my motor. But I am with them if they misbehave and are getting roughly policed by a regime for phony public relations reasons, especially when that regime is made up of the richest family in the country and gets patted on the back in the interests of maintaining law and order. That's a joke.

Look. I'm not bullshitting, I am looking forward to the football. I always hold out for the underdog, no matter how much dosh is in their little brown envelopes in the breast pockets of their blazers. Will it be enough? I believe it gets them a seat at the table, that might be all. "Gorau Chwarae Cyd Chwarae" (for Wales and not false nationalism, merely an opportunity to write a few words in an incomprehensible language). More will follow.

World Cup Chapter Two – The Football Saga Continues

The Left Hook

(This was written on Saturday night, November 26. Tomorrow's results might paint a different canvas, but I am not very good at the prediction business. This is about what has happened so far.)



Well, towards the end of week one we've seen enough to be proven wrong and sometimes right. And we've had enough time in America to be punished by the Fox Network panelists. They are a sarcastic writer's dream come true. It might be too early to say who's going where, but there are some signals.

Let's start with Iran. They lost 6-2 to England and then beat Wales 2-0. The Iranian team kicked off by refusing to sing their national anthem in solidarity with the protests back home. With demonstrators and even certain Iranian celebrities being chucked into the hellhole Evin Prison in Teheran, and with tough jail sentences and even death sentences being meted out, this says something. Iran is not a shabby football squad. FIFA ranks them as 20th in the world. Some have suggested that they refused to play England hard in the opener to shun accolades for the religious Iranian regime. Maybe so, maybe not so, but their original act of defiance (the anthem business) was pure gutsy. These players have to return back to their country, they have families there. Remember how the SS dealt with that. Their Portuguese manager, Carlos Quieroz, has had it with the sanctimonious (mostly Brit) reporters. His position has been along the lines of why don't these correspondents talk about what the UK did in Afghanistan, if they want to pursue their political hygiene. I understand his stance, he wants his team to be able to play like everybody else does. If war crimes are a yardstick, then the US and England would have to play amongst themselves only, probably in some muddy field in rural Wisconsin.

Then the Welsh crashed out against Iran, who played that match like they meant to be there. The Welsh goalie, Wayne Hennessey, managed to poleaxe an Iranian player in the waning minutes and then his team gave up two goals in extra time <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/jGOnEHOGdQQ>. Bang goes the strange language side. And Wales has some great veterans (Gareth Bale and Aaron Ramsey), so they are not a pushover. The point is that Iran held them goalless for most of the game and then took advantage of the Welsh booboozela. In this competition, Iran needs to be taken seriously. They play the US next.

And then there is the U.S. presence. They are a likeable team, Tyler Adams, Christian Pulisic, Yunis Musah, Timothy Weah, etc. They are also the youngest side in the tournament, a big plus in my books. They ran out of gas against Wales in the second half, but they managed a goalless draw against powerful England, a game they played very well. So far to their credit, they have held their own. In another time perhaps I might wish them the best. The

problem is all of the surrounding tub-thumping and other assorted nonsense and hypocrisy that come with being a US national entity on a world stage. The homegrown commentary doesn't help. They're only a football team for chrissake, not a Special Forces Unit or an Amphibious Assault Task Force, and this isn't Omaha Beach. I am sure that every competing nation in the World Cup has its own variety of patriotic schlock ("shlag" for the Germans). But it is different when this comes from the richest country in the world, a country not ashamed to militarily occupy others nor to wave the lethal big stick, a country whose fan base is substantially more privileged than those who live further south or are locked-out immigrants here from there. Little effort is made to distinguish the aspirations of the US soccer squad from those of the US as a superpower and self-appointed world enforcer. A much greater effort is made to combine them. The homeland audience does not seem very interested in discerning any distinction. Latching onto the football underdog label doesn't quite cut it here, but merely amps up the opportunities for more exaggerated doublespeak. This intertwined posture makes it harder to feel joy or sorrow for the US team and their legions of supporters here when things do or don't go their own way. That's a pity.

The biggest upset...obviously Saudi Arabia beating Argentina, although Argentina took care of Mexico this afternoon, sigh! In Brooklyn, I have too many Mexican friends, hardly any Argentinian ones, and a general animus towards favorites. And then Germany lost to Japan. When Germany is a goal up, they usually act like a deluxe Mercedes Benz, you barely feel the bump. But this was a bumpy road for them. Ghana gave Portugal a bit of a run, and we were all lucky to see the bombastic Ronaldo giving it to the Portuguese goalie after he almost blew it in the final minute. Thank god for superstars. Meanwhile boring but good teams seem to be carrying on (Poland). Watching Poland play football reminds me of watching Ivan Lendl play tennis, it's robotic. Spain and France look formidable, so do the Dutch and Belgians. Brazil is playing sexy. It is still a crapshoot, early days.

Lest we forget, we are the audience for our panel of television experts. This is hard to take. The most flaming punisher of the lot is Alexi Lalas. He played for the 1994 US World Cup team and he looked like a Grateful Dead follower back then. But like many hippies, Alexi Lalas has become an irritating reactionary. On Thanksgiving Thursday, he chewed on a turkey drumstick, yelling about freedom and America, and even his colleagues seemed a wee bit uncomfortable. When discussing the standings, he emphasized that Spain scored seven goals against Costa Rica, as if anybody could score seven goals against a lowly team like Costa Rica. His stuff is flat out ugly. Clint Dempsey, the former striker for the US, is far more tolerable. Maybe he is Alexi Lalas's front guy. What a horrible job.

And to make things more indigenous and worse, Fox has chosen a non-soccer athlete, the ex-US football player Chad OchoCinco to be the outside buffoon. From about the 90s onwards, special attention was given to NFL wide receivers, many of whom were a bit crazy and had even wider egos. Chad Johnson played wide receiver for the Cincinnati Bengals in the 2000s. He was one of those guys who changed his name, not like Muhammed Ali, but just for showbiz reasons. So he became Chad OchoCinco (#85). Pfft! Later, Chad did try his hand at professional US soccer, but that didn't go very far. The producers think it is important to have a non-football (soccer) player waltzing around the games giving us his take on the events. Think of whom they could have chosen, a real veteran, not #85! They might as well have asked you or me, and I guarantee we would be better at it. I must confess, I did change my name to the Left Hook, so I am not entirely innocent, but I was never a competent NFL wide receiver or the boxing champion of the world. Maybe Alexi Lalas and Chad OchoCinco can become the Laurel and Hardy of this World Cup, courtesy of Fox Sports. They're both looking like prize candidates so far.

The opening rounds of the football World Cup are the best, when all of the qualifying teams get to play, not necessarily against each other due to the groupings and the draw. The knockout stages will come at the end of next week, and that's when the heavyweights go at it. *Hard Crackers* will be there, along with Alexi Lalas and Chad OchoCinco. You will be glad you got us instead. More is to come.

For The Shoeless
The World Cup Diary – Volume 3
By The Left Hook



(Written on Saturday night, December 10, 2022)

In the rarified upper atmosphere of professional international football, Morocco's successful march to the 2022 World Cup semi-finals is a welcome break from the usual script. What is even more remarkable about this feat is how the team got there. The Moroccans drew with Croatia and beat Canada and Belgium in the group stage matches to finish on top of their group, and then dispatched both Spain and Portugal in the round of 16 and the quarterfinal games respectively. They knocked out the entire Iberian Peninsula's pride of football in less than a week, and that menu was loaded with superstars. That's no easy slate to erase from the blackboard. The Moroccan footballers accomplished this by playing fearless defense (they have conceded one goal so far in five matches and that was an own goal), by not being cowed by the power houses and the big shots, and by performing as a team, not as a collection of multi-millionaires who largely play for their own individual success ratings. We should take a moment to recognize this. But there are other things going on as well.

Here's one. Morocco's success resonates with people who righteously feel short changed. In this country, Arabs, Muslims and immigrants from the Middle East (exempt Israelis) are generally viewed as suspect (see post 9/11 especially). Africans from the continent are considered to be non-contenders (see forever). Morocco's success helps blow up this mythology, no matter how superficial winning a football game might appear to be. And in the big wide world, this is huge. Morocco competes, equals and beats the very powers that deem them to be inferior. Look, Morocco might be ruled by a lousy regime, with a putrid track record. That matters, but it doesn't seem to enter into the equation of underdog versus favorite and this is the popular global interpretation...root for the underdog. This time the underdog is Arab and from Africa. Most Moroccans are of Berber origin

Let me carry on for a bit more. The international shoeless, those that have next to nothing, who maybe have been bombed, starved, made to flee as refugees, who receive no welcome but scorn, and are forced to live in constant danger recognize this inequality. That's hardly an insignificant percentage of the world's population. They follow the World Cup too. The Palestinian struggle has received a much-needed boost in visible ways (see the photo below). In New York City, the streets of Astoria, Queens (a neighborhood with a sizeable North African population,

documented or not) were chock a block with folks celebrating the Morocco victory over Portugal. I don't know whether these people vote or are even allowed to vote. It doesn't matter, they have the right to enjoy that moment because they probably don't have too many joyous occasions. I sincerely doubt that this same crowd would come out like this for an elected official. The same is true from Marrakesh to Mombasa, from Durban to Delhi, from Cairo to Karachi (in both directions). It's everybody's world, despite what the current owners and those that are too comfortable to give a shit say and do.



The Moroccan team with an unfurled Palestinian flag after their victory over Spain.

Who are these Moroccan players? Many of them play for top European teams, yet they remain a mystery, particularly for Americans. Hakim Ziyech is a winger whose nickname is the Wizard. He is with Chelsea, a major English Premier League club. Achraf Hakimi is a defensive back fielder and he plays for Paris-Saint Germain, Neymar's team. His mother cleaned people's houses in Madrid and his father sold fruit on the streets there. Achraf Hakimi scored the winning penalty in the match against Spain. Youssef En-Nesyri, an attacking forward whose header earlier today destroyed Portugal's hopes, is a member of Sevilla in the Spanish La Liga. Yassine Bounou (also called Bono) is the Moroccan goalie. It's a pleasure to know another Bono (Bounou) who isn't as insufferable as the Irish singer. That Bono irritates the pants off me. Remember the infamous Bono (U2) quote at a concert, "Every time I clap, a child dies of starvation." The response from a savvy audience member was "Stop fucking clapping then." So that's Morocco. Bueno!

I'm trying to figure out how England managed to lose their match against France. They had tons of chances to put it away and still came up short. They seemed to me to be the better more adventurous team. I'm sure Harry Kane will eventually be forgiven for missing his penalty, maybe his knighthood might be temporarily delayed, but I am not so certain that Marcus Rashford will receive the same leniency for overshooting the free kick right at the end. Both Rashford and Bukayo Saka were vilified for missing their penalties in the loss to Italy last year in the Euros final at Wembley. Death threats were issued. Saka and Rashford are black English players, good ones too. What a miserable tradition.

It is not my intention to ignore the other side of the bracket. Croatia is a tough team made up of hard men. They beat Brazil last Friday. And they were finalists in the last World Cup go-around. Argentina is the favorite of many pundits to take the trophy. The winner of this contest next Tuesday (December 13th) will have to face either France or Morocco in the final.

Meanwhile, the US Fox television coverage of the tournament continues to be abominable. I felt somewhat vindicated on my initial comments about this (see *Hard Crackers* World Cup Chapter Two – The Saga Continues, November 27, 2022). Aaron Timms of the London Guardian wrote a scathing piece which echoed in far more detail my thoughts (see https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/dec/05/fox-sports-us-world-cup-coverage-tv-soccer?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other). He wrote “this World Cup tempts us with the fascination of Fox’s abomination.” And he concluded “Lalas is about to do his World Cup power rankings and nothing gets between me and my daily appointment with Lexi on the Doha disco tiles.” I agree. It’s akin to watching Bono and his gigantic ego at some concert/promo for his anticipated Nobel Peace Prize award, one just doesn’t want to miss how awful the whole megillah is. And the writer is talking about my favorite banana on the panel, Alexi Lalas. Half an hour before the Netherlands US match, Alexi Lalas boldly pronounced that the US would win that game 2-0. Half an hour after the Americans lost 3-1, he predicted that the US will win the next World Cup here in 2026. That’s four years away, but his sureness wasn’t in doubt. Lalas’s certainty was based on his notion that the US would be getting a lot better. What this doesn’t take into consideration is what about everybody else, do they improve too, stay the same, or just deteriorate (all of them at the same time). What a profound thinker Alexi Lalas is. Thank god we don’t have to (think that is).

On this coming Wednesday (December 14th), Morocco goes up against France in the other one of the semi-final matches. There is more than a little bit of non-football history here shared between these two countries. *Hard Crackers* will be back with further reportage and musings on this World Cup competition. Go Morocco, the Lions of the Atlas Mountains! Watch out for Alexi Lalas! We’re not dead yet.

FINIS

THE WORLD CUP STORY – Part IV

By the Left Hook



The money people, FIFA and the Qatari rulers must have been full of glee after the final on Sunday. It was indeed an exciting match. All of the hype played itself out, the major superstars, Lionel Messi for Argentina and Kylian Mbappé for France, had a hand in or scored all of the key goals. Even the Fox TV idiots felt vindicated and shut up they could not. They were full of something else and I stand in it regularly on Brooklyn sidewalks. And there was a penalty showdown, just the right recipe for fair weather television viewers.

Personally, I had no dog in the race because Morocco was gone and the contest was between two big shots. If push came to shove, my tendency was for the southern hemisphere team, but I have too many memories of 1978 when the Argentinians knocked off Johan Cruyff's Dutch team in that World Cup final in Buenos Aires. There were voices around then, ones that reminded us that the very stadium where this happened (Estadio Monumental) was a round up center but a few weeks prior for the people who soon were to become or had already become the disappeared (Los Desperacidos) during Operation Condor, conducted by the military junta and their death squads against our side. The US Government was no idle bystander in this horror which lasted from 1974 to 1983. The estimate of murders was between 10,000 to 30,000 people. Go Argentina! And then of course there was the France and Algeria bloody episode, which probably taught the Argentinian generals more than they needed to know. And for those who aren't aware or don't remember, the Roland Garros tennis stadium in Paris was used as an internment holding pen during WWII for resistance members and refugees whom the French government conveniently handed back over to the Nazis. Roland Garros is where they still play the French Open tennis tournament. But excuse me for mixing up politics with sport.

Still as a football follower, this World Cup was an enthralling contest. It's difficult to forget Saudi Arabia beating the eventual champs in one of the opening games, Japan getting to the knockout stage, and Morocco giving the business to Spain and Portugal. Even the US showed a bit of promise. Croatia beat Brazil, and the Dutch played hard

against Argentina, perhaps the dirtiest and toughest match of them all. A powerhouse team like Belgium might be on its way down, some old war horses like Germany and England are simmering, and then there are those that could well improve, like Japan and the US (See Alexi Lalas).

I have to admit, I felt for England. This is because I remember that the first World Cup I ever followed was in 1966, when England won for the only time. As a naïve kid, I believed they would continue (winning that is). My childhood heroes were Bobby Moore, Jimmy Greaves, Gordon Banks, Geoff Hurst and Nobby Stiles. Nobby Stiles was a defensive midfielder who didn't have too many gnashers and a face only a mother could love. England has



Nobby Stiles, 1966

never repeated that moment of defeating West Germany in the final at Wembley and it may be that they will never do so in my lifetime. There is something tragic here, and it is not connected to my youthful enthusiasm for that winning squad or that I am an unconfessed English fan (I am not). It's more like the Rolling Stones song called *The Hand of Fate*. I just feel sorry for the poor bastards.

One thing that seemed more noticeable...these football players play in a select community, albeit a very privileged one. Most of them know each other from the European leagues. For example, when Harry Kane, the English striker, missed his penalty against the French goalie Hugo Lloris in the quarter finals, it is worth knowing that they are teammates on Tottenham Hotspur, an English Premier League club. They have both played hundreds of games together. There is something quite fascinating and odd about this. The same is true for most top international players, for Moroccan, Brazilian, Argentinian, German and a whole host of other footballers from different nationalities. This is not Club Med (Dead), where money alone allows one automatic membership. The criterion for joining is the ability to exhibit a remarkable skill set. These professionals might be spoiled lads, but they are extremely talented and, for now, are in a unique minority. Our job as football fans should be to broaden that community. There are plenty of Lionel Messis in the barrio or ghetto and the world will probably never know about them. That's our task, as members in the struggle for building a new society, one where I hope football plays a role. Let a million flowers blossom.

And I would be remiss if I ignored our punishers at Fox Sports. In the grand finale, the panel shared Chad Ochocinco's favorite moments of being a spectator in Qatar. These included driving a 007 type Maserati or Ferrari car that sped across the water (a kind of "Q" invention), riding a camel, dressing up in full Arab gear, holding a fighting falcon bird, shopping at the spice bazaar, and surfing down a sand dune. Of course, all of these treats would have been available to anybody who had the dosh to get to Qatar and watch a match or two. Chad looked foolish, but didn't sound quite as inane as Rob Stone (the Big Kahuna on the panel) when he embarked on a ten-minute gush about the wonderful job FIFA did, while bowing to the Qatari owners. That was pretty unbearable. Meanwhile, Alexi Lalas (my favorite) reminded us that we got what we paid for, first class soccer from first class presenters. Merry fucking Xmas.

What I saw this time around is that there is a sophisticated football audience in America, and it is not just made up of immigrants, who have always been savvy about it all. The US football team has been around for more than a

generation, and their supporters are sincere and quite knowledgeable about the game. This makes the Fox Sports presentation even more insulting, since their bozos are intent on explaining things through the prism of how it all relates to other American sports in lowest common denominator terms. One cannot treat intelligent fans with such contempt. America's salvation in the world of football will only come with international inclusion and exposure. These talented young men and women here need to play in the real world, and forget about all of the other baggage that they are told comes along with being an American. I remain somewhat hopeful about this, despite what Alexi Lalas says.

The next World Cup is in four years' time. I can't promise you anything, except if Rob Stone and Alexi are there, *Hard Crackers Magazine* will try its utmost to fill that void. Perhaps we will be in a better place, beyond imagination. After all, we have our own different goals.

Cosmos!

By Tony Maniscalco

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On October 1, 1977, Edson Arantes do Nascimento, a/k/a “Pele,” played his last game as a professional footballer. The game was played at New Jersey’s Giants Stadium, across the Hudson River from midtown Manhattan’s Port Authority Bus Station in New York City, a truly seedy place, but one where soccer fans without cars could drop a few dollars for a coach ticket up to the entrance gate. This made it possible for the Stadium owners to fill up the place on game days. Soccer wasn’t exactly an American pastime in 1977. At least half of the people who went to matches in New York were West Indian or Latin American, and without drivers’ licenses or a lot of money to spend on transportation. Many were recent Eastern European refugees with little interest in driving the mammoth cars still coming out of Detroit in the ‘70s.

On that October day, I got to go to the game, a budding American soccer sophisticate, 11 years of age. The ride to East Rutherford, NJ was nothing to write home about. Still, it meant a lot to me to take those rides. I did so every other Sunday for the next two years, in 1978 and 1979, when the New York Cosmos played their home games against the other teams that belonged to the North American Soccer League (NASL), the precursor to today's Major League Soccer (MLS).

What made those rides special was the opportunity to hang out with Gerry, my father's romantic partner of four years by the time Pele played his last match in 1977. Gerry was a tall, handsome Black man, who loved sports, all sports. He was also a man with whom I was unable to connect too much, beyond our love of sports. That likely owed to our mutual indifference, born of the competition we two were constantly waging to be my father's priority. On day two of knowing him, Gerry took me to my first major sporting event, a Mets-Padres baseball game at Shea Stadium, in 1973. Soccer would become my fleeting passion in the late-1970s, but I forever fell in love with baseball and the New York Mets on that day at Shea.

I probably fell for Gerry in some weird way, too. Not only for taking me to the game and teaching me how baseball worked, but for making things less awkward to a 7-year-old boy who had no understanding of “gay,” and who still wanted to know when his father was going to take up with another woman after my mother left for Puerto Rico with my little sister. In teaching me how to use those written scorecards that were so popular in the stands during baseball’s pre-electronic era, Gerry was able to do something my father couldn’t do, and something the family members who generally shunned them both seemed unwilling to do. I also fell for Shea Stadium at that Padres

game. The Mets were competitive in 1973, so I never saw a crowd that big in my life. I also thought it was cool that so many different people could sit together and cheer, boo, etc., united by the fear and loathing that has long united Mets' fans of all stripes. If I recall right, the Cosmos played some games at Shea, too, while Giants Stadium was still under construction and the far more successful New York Yankees were playing well into the fall.

Pele's final match was an exhibition between the Cosmos and Santos, the Brazilian team he represented for most of his professional career. In a wild 90 minutes, Pele played this last match for BOTH the Cosmos and Santos. In the first half of the match, he donned his Cosmos jersey, the one he had been wearing since 1975, when he came out of retirement from Brazilian soccer to join the NASL. Perhaps motivated to leave Brazil because of its dictatorship, perhaps by the money on offer by the Cosmos, perhaps both, Pele inspired a host of internationally heralded footballers to join him and come to America to play in New York. The great Italian striker, Giorgio Chinaglia, enthusiastically followed from Massese, Internapoli, his club team across the Atlantic. Franz Beckenbauer, the unrivaled German midfielder, would travel to the States the next year. Carlos Alberto, arguably the best defender to ever play the game, would eventually join them both, making the trip north to New York from Pele's home country and the Brazilian club team that they both used to play for, Santos.

It was his Santos jersey that Pele wore in the second part of the match. The spectacle did not last long, however. A torrential downpour commenced shortly after the second half began, drenching the pitch and leading to no further scoring after Pele himself scored a goal for the Cosmos in the game's first half. The Cosmos won the game in Giants Stadium, 2-1. In Brazil, there was a joke about the rainstorm after the match. It was said that even the skies cried after Pele scored that second goal for his adopted team in the US. The Brazilians took it all very hard.



The Americans, native and adoptive, seemed to warm up to soccer after getting a taste of Pele's acrobatic play on the field. And even though he would retire from his second home in Giants Stadium, the Cosmos caught fire where local fans were concerned, at least for a couple of years. As the 1978 season commenced, the Stadium began to fill on those alternating Sundays. By 1979, many more buses were scheduled to get fans from Port Authority to the field in Secaucus; more concession stands were opened, too. The Cosmos were the winningest team in the NASL, rivaled only by the Vancouver Whitecaps, the Tampa Bay Rowdies, and the Fort Lauderdale Strikers during the 1978-'79 season.

Even with Pele in full retirement, the defense, dribbling, and scoring prowess of the Cosmos was simply too much for most teams. Carlos Alberto worked near the Cosmos' net, ensuring that little to no offense was mounted by opposing teams. During my two years at each of those games in New Jersey (and one in Philadelphia, where Gerry once took me to see an away game against the Fury), I watched Alberto throw his body at and into everything and everyone. If you were going to score against the Cosmos, you were going home with some dents in your shins, Alberto guaranteed it. It was demoralizing for opponents. Perhaps today's fake flops in soccer would have placed Alberto's work under referees' microscopes, but they let the game be played in those days. So, he rarely collected cards for his physically menacing defense.

On those few occasions when the forwards from opposing teams could get through Carlos Alberto's defenses, they were forced to get the ball past Shep Messing, the Cosmos' goalie. Messing was a brilliant mind in front of the net,

you could see it. Maybe it was his Harvard education, maybe it was the wealth of experience he brought from his college soccer days or his time with other teams before he got to New York. It didn't matter. Messing anticipated better than any other goalie in the League. He wasn't particularly big or tall. He just seemed to know where the ball was going to be struck before anyone else did. It's possible that as a Bronx native, Messing was on high alert all the time. The Bronx of Messing's childhood must have been an awkward place for him, so his personage would increasingly stand out in a changing landscape of people. As a white kid in the most impoverished borough in New York City, a place where government neglect and white flight created some space to live for African American and Latino families who moved there in the 1950s and 1960s, Messing might have developed enhanced abilities to think ahead and stay out of harm's way. In any case, getting the soccer ball past him wasn't a thing done easily or too frequently.

Gerry was a Bronx native, too. Like Messing, he might have been on high alert while growing up there. For one, he had earned full scholarships to some of New York City's best prep schools. This meant he stood out at an early age among peers in his Northern Bronx neighborhood. It also meant that he left that neighborhood every day to take the NYC subway to Manhattan's Upper East Side, a thing that Bronx kids simply weren't doing in the 1950s and 1960s, when *Blackboard Jungle* was showing in American movie theaters. These things would make Gerry special and a subject of scorn and derision in the Bronx. The exception was his proud mother and his younger sisters. His older brother, Lance, had a harder time accepting Gerry's liaisons with New York's well-heeled kids. Lance was more connected to his neighborhood. He was even associated with the different gangs cum crews that made lots of trouble en route to forming such hip hop groups as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Though those groups would shed a light on issues of race, class and police brutality, they weren't too invested in LGBT rights, to say the least. And the homophobia coming out of the Bronx must have placed Gerry in a lonely corner of the borough, giving him and Shep Messing a sort of kinship, even though they never shared anything beyond Gerry's wild cheers for Messing when he made brilliant saves.

Brilliant saves Messing made. He benefitted greatly from the offensive juggernaut that was the Cosmos' Giorgio Chinaglia and Franz Beckenbauer. Match after match, Beckenbauer was able to translate the defensive playmaking of Carlos Alberto into midfield transitions from one end of the soccer pitch to the other. Once he did, the ball was on Chinaglia's foot. And if the ball touched Chinaglia's foot within 125 feet of the opponent's goal, it was likely to touch the back of the net. Chinaglia was no Pele when it came to ball handling or acrobatics, but he had a rocket of a right leg. He was the scourge of defenders throughout the NASL. He would retire in 1983 as the League's leading scorer of all time—averaging a goal a game (counting exhibitions). Beckenbauer would score plenty of goals on his own. Still, a good fake and a clear pass to Chinaglia meant that little stood in the way of the Cosmos' dominance in 1978 and 1979.

It was a team effort, to be sure. That was the thing that made the Cosmos so spectacular to an 11-12-year-old kid who desperately hoped to understand the diversity he returned home to after each game, when the bus pulled back into Port Authority, and he would hop on the subway to Brooklyn with Gerry to resume their competition for my father's affections. The Cosmos represented the four nations above, Brazil, Italy, Germany, and the United States. They also represented England, Canada, Turkey, Portugal, and the former Yugoslavia—before it became two of the world's most competitive national teams, Serbia, and Croatia. It was that assortment of nationalities on which I was transfixed at each home game. And quite apart from the racism I was taught to embrace by the rest of my family, or most of them, the Cosmos and Gerry offered a vision in which cooperation between diverse people could be a source of some serious defensive capacity and goal scoring.

In the end, I'm glad I got that from Gerry and the Cosmos. The Cosmos would eventually surrender their dominance over the NASL. Where Gerry is concerned, no one knows what happened to him. He and my father split in 1981, when he returned to his neighborhood in the Northern Bronx and went missing. After he disappeared, Gerry's family came together with my father to pick through his belongings and somehow figure out what happened. Without much help from the police or his landlord, they reached the conclusion that Gerry must have run afoul of some sketchy guys in his apartment building. That was something he was prone to doing, considering his volatile temper. When the book was closed on his life, we were simply left with a vision of Gerry's murder in a boiler room. A hard thing.

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