

Book Review



Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski

Soccernomics: Why England Loses, Why Germany and Brazil

Win, and Why the U.S., Japan, Australia, Turkey—And Even

Iraq—Are Destined To Become the Kings of the World's Most Popular Sport New York, NY:

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Soccer and economics? Many people indeed associate soccer (“football,” of course, if you are British) with big money. Asked on the streets, some would start a rant over the incredible sums that top players pocket these days. Others would invoke the gigantic sums involved in the preparation of a European Championship or a World Cup, and offered for television broadcasting rights. Still others might just regret the sums that they have spent over the years supporting their now relegated favorite club.

Soccernomics by Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski looks beyond these obvious issues. The authors, a sports journalist for *The Financial Times* and a professor of Economics, advance the broader claim that we can understand soccer better through the use of methods preferred by economists, particularly econometric analysis. In their own words, as soccer is a “numbers game,” we should be “driving with a dashboard” (ch. 1). Unlike most academic studies, the book does not set out to find a compelling answer to one intriguing question that provides the narrative from beginning to end. Rather, Kuper and Szymanski address 13 smaller puzzles of the game by combining available data, which often span a few decades, with, at times amusing, anecdotal evidence and logical reasoning. Their well-written book is thus composed of single, unrelated episodes about the clubs (Part I), the fans (Part II), and countries (Part III).

One of the book’s strongest points is its “power of demystification.” Kuper and Szymanski achieve their objective of dispelling some of the oldest and most resilient myths of the game. Their ability to portray soccer as a social event becomes most evident in Part II, in which the authors argue convincingly that the overwhelming majority of (English) soccer fans are neither die-hard fans of just one club for their entire lives nor consumerist swappers, but relatively committed followers with occasionally changing levels of interest and affection (ch. 10); that supporting a particular team can decrease the rate of suicides because of the long-term social cohesion

that comes with it (ch. 11); and that hosting a big sports tournament, such as the World Cup, makes the people of the host nation not richer, as is still commonly assumed, but at least temporarily happier because of the short-term social cohesion that comes with it (ch. 12).

Kuper and Szymanski put the economic dimension of soccer into perspective when qualifying it as “bad,” rather than “big,” business. While many people—including the most ardent soccer fans—tend to believe that today’s soccer involves too much money, the authors highlight the comparatively modest revenues of even the biggest and globally promoted clubs. According to Kuper and Szymanski, the likes of Real Madrid and Manchester United generate only less than half the revenues of the smallest of the 500 publicly traded U.S. corporations in the S&P 500 (p. 76). Although the book lacks information about the relative growth of clubs in recent years, which, as most observers would agree, have witnessed an increasing “financialization” of soccer, this remains an interesting point. The comparison provides us with a note of caution: those who think that the bailout of “systemically important” banks is a waste of taxpayers’ money should be adamantly opposed to any form of public financial support for economically far less relevant soccer clubs. Consistent with their line of reasoning, Kuper and Szymanski would probably again attribute such political efforts to the nature of soccer as a social event, not a money-making machine.

A final achievement of the book lies in its attempt to explain the success or otherwise of national teams. Here the authors rightly cite the positive effects of much game experience (or a dense network of “soccer knowledge”), a large population pool, and a high income per capita (measured in gross domestic product, GDP) on a nation’s prospects of winning a major international title. A lack of network is, thanks to the globalization of sports, less of a problem today than it used to be when the necessary knowledge could not be easily imported over great distances. With the obvious exception of soccer powerhouse Brazil, poverty, conclude Kuper and Szymanski, remains a huge obstacle to success in sports that, among other things, impedes countries from either being “networked” or importing the crucial knowledge (chs. 2, 13, 15). In addition, the authors sometimes draw on historical evidence, in particular to explain why soccer has become a global sport while (American) football has not. For them, the economic and cultural ambitions of British colonialists made the difference in spreading “their” sport—a thrust that U.S. expansionism seems to have never quite shared to the same degree (ch. 8): “Long after the sun set on the British Empire, it is achieving a posthumous victory in sports” (p. 178). It is this combination of economic data and historically and politically informed reasoning that makes their analysis of the game fruitful and convincing.

Still, the book suffers from a few shortcomings and limitations. Three are particularly noteworthy. First, some arguments seem not fully consistent or even contradictory. For example, Kuper and Szymanski complain about the English national team’s poor tactic of “run[ning] around like lunatics” (p. 31), only to announce later that, with few exceptions, who manages a team does not much influence a team’s performance (p. 111). However, keeping players from overpacing themselves to not

concede late goals clearly falls within a manager's purview and would be one of the first things to teach players already at a young age. In a similar vein, their exclusive reliance on European data to determine which country is the relative overachiever may be sensible for statistical reasons but implicitly reinforces their own view that European teams are good because they are part of the world's best soccer network.

Second, even though Kuper and Szymanski come up with cogent considerations of how to assess particular correlations, some of their regressions remain blunt by design. Apart from the well-known criticism that correlation must not be equated with causality, the reader is left wondering how one could explain the disparate evolution of men's and women's soccer in the very same country. Norway and the United States, for example, have excellent women's teams; by contrast, the U.S. men's team aims to survive the first round of a World Cup, while the Norwegian men's team aims to at least qualify for any such tournament. Kuper and Szymanski's performance assessment, which combines experience, income, and population size, cannot account well for variations such as the one between a brilliant women's team and a mediocre men's team.¹ In fact, it subdues whether soccer has to compete for the best players with similarly popular sports and how the national sports system then translates a large pool of potential players into a large (or small) number of players for a certain sport—a reason why indeed England can be expected to do better in World Cups.

Third, Kuper and Szymanski merely touch on issues in sports that are of political relevance. Their treatment of poverty-related obstacles to a national team's success could be extended to include problems that contribute to the persistence of poverty. A case in point is the "talent drain" from the global South to the global North, mostly the dominant European leagues. In-line with what many structuralist political economists view as systemic exploitation, such a change in perspective would highlight not only how poverty affects outcomes in sports but also how global structures in sports affect domestic socioeconomic realities. Moreover, the authors leave out issues of gender and treat issues of race (ch. 5) almost exclusively from an economic angle even though racism may continue to exist beyond the market discrimination of earlier years. Kuper and Szymanski intentionally leave such topics untouched. Yet a lot could be gained from more comprehensive analyses, and future studies of the economics and politics of sports should not shy away from these issues.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, anyone interested in economics or sports is well-advised to read *Soccernomics* by Kuper and Szymanski. Suitable even to readers with limited economic knowledge, their book is yet another proof that economics and other areas of social life are inseparable. Academics of various disciplines should indeed do more to engage with the subject of sports.

Note

1. My thanks go to Verena Schüren for bringing this point to my attention.