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The US may have lost in the World Cup, but soccer is more popular than ever in America

Analysis by Harry Enten, CNN

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America is known for being at the top of the list at a lot of things. My home country has, however, historically struggled at the most popular sport worldwide: men's [soccer](#).

At this year's [World Cup](#) the US Men's National Team (USMNT) advanced to the round of 16, although [the Netherlands defeated it 3-1](#).

If the USMNT isn't quite ready to join soccer's elite nations, the sport is finding record success at home. "The beautiful game" is far more popular than it has ever been, especially among young Americans.

Take a look at how many people say their favorite sport to watch is soccer. Historically, that percentage has been miniscule. From 1937 to 1972, the figure in [Gallup polling](#) was always less than 0.5% of Americans giving the answer soccer when asked which their favorite to watch was. Even through December 2004, the percentage never rose above 2%.

Earlier this year, 8% of Americans answered soccer as their favorite sport to watch in a [Washington Post poll](#). This may seem like a small percentage, but it is huge growth given the baseline. There is no other sport that saw anywhere near this type of improvement in its popularity as soccer during this period.

Indeed, nearly as many Americans now call soccer their favorite sport to watch as they do basketball (12%) or baseball (11%). Soccer actually has beaten motor racing, hockey and golf the last few times the Washington Post polled the subject.

My guess is that the number of soccer fans is going to continue to grow over the next few years. Why? Look at the young.

Soccer is most popular among adults under the age of 30. There are actually more adults aged 18 to 29 who say soccer is their favorite sport to watch than those who say baseball is their preferred. Remember that baseball is [supposedly America's pastime](#).

Of course, American football – the NFL – is still the top sport to watch overall and among all age groups. Over one-third of Americans have for years indicated that it is their top sport to view.

Football may be getting a run for its money from soccer, though, when you examine the long-term trends among the [number of high schoolers](#) playing the game.

Forty years ago, soccer was not a terribly popular sport for high schoolers to play. When you combined boys and girls playing the sport, only a little bit more than 200,000 students played the game. For comparison, nearly a million boys played football.

Twenty years ago, over 600,000 boys and girls played soccer. This past year, over 800,000 boys and girls in high school decided to take up the sport with the black and white ball. Put in other mathematical terms, that is nearly 300% growth in the last 40 years.

There is no other sport in America that has taken off as quickly over the last 40 years as soccer among high schoolers.

And while soccer isn't particularly close to the NFL's popularity among adults, soccer is closing in amongst high schoolers playing the two sports. What was once an over 700,000-participant gap in the early 1980s between the number of high schoolers taking part in soccer and those playing football has consistently slid downward since. The gap dropped to a little bit more than 400,000 in the early 2000s.

Today, football has just over a 200,000-person advantage over soccer in the number of high schoolers who play the game. Put another way: football has stagnated, while soccer has consistently risen.

What has caused soccer to be nipping at football's heels in terms of participation?

The most obvious is that soccer is played in large numbers by boys and girls. While football does have some girls playing the game on the high school level, it's almost uniformly a boys game – especially in contact football. Soccer, meanwhile, has nearly 400,000 girl players. In the early 1980s, that number was about 50,000.

The impact of the success of the US Women's National Team in America can't be underestimated. The women consistently do well on the international stage. They've won four World Cups to the men's zero. Less spoken about is that they also [rate better on television](#) than the men do in the World Cup.

Safety is a factor as well in soccer's rise. In an [Associated Press poll](#) taken in the 2010s, 86% of parents said they were comfortable letting their kids play soccer given safety concerns. This dropped to 51% for football.

Given that soccer is primarily a fall sport like football, it's not hard to imagine a lot of parents pushing their children to kick the soccer ball instead of the football.

The question going forward is whether the success of soccer on the high school level will ultimately translate into soccer truly closing the gap with football in the number of adult fans.

We'll just have to wait and see, though with the US, Canada and Mexico hosting the 2026 World Cup, soccer isn't going away anytime soon.

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