

WE ARE THE WORLD (CUP)

*A Personal History of
the World's Greatest
Sporting Event*

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An Imprint of WILLIAM MORROW

Introduction

A WORLD CUP has been compared to a solar eclipse that engulfs the entire planet simultaneously for its duration, though not in darkness but in football. I have always adored that image and believe it to be true. But for me, and millions of football mad fans around the world, the World Cup is far more powerful and personal than a mere cosmic lightshow. The tournament is both a history of moments and a shared text that creates the deepest connection to our own individual pasts as a biography of our childhoods, teenaged years, and beyond. It is the definitive mechanism through which we measure and mark the very passing of time.

The tournament's power is complex. Part of it lies in its every four-year pacing, a bassline rhythm which has made it the spine to my life. Allow me to explain this in practical terms. If I meet an aging relative, and they remind me that we last saw each other in 1997, my mind instantly relocates to the nearest World Cup year—in this case, 1998—to recollect where I was living and what I was feeling when I experienced the furious intensity of Zinedine Zidane's victorious France. Having then located myself via that bookmark I can then recalibrate and recall richer, more detailed memories of the time being referenced. I suppose it is akin to how music obsessives pin the mo-

ments of their lives to the songs and albums that formed the soundtrack of every era.

How has this come to pass? I am not a brain surgeon, but I would bet that if you cut open my central cortex, over 70 percent of it would consist of World Cup stories. The tournament has provided the greatest trove of my most powerful memories, both collective and personal. That is partially because the game of football moves me so deeply. I often joke that I am a gent who is dead inside. But when I watch football, I experience the all-consuming rollercoaster of human emotion—joy, agony, exaltation, stress—that most people feel in everyday life. For ninety minutes at a time, I feel truly alive.

The World Cup, then, is that reaction on steroids. When two teams take the field, their nation's histories, politics, and cultures take the field alongside them. It is that fusion of the sporting, cultural, and geopolitical aspects that makes the storytelling so epic, poetic, and multilayered. Like Walt Whitman, the tournament contains multitudes. With the games dripping out, one at a time, the entire planet is focused on a single match while it is being played, all the eyes of the world resting on twenty-two elite athletes acting out a sporting telenovela, live, making decisions without a script, under conditions of hysterical pressure. There may be other club tournaments where the quality of the actual football is better, with the Champions League the apex, but the World Cup reigns supreme in feeling. It delivers something far more precious than mere sport—global connectivity and shared emotion. There is no casual watching of a World Cup match. You, and every fan in the world, are fully present and invested, no matter who is on the pitch.

This then is a book about feelings. I may call myself dead inside, but I believe the true meaning of the World Cup lies in

the joy the whole world shares. The national collective dreams invested passionately, but safely, not through war, but through matches. So, this is also a story of a boy whose life was defined by the power of football—the mystery of human beings, the geopolitics, the sense that somewhere within the game lies the magic of life. It is also about the evolution of the World Cup itself into a commercial juggernaut. An estimated one billion people watched the entirety of the 1978 World Cup. Over 1.5 billion people were blessed to have watched the final alone during the 2022 tournament. A testament to omnipresence of television and social media, which has made the World Cup feel like a single giant billboard visible from space.

The strand of storytelling I have found most personally meaningful in this recollection you are about to experience is the inexorable rise of the sport in the United States of America, which, as someone who loves both football and this nation, has been the dominant narrative of my life. There is also the subplot of how we fused the two to build the Men in Blazers Media Network, the biggest dedicated soccer-media company in the United States. MiB has become the first institution to wire together all the different football communities in our nation's history. As I like to say, no one had done that before us. Not George Washington, General Patton, or Neil Armstrong.

I write all of this in anticipation of the forthcoming 2026 World Cup, which will be played on North American shores and will act as a tidal wave, forever transforming the profile of soccer in this nation. The book is partially a personal history, but I also hope it will be used as a permission slip for the entire nation to cut work for a month. Let *We Are the World (Cup)* be encouragement for us to do what we do better than any other nation in the world: Savor the circus. After you read, I hope you

are compelled to slink out of your office cubicles en masse, day drink, watch, revel, and inhale the World Cup in its full glory. Messi, Ronaldo, Erling Haaland, heroes, villains, echoes of wars past, dodgy haircuts, and ill-advised neck tattoos await.

This book is my life hymn, but, more than anything, I hope that it equips you, the reader, to add backstory to and heighten your own experience as a fan so you can write your own footballing story. To understand the layers, the subtext, the precedents of this tournament, and in so doing, to deepen the cross-generational memories you can make by opening your heart to what an event held every four years on the world stage can offer. That is ultimately all that matters. Life is very, very short. We do not have a moment to waste. Nothing should be taken for granted. Every moment, every game, every goal connects us to each other and gives us the opportunity to create collective memories that can last a lifetime. When you think about life and football this way, it becomes clear that we are witnessing fewer goals scored or matches played—and harnessing more meaning and memories. And we should savor each and every one while we can.

Courage,

Roger Bennett

New York City

December 2025