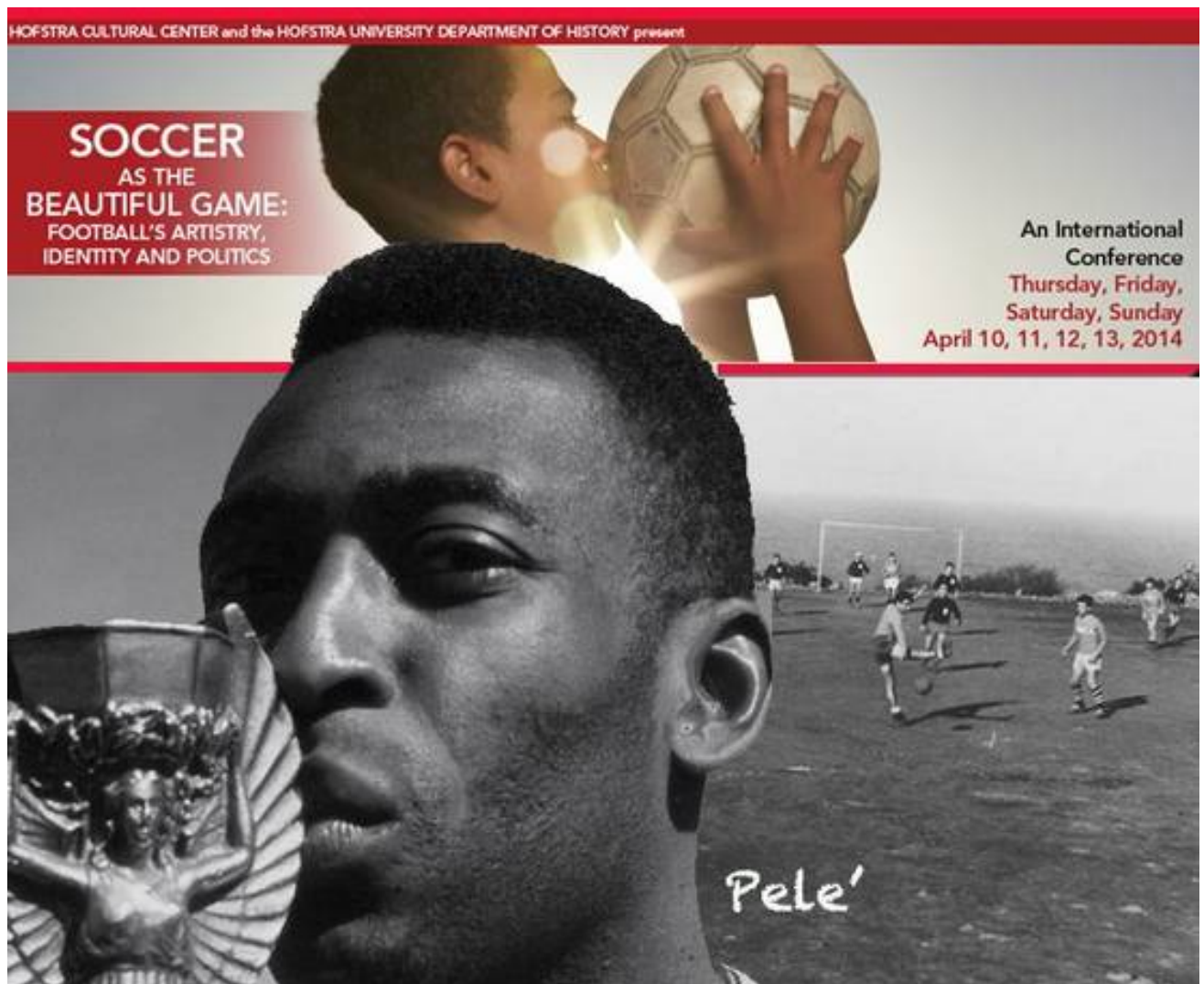




## Discussing Soccer. A Global Phenomenon

I.A. & L.A. (April 08, 2014)



More than a dozen academic and sports institutions have worked together to bring to us one of the largest academic symposiums ever convened about soccer in the United States. During the conferences the legendary soccer player Pelé will be awarded an honorary degree by Hofstra University and will be honored with a plaque in Hofstra's soccer stadium. Read our interview with history professor Dr. Stanislao Pugliese, co-director of the event.

On April 10-13 over a hundred scholars, journalists, soccer players and coaches from twenty five different countries, from Argentina to Zimbabwe, are to gather for one of the largest academic



symposiums ever convened about soccer in the United States.

The conference, which explores the historical, political, economic and humanitarian impact of soccer and is titled “Soccer as the Beautiful Game: Football's Artistry, Identity & Politics,” is being hosted by Hofstra University in anticipation of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

The symposium is being presented in collaboration with more than a dozen academic and sports institutions, including the Cosmos, the Consulates General of South Africa and Brazil in New York and the U.S. Soccer Federation, which last year celebrated its 100th anniversary. Hofstra History professors Dr. Brenda Elsey and Dr. Stanislao Pugliese are co-directors.

During the symposium the legendary soccer player Pelé, named “The Player of the 20th Century” by FIFA, soccer’s international governing body, and one of the “100 Most Influential People of the Century” by TIME magazine, will be awarded an honorary degree by Hofstra University and will be honored with a plaque in Hofstra’s soccer stadium. He will address a youth symposium and a celebratory banquet on Friday, April 11, and participate in the ceremonial unveiling of his stadium plaque on Sunday, April 13.

Some of the topics addressed during the three-day symposium will include women and soccer; the semiotics, history and governance of the game; how the sport is represented in art and literature; and its influence on religion and cultural identity. The keynote speakers are David Goldblatt, PhD, a sociologist at Bristol University, U.K., and author of the book *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football* and Jennifer Doyle, PhD, professor of English at the University of California, Riverside and author of the blog *The Sport Spectacle*.

I-italy got a chance to interview Hofstra's history professor, Dr. Stanislao Pugliese, who is one of the co-directors of the event.

### **How did the idea of organizing an academic conference focused on soccer come about?**

Two years ago, Hofstra University hosted a conference on the New York Mets baseball team.

At that conference, someone said that since we did a conference on the Mets, Hofstra should now do a conference on the New York Yankees. But George Vecsey, former sport journalist for *The New York Times*, and a great fan of Serie A soccer, immediately said “calcio” and suggested a conference on soccer. The University called me the next day. Along with my colleague and co-director Dr. Brenda Elsey, who is a specialist on Latin American history and football, we decided to organize the conference.

With the help of the New York Cosmos, we invited Pelé to receive an honorary degree for his humanitarian work and schedule the conference to end with the Cosmos season opener on Sunday, April 13 at Hofstra University’s Shuart Stadium.

### **How does it feel to discuss such a sport, which is very popular in Italy and many Latin countries, yet still not as much in America? What does it mean to present it within the frame of Academia?**

Dr. Elsey and I are very much aware that soccer is not as popular in the US as it is in Latin America, Europe, or Africa, yet we also know that the level of enthusiasm here is quite strong and there is a long history of soccer in the US. In some ways, the fact that soccer is not as popular here makes our work easier. But we don’t want to simply put soccer under a microscope and contain it in the academy.

We worked hard to make the conference accessible to people who are not scholars but simply love the game. So there are panels of coaches and trainers as well as journalist, publishers and editors on Saturday afternoon. At the same time, we hope ordinary fans who are not scholars will be intellectually curious and take advantage of the presence of so many world-renown scholars to explore some of the fascinating aspects and implications of the game in the fields of politics, economics, culture and philosophy, and philanthropy. We are hosting over 125 scholars and speakers from 20 countries, including a half dozen from Italy.



**"Soccer as the Beautiful Game: Football 's Artistry, Identity and Politics." "Artistry, identity, politics" how do these words associate with soccer? Could you explain it to us in a lay form, as some of our readers maybe know little about certain "not so noble" aspects of this sport?**

Soccer is both a product and a manifestation of culture. As such, it embodies artistry (think of the dribbling of the Brazilian Garrincha or the playmaking of Roberto Baggio). It functions as a vehicle for identity. How many of us identify ourselves through our respective club or national teams? How often have we said, "We lost" or "We played well"? Look at the rivalries in Italy between Roma-Lazio, Inter-AC Milan, Torino-Juventus, all in the same cities, or the rivalries between Juventus and AC Milan.

Real Madrid v Barcelona is not just a rivalry of cities but of culture, language, politics and history. The ghosts of the past live not in the cemeteries but in the soccer stadiums of the world.

And it is true: we do not shy away from some of the darker aspects of the game. Those of us who love soccer and those of us who study soccer (like Professor Elsey), have a moral obligation to discuss and think about problems in the game such as racism, betting, corruption, hooliganism and violence, the influence of television, and the obscene amounts of money for some teams and crumbs for others. This is not a healthy or sustainable system and it will probably have to change for soccer to thrive in the long term.

**Soccer and the church. In Italy, since the 50's, the oratory (Church meeting area) were also places where young people played soccer. More than in schools, where at times it was badly looked upon. What do you think playing a sport such as soccer can give to such young people?**

There are many examples in various countries where the Church, with a shrewdness that comes only with centuries of experience, has used soccer to bring young people into the Church. This was true in many areas colonized by the European countries. The thinking was "Let's get these children to the Church through soccer." But in an example of the irony or the cunning of history, what happened was that the sport became so popular, many people spent their Sundays "praying" in San Paolo stadium rather than San Paolo church! But Papa Francesco is a fan so maybe things might change.

But soccer did give many young people – girls as well as boys when they were permitted to play – not just memories but important skills: an awareness of the interplay between cooperation and competition, the importance of self-discipline as well as self-expression; sportsmanship and collegiality; and a consciousness that the world is not always fair, a sense of both joy and despair, the capriciousness of fate that is found in the expression "la palla è rotunda" (The ball is round)

**What does soccer mean to you personally? When and in what context did you get to first time kick the ball? Did the approach to the sport change with generations?**

There was a time when soccer was very important to me. As a child, I discovered it in elementary school, playing on the school parking lot's blacktop. I would bicycle to the local park but could rarely find other kids to play with. My younger brother, more "American" preferred baseball.

For me, soccer came to represent a link to Italy, which my parents left after World War II. It was a way to connect to a mysterious past that I knew only indirectly as my parents rarely spoke of their life in Italy. It was also a badge of honor in that I stubbornly played soccer while most of my friends and neighbors played baseball. But in junior high and high school, I found friends from Greece, Spain, Israel, Central America and even the United States who were just as passionate as I was. I couldn't play in college and developed the intellectual's disdain for sport in general. But as our children, Alessandro (17) and Giulia (14), discovered the game for themselves, I re-discovered its beauty. I am never happier than when I am on the sidelines watching them practice in the late afternoon sun and smell the grass and breathe the fresh air.

**The conference celebrates Pelé. What do you remember of this great player? Did you ever get to see him play? Why is he getting honored?**

I grew up watching the Cosmos on television and listening to games on the radio. It was a rare treat to get to Giants stadium to watch them play. (I was there the night Giorgio Chinaglia scored 7 goals.) Pelé almost single-handedly created a mania for soccer in America. Pelé is that rare ambassador: no one can dislike him. He understands what it means to come from poverty and the responsibility that



comes with great talent. After he retired from soccer, he devoted much of his time to humanitarian projects, reaching out to people – especially children – through soccer. Once he signed with the Cosmos, it opened the gate for other great players like Beckenbauer, Carlos Alberto, and others to come. But it was an unsustainable model. Since 1994, the MLS has been growing more steadily and on firmer financial footing. I am not sure soccer will ever be as popular in America as the other sports, but maybe that's not a bad thing.

**You are a historian with a specialty in Fascism. Those were the years during which Italian soccer soared. Years when it was tied to great nationalism. Times have changed but the Italian flag always remained exhibited with great pride during the World Cup. What do you think a sport such as soccer brings in people, especially in young people?**

I am wary of using soccer to foster nationalism. Too many dictatorships and military regimes have used soccer for political propaganda. Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Stalin in the old USSR, the generals in too many Latin American countries. It seems that Italians only think of themselves as "Italian" when the Azzurri scendano in campo. I am a fan of the Azzurri and hope they will win the World Cup but I can also appreciate the skill and beauty of other teams. It wouldn't be a tragedy if Lionel Messi won a World Cup with Argentina or Holland wins their first World Cup. I agree with the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano who once wrote: "I go about the stadiums of the world like a beggar with a hand outstretched crying: a pretty move for the love of God!"

**Soccer and the Italian-Americans. What does it represent for them? Was it perhaps that through soccer an Italian-American could feel closer to the motherland?**

I think for some Italian Americans of a certain generation, soccer represents an ethnic marker. For those who grew up in the middle of the 20th century, America demanded assimilation and therefore they were baseball fans. Soccer was "too ethnic," too much associated with "the old country." Giovanni wanted to be "Johnny" and emulate Joe DiMaggio. This crushing demand to assimilate meant Italian Americans were forbidden to be both American and Italian. World War II effectively killed any possibility of ties to the land of their fathers and mothers. For me, soccer was a way to maintain that "filo" or precarious thread that gets thinner and thinner with each generation.

**More than 150 panel discussions with leading scholars? A conference involving many scholars. Why should a person outside the academia join you?**

As I mentioned earlier, anyone with some intellectual curiosity will find panels to engage and interest them. Are you interested in the political aspects of the game? What about the economic dimension? Or the depiction of the game in art? Are you a player or a coach? Then there are panels and sections for you! And of course, there is the immortal Pelé.

**As a global phenomenon, using a language, which is comprehensible and feasible for anyone, the social and economic policy seems to remove territorial boundaries by promoting the free market. Yet when a team plays a national event, their culture and their origins, their sense of belonging is what tends to always manifest the most. Would you say that this is also a way to emphasize, perhaps unconsciously, their dissent to cosmopolitan politics?**

There is no denying it: there is a certain tribalism in soccer. I personally think the nation-state is an outdated political institution (so 19th-century!) But in an age of globalization, national teams are very popular. At the same time, there are millions of fans of Manchester United or Barcelona who are not from Manchester or Barcelona. This is an "elective affinity"; something we choose to belong to, unlike our families or our nation, which we are born into. Once, when he was very young and we were watching a game on television, my son asked me: "Dad, who do you want to win?" And I, wanting to teach him about good sportsmanship, said, "Whoever plays better." He didn't like the answer and now I know why. Soccer demands partisanship. Yes, we can watch a game between two top teams and marvel at their skill. But it's not the same as watching Juventus (his team) against Napoli (my team). Even when we lose, the emotions are precious. When Italy won the World Cup in 2006, I wrote a short essay, "[Soccer and Suffering.](#)" [2] that examines this experience.

**Trying to identify the subtle dynamics underlying any phenomenon is almost impossible, however, analyzing the phenomenon of soccer, which you think are the reasons that this sport has been around for 150 years, starting from its origins, and has now gone beyond the boundaries of all the continents, becoming perhaps the most watched and the most**



### **practiced?**

To use an expression again: “The ball is round” but here it means something different. There is a simplicity in soccer that doesn’t exist in other sports. There is also a sublime beauty, a symmetry. Sometimes watching a game, I marvel at what appears to be a synthesis of ballet and geometry; creativity and physics. It is, in the end, the beautiful game. Stanislao G. Pugliese is Professor of History and the Queensboro UNICO Distinguished Professor of Italian and Italian American Studies at Hofstra University.

**More information on the conference can be found at** <http://www.hofstra.edu/soccercon> [3]

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### **Links**

[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/soccerhosfra1396977038jpg>

[2] <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2006/pugliese260706.html>

[3] <http://www.hofstra.edu/soccercon>