FOOTBALL RETURNS HOME

On March 7, 2003, the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) announced that one of the greatest spectacles on the globe would be on the soil of a country that lives, breathes and ultimately loves the beautiful game of football (soccer)—Brazil.

Every four years, more than 200 nations strive to reach the finals, and only 32 teams get to compete on the big stage known simply as the World Cup. The players have the opportunity to display their abilities while at the same time, represent their respective homes. This summer marks the 20th FIFA World Cup.

CULTURE OF THE COMPETITION

World Cup fever will soon affect people by the millions, yet again. Much like the timing of the Olympics, this tournament only comes around every four summers, to some extent making it a more cherished event. The 2010 South Africa World Cup had an astonishing 1 billion people viewing the opening games, and this time around is set to have even higher numbers.

The glory of the tournament and the game itself are shared by all countries of the world. They all use the same equipment, same rules (mostly) and, although the languages are different, the world itself is unified by one illustrious language—the language of football.

The World Cup is the foundation for a unique cultural experience, no matter where it takes place. Fans will flock to Brazil, making it a momentary melting pot during the month-long festival. It’s a chance for Brazil, like every host country, to show the world what they’re all about and for visitors to also share respective cultures.

For those who are unfamiliar with the game, the rules are simple. There are two teams, each made up of 10 men and a goalkeeper. The sport is played by primarily using your feet to control a ball. The game lasts for 90 minutes, or two hours if overtime is needed. The objective is to put the ball into the back of your opponent’s goal more times than they can do to yours, while also preventing them from scoring.

The United States will compete against Ghana, Portugal and Germany—a group considered to be one of the toughest. Luckily, as ‘Yanks’ are familiar with upsetting the doubters.

Not everyone can be inside the Maracana—the stadium venue of the final match, which holds 77,000 people—but there are other methods of enjoying the games that some consider even more entertaining.

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The sport that attracts millions of fans worldwide will peak this July at the World Cup in Brazil

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The experience is similar to a huge tailgate all over the country. The streets are flooded with supporters; bars and restaurants are packed to the brim with eager football fans and there are public viewings on giant screens.

**ALL HAIL THE VERDE-AMARELA**

This summer’s biggest party will culminate in Rio de Janeiro between the two nations whose players have fought through thick and thin, battled valiantly and refused to accept defeat.

The “Verde-Amarela” (green and yellow; their traditional uniform colors) are a powerhouse one never hopes to face. In addition to being five-time world champions—with wins in 1958, 1962, 1970, 1994 and 2002—they’ve been in the final seven times, boasting the most wins (67) in the tournament and the most goals scored (210). Brazil has also never missed a World Cup to date—a feat unmatched by any other nation.

This is Brazil’s second time hosting the tournament. The fourth World Cup was held in Brazil in 1950, when they lost in the final to fellow South American country Uruguay, 2 to 1. They will likely be in the finals again, especially under former World Cup-winning coach Luís Filipe Scolari.

**THE COUNTRY OF FOOTBALL**

Brazil has often been called “O País do Futebol” which is Portuguese for the “Country of Football,” even though other countries like Germany, England, Argentina and Italy also highly regard the sport.

When the international team is scheduled to play an important competitive fixture, everything virtually stops. Kids are let out of school early, work shifts end early and banks and businesses close down simply because everyone gives their undivided attention to the game.

“It’s the only sport that exists in Brazil. In America, you have college football (American) and NFL teams, but even then there’s no real comparison. Down there, it has so much to do with culture. Kids are fresh out of the womb and they love soccer,” says Rebecca Warnecke, a student at Iowa State whose mother’s side of the family is Brazilian. “When it comes to international play, everyone is so connected that you can’t not shut down schools or get off work early for the day. It’s a huge deal.”

Football plays a major part in Brazilian life. Many people play it—whether it’s in the streets, at the beach or on the field. It’s ingrained into their everyday lives. Warnecke adds, “My favorite part about the World Cup is that you don’t have to be at the game—you don’t even have to be in the same city or country as the game—and you’re still a part of the party.”

There is an immense sense of pride in the prowess portrayed by Brazilian footballers.

“In Brazil, there are many players, and you have to be really good to be on the national team. Many players are waiting in the lower leagues and may not be needed, yet the professional coaches know they’re there, know their names and have a lot to choose from. It’s about getting your chance, like if someone is hurt or the team needs an extra player. When a Brazilian puts on the yellow jersey, they play with all of their heart,” says Claudio Gianello, owner of Café Beaudelaire in Ames.

Gianello is from Porto Alegre in southern Brazil, and he moved to the United States at the age of 20. Although he hasn’t attended a World Cup match before, he plans to attend this summer with his daughters. He’s an avid football fan and has been keeping up with all the tournament’s latest news: “There is a lot of poverty and starvation in Brazil and there are concerns surrounding how much money is being put into the tournament, especially the stadiums and what will be done to maintain them after the World Cup. So some people are upset.”

Although Brazilians adore the game, many riots have broken out in response to budget priorities. In South Africa in 2010, $5 billion was spent on the showpiece spectacle, almost none of which benefited impoverished citizens. Five new FIFA-approved stadiums were built that now are relatively unused. Brazil will also have five new stadiums, and many wonder what kind of hangover they will have post-World Cup.

Security measures are being taken to protect attendees. During some games in the Brazilian leagues, police officers lined up around the crowd with German shepherds to deter possible troublemakers.

“There will be a lot more security. With some of the stadiums, they’ve dropped the capacities to a more European-style arena, so fans will have a closer and better experience, at the same time feeling safe too,” Gianello says.

Gianello added it would be a blockbuster finale if rival Argentina faced Brazil in the final, and from any football fan’s perspective, that would be a mouth-watering confrontation.