

World Cup Countdown¹: The History Of the World Cup

Find out how the World Cup has grown over the last 80 years.

From: www.goal.com

By Zac Lee Rigg

May 30, 2010

Over a quarter billion² people will watch the 2010 World Cup on television, a far cry³ from the 10,000 spectators who witnessed the United States' first game, a 3-0 win over Belgium, in Montevideo's Parque Central back in 1930.

In 80 years the World Cup has transformed from a modest little kick around, spurned⁴ by some of the best sides in Europe including England, into the world's largest single-sport event. As viewers worldwide flick on⁵ the tube⁶ or, better yet⁷, travel to South Africa to watch the latest edition in person, it bears⁸ looking back at how the World Cup became the juggernaut⁹ it is.

Association Football, a sport invented by the British and called soccer for short, gained quite a bit of popularity in the 1920s at the Olympics. Two events caused FIFA, soccer's worldwide governing body¹⁰, to form a separate tournament. Firstly, FIFA disagreed with the International Olympic Committee (and within itself¹¹) over the definition of a professional player, which deprived¹² the Olympics of some of the world's greatest stars. Secondly, the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles did not have a soccer tournament in its schedule¹³.

So in 1928, FIFA president Jules Rimet started exploring the option of a separate, soccer-only tournament. Uruguay, looking for a way to celebrate its centenary, offered to pay the traveling cost of any nation which participated. By 1930, 13 nations in all showed up¹⁴ in Uruguay for the first ever¹⁵ World Cup.

The hosts, winners of the 1928 Olympics, claimed¹⁶ the trophy, a golden sculpture of Nike, the goddess of victory. So the trophy, alternately called the Jules Rimet trophy and Victory, remained in Uruguay for four years.

Italy hosted and won the tournament in 1934, then repeated as champions in 1938. However, as teams bid for¹⁷ the 1942 edition, including Germany, World War II broke out. The tournament was abandoned, as well as the 1946 World Cup. During the war, Italy secretary Otto Barassi stashed¹⁸ the trophy in a shoe box under his bed to hide it from the Benito Mussolini-led government.

As the rest of the world emerged from the turmoil¹⁹ of the war, so did the World Cup, out from under Barassi's bed and over to Brazil. The Samba Kings hosted the first tournament which England attended²⁰. In it, two expected outcomes never came to fruition²¹.

Firstly, England did not breeze through²² to victory with ease. Spain and, earlier, the United States beat the British. Following the USA's undeserved²³ 1-0 win, the jubilant Brazilians in attendance carried goalscorer²⁴ Joe Gjaetens off on the pitch raised on their shoulders, mostly because Brazil figured England's loss opened the door for a first ever Brazilian World Cup win. However, as the second surprise of the tournament, Uruguay upset²⁵ Brazil in the final to earn a second title.

The first of Brazil's record five World Cups would have to wait eight years, when a 17-year-old prodigy who went by the name of Pele led Brazil to a long-awaited²⁶ trophy in Sweden. In only the second televised²⁷ World Cup, viewers in their living rooms saw Pele do things with the ball unthinkable²⁸ before that, including lifting²⁹ the ball over the head of a defender and half-volleying³⁰ home in the final, a 5-2 win over the host nation.

After the final whistle, Pele passed out³¹ on the pitch. Breathlessly, earnestly, the World Cup had arrived.

Pele went on to participate in four World Cups as a player, helping to establish Brazil as the dominant force on the world scene.

The only player to come close to Pele's longevity and impact was from Brazil's South American rival, Argentina. Diego Maradona had a habit of hauling³² teams to championships, as shown with club team Napoli. In 1986 he nearly single-handedly³³ dragged³⁴ Argentina to victory, scoring five goals and assisting³⁵ five more along the way.

In his fourth World Cup, 1994, Maradona was sent home after two games after failing³⁶ a drug test.

Maradona is back for the 2010 edition, the first on the African continent, now as coach of Argentina. The old trophy was stolen and, presumably, melted down;³⁷ stars retire, cycle back³⁸ as coaches, then retire for good³⁹; and Uruguay is no longer a force. But the World Cup ticks on⁴⁰, gaining prestige and viewers every four years. This edition will dwarf⁴¹ previous versions. And to think it all began as an upstart⁴² little event 80 years ago.



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- ¹ **Countdown**: *counting backward from an arbitrary number to indicate the time remaining before some event (such as launching a space vehicle)*: conto alla rovescia.
- ² **A quarter billion**: duecentocinquanta milioni (per chi volesse approfondire l'argomento numeri, rimandiamo alla scheda "Ebac Numbers").
- ³ **A far cry (from)**: *far from, very different from*. Il significato della parola *cry* è grido, urlo. L'origine di questa espressione risale all'inizio dell'Ottocento e deriverebbe dal modo di calcolare la distanza del nemico dalle urla di quest'ultimo. Nel tempo ha assunto un significato figurato riferito alla differenza piuttosto che alla distanza: una bella differenza rispetto a.
- ⁴ **Spurned** [*to spurn, spurned, spurning, spurns*]: *to reject disdainfully or contemptuously, scorn*: rifiutare con sdegno, disprezzare.
- ⁵ **Flick on** [*to flick, flicked, flicking, flicks*]: *switch on*: accendere.
- ⁶ **Tube**: in *AE* colloquiale per televisione, potrebbe corrispondere al nostro "tele". Si noti invece che in *BE* colloquiale, *tube* è la metropolitana di Londra.
- ⁷ **Better yet**: ancora meglio, meglio ancora.
- ⁸ **It bears** [*to bear, bore, borne, bearing, bears*]: *qui: to be worthy of an action*: vale la pena, merita.
- ⁹ **Juggernaut**: (*slang*): evento straordinario, grande kermesse. Più in generale, *juggernaut* è un termine inglese di origine sanscrita (*Jagannath*) per definire una forza di qualsiasi natura considerata inarrestabile e distruttiva.
- ¹⁰ **Governing body**: organo direttivo.
- ¹¹ **Within itself**: al suo interno.
- ¹² **Deprived (of)** [*to deprive, deprived, depriving, deprives*]: *keep from having, keeping, or obtaining*: privare (di qualcosa).
- ¹³ **Schedule**: *a program of events*: calendario.
- ¹⁴ **Showed up** [*to show, showed/shown, showing, shows*]: *to arrive, to attend*: presentarsi.
- ¹⁵ **The first ever**: prima in assoluto.
- ¹⁶ **Claimed** [*to claim, claimed, claiming, claims*]: *qui: to win a title, to take a title, prize, or record*.
- ¹⁷ **Bid (for)** [*to bid, bade, bid, bidding, bids*]: *qui: to seek to win or attain something, to strive*: lottare, battersi.
- ¹⁸ **Stashed** [*to stash, stashed, stashing, stashes*]: *to hide something*.
- ¹⁹ **Turmoil**: *a state of great confusion, commotion, or disturbance*: agitazione, tumulto.
- ²⁰ **Attended** [*to attend, attended, attending, attends*]: *to be present at*: partecipare.
- ²¹ **Came to fruition** [*to come, came, come, coming, comes*]: realizzarsi.
- ²² **Breeze through** [*to breeze, breezed, breezing, breezes*]: *qui: to accomplish something easily, to progress through something easily and with little difficulty or effort*: superare, aggiudicarsi.
- ²³ **Undeserved**: *unfairly awarded or unfairly endured, or not merited on the basis of the facts*: immeritato.
- ²⁴ **Goalscorer**: cannoniere; *top goalscorer*: capocannoniere.
- ²⁵ **Upset** [*to upset, upset, upsetting, upsets*]: *to defeat unexpectedly (an opponent favoured to win)*: sconfiggere inaspettatamente.
- ²⁶ **Long-awaited**: a lungo atteso.
- ²⁷ **Televised** [*to televise, televised, televising, televises*]: *broadcast via television*.

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- ²⁸ **Unthinkable:** *impossible to imagine, inconceivable:* impensabile, inconcepibile.
- ²⁹ **Lifting the ball** [*to lift, lifted, lifting, lifts*]: nel calcio, imprimere un effetto alla palla. In gergo calcistico, far passare la palla sopra la testa dell'avversario si dice "fare un sombrero".
- ³⁰ **Half-volleying** [*to half-volley, half-volleyed, half-volleying, half-volleys*]: (*football slang*): *kicking the ball while it's in the air:* tirare al volo.
- ³¹ **Passed out** [*to pass, passed, passing, passes*]: *to faint:* svenire, perdere i sensi.
- ³² **Hauling** [*to haul, hauled, hauling, hauls*]: *to pull or drag:* trascinare, spingere.
- ³³ **Single-handedly:** *by oneself, without assistance:* da solo, in solitaria.
- ³⁴ **Dragged** [*to drag, dragged, dragging, drags*]: *to pull along with difficulty or effort, to haul:* trascinare, tirare.
- ³⁵ **Assisting** [*to assist, assisted, assisting, assists*]: *to help, to give assistance to, to aid.*
- ³⁶ **Failing** [*to melt, melted, melting, melts*]: *qui: to prove deficient or lacking; be unsuccessful:* non superare, fallire.
- ³⁷ **Melted down** [*to melt, melted, melting, melts*]: *to reduce or cause to be reduced from a solid to a liquid state, usually by heating:* fondere, squagliare.
- ³⁸ **Cycle back** [*to cycle, cycled, cycling, cycles*]: *qui: ritornare, riciclarsi. Da notare che riciclaggio di rifiuti si dice waste recycling, mentre il riciclaggio di denaro è money laundering.*
- ³⁹ **For good:** *permanently.*
- ⁴⁰ **Ticks on** [*to tick, ticked, ticking, ticks*]: *qui: va avanti, non si ferma. In questo caso tick si riferisce al ticchettio dell'orologio.*
- ⁴¹ **Dwarf** [*to dwarf, dwarfed, dwarfing, dwarfs*]: *to make somebody or something else seem very small or very unimportant by comparison:* sminuire, eclissare, far sembrare piccolo. Il sostantivo *dwarf* significa nano. I sette nani di Biancaneve (*Snow White*) sono infatti *the seven dwarfs*.
- ⁴² **Upstart** (*upstart*): *suddenly raised to a position of consequence:* nuovo, creato da poco, agli esordi.