

Fire! Fire! Fire!

By Chris Brown and Casey Shearer

On the Case once more. Chris and Case looking to score. Scoring, perhaps that's the answer to our question. Or maybe the answer is 42, except this isn't *the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, it's the Indy. The question: why has the world's most popular spectator sport failed to catch on in the United States?

Football, urrrr soccer, is unquestionably the world's most popular sport. What, no lawn bowling? More people watch the World Cup final than watch the Superbowl, NBA finals, World Series and Stanley Cup finals combined. Children all across the world, from Buenos Aires to Capetown, from Tokyo to London, grow up kicking a round leather ball through the streets and dreaming about being the next Pele, Cryuff, Maradona, Ronaldo or Shearer (Alan, the England and Newcastle United striker, not Casey. Although Chris dreamed of being the next Casey when he was little). However, in the U.S., kids dream of slam-dunking, hitting home runs and scoring touchdowns, rather than scoring goals in the World Cup. This is the case despite the fact that enrollment in youth soccer leagues such as AYSO (the American Youth Soccer Organization) continues to rise exponentially and so-called "soccer moms" have become a national political force, striking fear into the hearts of Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich. Young children are playing soccer in record numbers and the U.S. hosted soccer's premeire event, the World Cup, in 1994. Despite all these facts, though, the new professional soccer league, Major League Soccer (MLS), and the American national team are having trouble making an impact in US popular culture. We wonder why. We bet you do too, or else you wouldn't be reading this article, unless you think we're funny. We do.

Various explanations are offered for why soccer can't catch on as a spectator sport in this country. Conventional wisdom believes that the American sports and entertainment market has become saturated with so many leagues and so many teams that there simply isn't room for a new sport to rise to prominence. We respond to this argument by simply saying, "You've got to be (insert Tommy Lasorda-esque expletive) kidding me!" The American public has found enough time to support sports such as bowling, beach volleyball, and auto racing so that these sports make regular appearances on national network television. Auto racing, in particular NASCAR (a.k.a. neckcar), has become the fastest growing sport in the country. So let's get this straight here. You're telling us that the American public can fall in love with a so-called sport in which a bunch of necks, all named Dale, drive in circles for hours at a time in hilariously ugly souped up Chevrolet death traps, being cheered on by farmer-tanned, tobacco chewing, deaf, gun rack toting pick-up driving, r.v. loving, beer guzzling necks, but they can't fall in love with the precision, art, strategy and excitement of the world's favorite game. Okay....sure Bill, we believe you. This simply cannot be the case; we say if there's room for neckcar and bowling, there must be room for soccer.

Other critics say soccer is too boring, the game's too slow, there isn't enough scoring, etc. To these critics we respond in classic hooligan fashion, with one finger in the air. However, we will also utilize our Ivy League education to respond with an intelligent (well at least slightly intelligent) intellectual argument. North Americans often label soccer as boring and unexciting. What good is watching two-hours of a scoreless tie if the game is just going to end in a shoot-out where one guy with a pony-tail chokes and

misses the target altogether, right? Well, Europeans would respond in kind about baseball - the world's most boring game. They wonder how exciting it can be to watch nine guys stand around for three hours, spitting dip and sunflower seeds, with about a total of five minutes of excitement coming in intervals of picoseconds. In defense, Europeans don't recognize the geometric beauty and perfection of baseball, the fact the game is never over until it's over like Yogi Berra used to say because there is no time limit, only the boundary of nine innings. They also don't realize that the point of going to a baseball is simply the best chance to eat Dodgerdogs and Crackerjacks. In the same fashion it appears that Americans simply don't recognize the wonderfully unique qualities of soccer. For a brief moment in 1994, during the World Cup, the US caught the soccer bug, but alas, it seems to have been only a quick flash in the pan of sorts. But that moment of realization shows that Americans obviously have the capacity to see the beauty of soccer. Perhaps when the next World Cup rolls around in 1998, the American public will rekindle the flame, and keep it alive by continually supporting the MLS.

Some people, such as nationally syndicated sports radio talk show host, Jim Rome (The Huge One), believe that soccer will never catch on, no matter what. Rome's mantra is that soccer isn't a sport because you can't use your hands. However, it appears that soccer's characteristics would play right into Rome's hands providing exactly the kind of news he loves to discuss on his show. Rome's show, known as "The Jungle," thrives on the controversial, the strange and the funny. His show is based around "smack", callers having takes on sports related issues. Rome has spent considerable air time discussing "Sodom" (Marv Albert), "the Crackwagon" (the Dallas Cowboys in reference to many of their players, including Michael Irvin, having trouble with drugs and the law), the Portland "Trailganstas" and various other smack-worthy topics. Soccer is chalk-full of incidents that would make for great material in the Jungle: Manchester United star Eric Cantona going gansta' and flying at a fan with a two-footed karate kick followed by a right hand to the head; the former Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, being accused of using his political power to help the cause of the soccer team he owned, AC Milan; two South American countries starting an actual war over the result of a soccer match; Argentine superstar Diego Maradona being suspended repeatedly for drug use and firing a beebee gun at reporters camped outside his house; Chris making an outstanding save in the final minute of his AYSO game that lead his team, the Saints, to the championship; and Casey's brother Anthony mooning a referee after receiving a red card. The list goes on and on. It certainly appears that soccer has all the characteristics necessary to fit it into the mainstream of American sports, including the ever growing field of talk radio.

The arguments against why soccer hasn't or shouldn't catch on in this country don't seem to hold much water. It seems that we are left with a mystery as to why the world's most popular game cannot reach the mainstream, while neckcar and beach volleyball can. Perhaps the difference is an ideological one. America prides itself on its, lets face it, obsessive love, for American football. We love the absurd rules, the big hits, the long bombs, the gangsta' personalities, the uniforms, the fat linemen, the Bills, Superbowl blowouts, the Raiderettes. We love it all. In some respects, football is the most American game, despite the fact that baseball has the longest history in this country and is the designated national pastime. Football gives all the beer-drinking out-of-shape Americans something to relate to. The comical, yet somehow very real, Al Bundy

remembers his glory days in highschool when he was the star quarterback for his team - now he is a married shoe salesman. But so many Americans connect themselves with that glory that Al remembers, coming out of football. So much of football is smash-mouth, hard-nosed, bone on bone struggles: the linemen going head to head; the running back, looking for just one yard, putting his head down and hitting the hole; two yards and a cloud of dust. It is to these plays that the fans can swing their fists in mock boxing style and throw their popcorn (or if they're Raider fans throw their guns in the air). But then there is the long pass, and as the ball splits the air in a perfect spiral, hanging in the air for second, second, upon second, the fans clutch their beers to their breasts in a moment of intense anticipation and awe in the elegance of the path of the ball through the air. Then the receiver lays out and the ball meets his hands and the stadium exhales with exclamations and yells. Football mirrors American idealism that goes back to the formation of this country and Ben Franklin. Does soccer not fit into this context of transcendent displays of elegance surrounded by immediate crashing excitement? The answer is essentially no. Soccer requires much more forethought than the MTV cultured Americans are willing to give. "Give me action. Give me flashing colors and violence! . . . Give me Bevis and Butthead. Fire Fire." Soccer is the most intellectual game because it requires so much timing, precision and forethought, and also because one appreciates it as one judges or critiques a work of art. There is no dichotomy, in soccer, between movement with the legs and control of an object with the hands. In soccer these two are one in the same so that there is an ultimate blending of control and movement. Why can't Americans get attached to soccer?

Give it a chance. Already there are plenty of Americans who are big-time soccer fans and support the MLS and the US national team vigorously. This is evidenced by the US team selling out three consecutive home world cup qualifying matches in large stadiums. Other people should expand their horizons, go to a match and revell in the excitement. This can be started at the level of simply making your way to Stevenson field to check out the Brown University soccer teams. Anyone who has ever sat in or near the Kappa Sig section at one of these games can tell you that even 0-0 ties are extremely fun. So get out there and learn about the world's game, because it's a shame that Americans are missing one of the greatest pastimes on the planet. Hey, slightly altering AYSO's motto we get; soccer everyone gets play. So go out there and learn to love the game. We have faith in you America! (Aren't we cheesy.)

Chris Brown and Casey Shearer B'00 were AYSO superstars.