

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE LIKE FOOTBALL?

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By the time this article goes to print, a new World Cup champion would have been crowned. Since mid-June, millions – if not billions – of people could have had their sleep and daily routine interrupted to catch up with the world’s most liked sport¹. Football, or in some places soccer, is estimated to have 3.5 billion fans worldwide. The number of FIFA (the Fédération Internationale de Football Association), the governing body of this sport’s national-level members even exceeds the United Nations 193 strong member states. What is it about football that attracts such a huge following? This article identifies three possible attributes that football as a sport has, which could be the reason for its likeability.

The first attribute that football has is simplicity. It is an easy sport to play. One could use effectively any body part except their hands to play football. The ability to use hands is reserved for the goalkeeper if football is played as a team sport. One would just need to kick the ball, stop its movement when necessary, run after the ball, and use ones’ head if the ball goes higher. It is so easy that one hardly hears about people forgetting how to play football even after years of not kicking one. Football is also easy for people watching it. Generally, there are two opposing teams that try to put the ball into each other’s net within a stipulated time frame. The more goals they can put in the better as the team that ends with the most goals wins. Apart from playing and watching, its simplicity tends to attract people to teach or coach football to others. It may be likely that equipped with some imagination and soft skills, casual footballers like Arrigo Sacchi² and André Villas-Boas³ went all the way to become successful football coaches. In all fairness, the technicalities that come along with football today, as observed in the recently concluded FIFA World Cup such as the Video Assistant Referee (VAR), exists when the stakes are high. This is often driven by commercial considerations and can be observed in other sports too.

The second attribute is the versatility that football has to offer. Ideally, football is played by two teams comprising of 11 players each on an area of 7,140 square metres on a green pitch, with one main referee and two linesmen. As for the players, each team wears different coloured shirts, shorts, socks, and boots. To distinguish themselves from the rest of the team, the goalkeepers wear a different coloured shirt along with a pair of gloves. A football match is divided into two halves of 45-minutes – each with 15-minutes break in between. Each team can make a maximum of three substitutions throughout the game. Red and yellow cards are brandished should players breach the rules. That said, would the teenagers in the favelas⁴ of Rio de Janeiro, the back alleys of Barcelona, and the dusty pitches in Cairo care about the technicalities? They are simply carefree and somehow found ways to adapt football within their limitations. No iconic

¹ Once in four-year’s, an international football tournament namely the FIFA World Cup 2018 took place in Russia from 14 June to 15 July 2018.

² An Italian football coach who has won numerous international honours with AC Milan in late 1980s.

³ A Portuguese football coach who has led famous clubs like Porto, Chelsea, and Tottenham Hotspur from 2010 to 2013.

⁴ Brazilian Portuguese for slum areas

black-and-white Adidas ball? No problem! A crumpled old newspaper or flattened drink can would make a decent substitute and can always be kicked around joyfully; most of the time in torn rubber shoes, slippers, or even barefoot. One of the more popular ways to differentiate the two opposing sides is for one team to play shirtless. Goal posts can easily be substituted with small stones or even school bags – more importantly, to enjoy the game!

The versatility of football could have caught the eye of entrepreneurs who would always find ways to capitalise on people's liking to suit their lifestyle and existing limitations. Futsal is one of the variants of football that has become a growing business in Malaysia. This scaled-down version of football requires fewer players, adopts shorter playing time, and is played indoors – which offers a huge advantage in terms of weather (rain or shine), time (round-the-clock), availability (advanced booking), and privacy (public areas on sharing basis). The least one needs to do with the football is to juggle it. Many years back there was a Malaysian football player by the name of Titus James Palani⁵ who was remembered more for his ability juggling a football (a total of 5,680 times in 1999 – a Malaysian record).

The next attribute is affordability. Unlike certain sports, football at its basic requires minimal investment – no equipment like a stick, bat, club or racquet. The ball is durable; so are the attire and boots, if required. There is an abundance of online materials relating to football if one is looking for an audio-visual example and inspiration from the greats. Perhaps in urban areas, where space is limited and expensive, the affordability of football could be a challenge especially when it is intended to be played in numbers. Yet, for those who are interested only in watching football, with a glass of teh tarik⁶, one could indulge with top flight football games screened live at outdoor stalls. The mass that football commands also attracts government intervention. For instance, the Government of Malaysia decided to live screen 27 from a total of 41 FIFA World Cup 2018 matches for free.

Of course, there will be arguments that passion for football in certain locations is due to legacy or based on cultural exposure. For example, people in this part of the world may be into other sports had the British not brought football with them then. Such early inroads could have helped football gain first mover advantage and indirectly built a barrier to newer sports gaining footing. There is merit to such argument but conversely, the British also brought rugby, cricket, and hockey. In other instances, Thailand was never colonised, yet they like football more than other sports. Meanwhile in the Philippines, football is thriving despite the advantage that basketball has.

To conclude, people are generally drawn to football because of its simplicity, versatility, and affordability. It is easy to understand, difficult to forget, and entices newcomers to try. Evidently, football is so agile and flexible in terms of scale and purpose. Such agility and flexibility could have made it business-

⁵ Malaysians abroad: The first millionaire to the player who never returned (2016, August 27). Retrieved from <https://www.fourfourtwo.com/my/features/malaysians-abroad-first-millionaire-player-who-never-returned?page=0%2C2> (Accessed Date: 9 July 2018).

⁶ *Teh tarik* (literally "pulled tea") is a hot milk tea beverage which can be commonly found in restaurants, outdoor stalls and kopitiam within the Southeast Asian countries of Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore.

friendly. Being cost efficient, football commands influence in term of numbers. Like other areas in life, football is exposed to competitive elements that could have led the sport to become more technical and complicated as it goes to the subsequent levels where the stakes are higher. Perhaps the said attributes about football can be a source of inspiration for leaders when it comes to policies and programmes. In light of the increasingly challenging playing field out there, leadership responses, if any, should be simple, versatile, and affordable enough to gain acceptance from the masses. For instance, affordability encourages ownership and participation, which is crucial to the implementation of public policies and programmes. While it is easier said than done, in reality, as rightly pointed by the legendary Pele, “everything is practice”, and there is always a start for everything.