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As Soccer Mania Mounts, Politicians' Goals Also Count



David Gray/Reuters

Adriano, at center, celebrated a goal he scored for the Brazilian team against Australia on June 18 in Munich.

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RIO DE JANEIRO, June 26 — With the knockout round in soccer's World Cup under way and an election looming, President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) has found the perfect way to combine his two main passions: when the opposition complains about incompetence and corruption in his government, he responds by linking himself to [Brazil's](#) wildly popular and successful national team.



Ricardo Stuckert/ Presidência da República, via Reuters

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his wife, Marisa Leticia, at the match against Australia.

"As in soccer, we are not going to cry about the goals we didn't score yesterday," Mr. da Silva said in a speech here, after Brazil eked out an unconvincing 1-0 victory over Croatia earlier this month in its first game of the tournament in Germany. "What we're going to do is think about the goals we're going to score."

Brazilians can count on hearing that kind of language every four years. The World Cup tournament not only regularly coincides with Brazil's presidential race, but it almost inevitably ends up spilling over into the campaign.

Brazil, which advanced to the elimination round and plays Ghana on Tuesday, has won five World Cups, more than any other country. Political folklore maintains that a Brazilian victory strengthens the incumbent. Though the numbers at the polls do not necessarily back up that theory, the country's obsession with the sport does offer opportunities both oratorical and practical to politicians.

Few are as astute as Mr. da Silva. In his public declarations he often uses soccer metaphors to explain his actions, as when the opposition was demanding late last year that Finance Minister Antônio Palocci be fired because of his involvement in the corruption scandal.

"Why would I mess with Palocci?" Mr. da Silva responded shortly before the minister in fact stepped down. "That would be the same as removing Ronaldinho from Barcelona," the president continued, referring to the Brazilian player who was voted the best in the world last year and the Spanish club he normally plays for. "Sometimes Ronaldinho misses a shot, but just let him play."

Mr. da Silva's genuine enthusiasm for soccer contrasts sharply with the attitude of his predecessor, [Fernando Henrique Cardoso](#). Mr. Cardoso is an intellectual, a sociologist who speaks five languages, has a Ph.D. and has written many books, but he never seemed convincing when feigning interest in the game.

"When you get down to it, he thought it to be of minor importance," said Juca Kfourri, one of Brazil's leading commentators on the sport.

Though Mr. Cardoso could never have afforded the political cost of such an admission while he was a candidate or in office, he now owns up to that truth. In his just-published memoir, "The Accidental President of Brazil," he writes: "I never watched much soccer on television; I always preferred reading a good book instead. In truth, I am a Brazilian who doesn't much like soccer."

But Mr. da Silva has discovered that being too ardent a fan can also create political problems. When he suggested twice this month that the star forward Ronaldo was overweight, the player took offense and fired right back at the president.

"They say that he drinks a whole lot," Ronaldo told Brazilian reporters in Germany. "Everybody says that I'm fat and he drinks. Since it is a lie that I'm fat, I think it must also be a lie that he drinks."

Mr. da Silva then backed away from further confrontation with the popular player, sending him what has been described as a letter of apology. But the president has continued to opine on the quality of the national team's play and to be photographed wearing the squad's yellow and green jersey.

His main adversary in the election on Oct. 1, Geraldo Alckmin of the Brazilian Social [Democratic Party](#), has also played the soccer card. Wearing a casual shirt, Mr. Alckmin was photographed at a barbecue restaurant in São Paulo watching Brazil play Croatia, though he erred in predicting that Brazil would win 4-1.

Mr. da Silva is by no means the first president to use soccer to strengthen his ties to the people, or to get himself into trouble by second-guessing the professionals. Before the 1970 World Cup, Gen. Emílio Médici, the country's military dictator at the time, criticized the coach of the national team, João Saldanha, for failing to add a player the president admired.

"I don't tell him who to choose for his cabinet," Mr. Saldanha, a journalist and a member of the Communist Party, retorted. "So he shouldn't be telling me who to pick for my squad."

Shortly afterward, Mr. Saldanha, who earned the nickname Fearless João because of the episode, was fired. The team went on to win the World Cup, and in his memoirs, Mr. Saldanha maintains that he was dismissed because Brazil's military rulers could not stomach the thought of a Communist running a team that symbolized national accomplishment and pride.

Yet one of the enduring images of General Médici, nicknamed the Executioner, is of him with his ear glued to a transistor radio, listening to Brazil's matches. "The liking for soccer humanized the dictator," the columnist Merval Pereira wrote in the Rio newspaper O Globo this month. "Already at that time, rudimentary marketing techniques were used to attenuate the cruel face of torture in the dungeons of the dictatorship."

World Cup play also has a big impact on the economy. When Brazil wins, people here feel happy and proud, and respond by spending more money, which boosts growth and by extension confidence in the government.

Mr. Cardoso now acknowledges tapping into that sentiment in 1994, during his first, successful run for president. He was finance minister at the time, and the introduction of an anti-inflation program and a new currency, the real, coincided with World Cup play in the United States, which Brazil eventually won.

"So much of economics is linked to expectations," Mr. Cardoso wrote. "If people expect a new business or a new policy to fail, it usually does. The opposite is also true. If Brazil did reasonably well in the World Cup, we thought maybe the country would relax a little bit and start believing in itself again. Maybe a bit of optimism would rub off on the real and give it a better chance at success."

All bets are off, though, if Brazil finishes anything but first in the current tournament. In his memoirs, Mr. Cardoso noted that when he and Mr. da Silva first ran against each other in 1994, Mr. da Silva, the die-hard fan, cautiously kept his distance from the national team, but he, the reluctant soccer neophyte, took the risk of hitching his fortunes to the national squad.

"Was it a slightly hammy bit of political theater?" Mr. Cardoso asks.

"Yes, of course. But it was also quite dangerous. If I was to be identified publicly with the team, what would happen to me if Brazil lost?"