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Football forever

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Sound the vuvuzelas! Blow the trumpets! Announce to the world that there is only one religion. It's the game called football.

It's over a week since the World Cup began and passions are slowly rising, day by day. By the time it reaches a crescendo on the night of July 11th, it will leave behind a tired and exhausted set of followers. There will be heartbreaks and also, arguably, controversies - no World Cup is without them - but this what many have been waiting for!

Be that as it may, there is no denying that the golden game would have won over new followers across the world. Even the U.S.A. cannot remain untouched when there is widespread football mania across the world with an estimate showing that there are over 715 million viewers ready to watch the World Cup finals. Compare this with America's most watched sport, the Super-Bowl which has about 100 million plus viewers.

Much has been written about this sport but what is truly amazing is how this game is the biggest uniting factor in the world. One can be sure that whether it is North Korea or Iran or for that matter any other troubled spot on earth, there will be no war till July 11th! Yes, football hooliganism might raise its ugly head and beer soaked fans will rumble, but at the end of the day they will still be united in spirit by the religion called Football.

The interesting thing is that though the game is considered a poor man's sport, having plucked unknown names and faces from the slums of Asia and the favelas of Brazil, there is much money that is pouring into the game as the stars of the game are the new apostles. Today, there are marketing wizards waiting to pick up sound bytes from the football stars, give spin to the message and take the word to all corners of the world where rugby, hockey, cricket, tennis, golf, etc. are deep rooted. Sport is now a packaged fast moving consumer good (FMCG), put together by experts and offered to consumers everywhere. And, true to the marketing ethos of 'catch 'em young', the larger clubs are penetrating deep into new territories with innovative programs by tying up with schools, junior football clubs, etc., & organizing clinics to the eager new converts. These marketing wizards recognize that the various countries of Asia and Africa will fuel the sale of merchandise in the coming years to make up for the deficit arising from the drying up of funds in the recession hit European nations.

The passion for the game is not limited to the men. The trend across the world is that from a large number of female fans swooning over male stars, there is a distinct move to become players themselves. The top women's teams in the world are not the usual suspects but new powerhouses like China, the USA, etc. The growth of the game and its universal popularity is a cause for celebration and soon a new international tournament will be held, the FIFA Women's Club World Cup.

The magic of football will not abate. Quite to the contrary, the rise of new nations, whether from Eastern Bloc (Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, to name a few) or the emergence of North Korea, New Zealand, etc., is proof that the game is winning new followers regularly. It is an inexpensive sport, with its raw, physical appeal, played in a relatively short period of time, requiring a small area, and therefore, can be an easy sport for all to quickly learn. With its quick movements, it offers easy & exciting viewing on television & the electronic medium has taken the game to its next level of engagement with a wider global audience who follow the fortunes of their favorite club or player right through the season. The rags - to- riches story of some of the game's stars always has a special attraction to the dreamers who are seeking an avenue of escape. The fact that talented footballers have risen to a new orbit in life, thanks to the game, has created stirring myths that populate folklore.

And what of the legends? Will the Black Pearl, Pele, the temperamental genius, Diego Maradona, the artistic Zidane, and a host of others, continue to shine as bright stars in the constellation? Yes, they do not fade but continue to shine brightly in our nostalgic memories.

Ah! Some of us live from World Cup to World Cup and cannot but reminisce of past World Cups when as young youths we discovered the beautiful game. And we romantics do continue to hope that Africa's time has come and come July 11th, the continent will be inspired to rise to glory again with an African team lifting the trophy. That would be the ultimate dream come true for millions of us!