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I, Michael T Burkel, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

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“I Believe that We Will Win!”:
American Myth-Making and the World Cup

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Abstract

This thesis examines the pervasiveness of nationalistic rhetoric and narratives in soccer-related media. The rhetorical strategies used by commentators, analysts, and fans to fit the United States Men’s Nation Team into the myth of American Exceptionalism are analyzed. First, four broadcasted soccer matches in which the United States played Mexico are analyzed, along with the available prematch, halftime, and postmatch studio coverage, in order to explain the growth of an exceptionally American storyline known as the Dos a Cero myth. Afterward, an analysis of fan responses to World Cup-related threads on a popular social media site are analyzed for nationalistic rhetoric and narrative content. This thesis offers insight into the ubiquitous nature of the myth of American Exceptionalism, showing the tactics used by Americans to rhetorically twist the facts to fit their preferred reality of an America that always triumphs in the end.
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Chapter One: Introduction

A few days before the United States exited the 2014 FIFA World Cup after a 2-1 defeat by Belgium, far-right political commentator Ann Coulter wrote online in the Clarion-Ledger that “Any growing interest in soccer can only be a sign of the nation's moral decay” (2014). In the article, Coulter bemoans soccer’s apparent growth in the US for its alleged lack of individualism and the fact that “It’s foreign,” among other complaints. Coulter compares the sport to the metric system: worthy of hate if only because of its distinctly un-American aspects. It’s not how “we” do it, it’s not what “we” like, so “we” should all hate it together.

Unsurprisingly, Coulter’s article drew responses. Peter Beinart (2014) wrote an article online for the Atlantic which agrees with Coulter’s on some key points: the same young liberals who elected Barack Obama are the same “coalition” popularizing soccer in the States. For both writers, sport is political—internationally-minded young left-wingers disproportionally enjoy soccer, a sport at which Americans traditionally do not excel. For Coulter, this is a supremely un-American quality; for Beinart, it is a sign of America moving on from its days of trying to control and dominate the globe.

It is hard to know yet if Beinart’s claim that young, liberal Americans will make stateside soccer more popular or not. Unlike the Presidential election he references, there is no set “place” for soccer to take, no clear sign that soccer in America has “arrived.” What is more certain, though, is that the US has a complicated relationship with “the beautiful game.” While many Americans have a love of sports, they pay much greater attention per capita to sporting “mega-events” (Real, 2013) like the Super Bowl and the World Series, prompting Buffington (2012, p. 136) to write of the United States: “Nowhere on the planet could one find a nation so
unconcerned with the world’s most popular sporting event.” According to Buffington, many Americans enjoy participating in the national apathy towards soccer.

And yet, some Americans continue to follow the sport, especially the United States Men’s National Team (henceforth, USMNT). Markovits and Hellerman, authors of the seminal book *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (2001), write that the men’s team is essential to the success of soccer in the US. The reason for this is simple: Like Ann Coulter, many Americans see the sport as disdainfully foreign, a sport for the rest of the world to blabber on about. This alien status, however, does not stop the USMNT from competing in international competition. According to Markovits and Hellerman, while most Americans may not understand soccer or enjoy it very much, Americans do understand fervently supporting the US and its representatives, and they enjoy that very much. Buffinton’s 2012 study of American newspaper articles about the World Cup corroborates this assertion. He wrote that sport plays an integral role in the way Americans define their “American-ness.” Coulter’s article perfectly represents sport’s role in cultural definition; she examines perceived aspects of “American-ness” and gives examples of how soccer exists in opposition to these important aspects of American experience.

Her article’s condescending tone also gives insight into the problems that can arise when making connections to national identity. It is important to remember that nation-states are social constructions; they are “imagined communities,” to use the title of Anderson’s 2006 book. National boundaries are only as real as they are allowed to be, but people the world over put significant stock in their socially constructed national identities. This can be dangerous because identities are inherently created in opposition to other identities; that is, the very existence of a nation-state places it at odds with all others. To exist, it must be distinct and different from other nations, which creates friction. Once these identities are formed, they can become difficult to
shake or even easily identify, often becoming “banal,” as Billig (2013) would phrase it. From that work: “In our age, it seems as if an aura attends to the very idea of nationhood. The rape of a motherland is far worse than the rape of actual mothers; the death of the nation is the ultimate tragedy, beyond the death of flesh and blood” (p. 4). Thoughts of “us-versus-them” become so normalized that they no longer register as nationalistic in nature. Through nationalism, it can become easy to view those in out-groups not as people but as a faceless Other, a member of a greater evil without an individuality worthy of acknowledgement, reducible to a singular, imagined point of identity. “They are the enemy” becomes reason enough for another’s complete dismissal. Prejudice and violence become simple matters when one becomes targeted for their nationality alone.

Coulter’s work again serves as a good example of the power of such normalization. She claims that Americans who enjoy soccer must come from immigrant backgrounds; they are not “real” Americans. They, as foreigners, are drawn to its apparently foreign nature. Her oppositional tone is troubling to those who prefer to see peoples of all types cooperate with one another for shared benefit, rather than working against one another for selfish gain.

As noted in the first paragraph of this introduction, the focus on glorified individualism and keeping Americans appreciably separate from “Others” features importantly in Coulter’s imagination of the United States. Her words echo the American Dream, which asserts that personal success results singularly from an individual’s effort, and American Exceptionalism, the notion that Americans are inherently different and, usually, better than other peoples. The American Dream and American Exceptionalism are example of national myths, or narratives. Writing on myth and narrative, Walter (1984) argued that these national stories permeate cultures, becoming incredibly influential and taking on a reality of their own. Myths become
associated with national identity and become engrained in shared cultural experience. Like national identity, they can become taken for granted as true. As such, it is important to identify and critique these “banal” facets of culture in order to better understand them and ourselves.

**Banal American Exceptionalism**

This introduction has discussed two articles with oppositional worldviews, and although both of these columns are intriguing in their own respects, this thesis will not focus directly on either worldview. Instead, it is more interested in the mindset of another response to Coulter’s article, this one written by Paul Vale in the Huffington Post. His piece, titled “Ann Coulter Is Wrong, Soccer Is The Most American Sport Imaginable,” (2014) takes each of Coulter’s examples for why soccer is un-American (and therefore deserving of contempt) and flips them, giving examples from the then-present World Cup to counter the each reason the pundit gives for soccer’s supposed anti-American nature.

It is precisely this kind of rhetorical reframing that this thesis aims to explore. Soccer throws a wrench into the myth of American Exceptionalism because in the world of the sport, the United States is, frankly, unremarkable (aside, perhaps, from its purposeful apathy thereto). Few Americans play in the top leagues of the world, and the nation’s top professional soccer league, Major League Soccer, only just approaches its 20th season, still quite young compared to the associated leagues of many other countries. The American men’s national team has achieved little success in international competition, especially compared to the American Women’s National team, which has won two World Cups since the competition’s 1991 inception.

Remember that the USMNT was singled out by Markovits and Hellerman (2001) as responsible for soccer’s growth in the nation. Americans may not support soccer on the whole, but they love sports, and they especially love supporting those who serve as their nation’s
uniformed representatives. The authors also make note of a gendered difference between the men’s and women’s teams. Unfortunately, women’s sports are still seen as inherently inferior to men’s. The success of the women’s team is more easily discounted by detractors as unimportant. In addition, it is possible that success on the part of the women’s team could contribute to the notion in America that soccer is a sport for children and women, and not for grown men.

With these nationalistic and gendered factors in mind, the men’s team becomes the key to grow the sport in the United States: If the team serves its country well and brings international renown to the nation, more Americans will pay attention and start to care, and the sport will grow. Should the team underperform, it becomes another reason for Americans to continue their apathetic outlook. The team, then, becomes all-important for soccer-minded Americans. If the team must succeed for the sport as a whole to finally “arrive” Stateside, then succeed the team must. Soccer, however, appears to pose a difficulty for mythic American Exceptionalism. As noted above, success in soccer has been historically difficult for the men’s team to find. The core research questions of this project center around this ostensible conundrum.

This thesis asks the following research questions:

1. How do Americans, so used to their nation being special, grapple with the complications soccer appears to present to the myth of American Exceptionalism?
2. What rhetorical strategies do Americans employ to recoup American Exceptionalism?
3. What role does nationalism play in these “rhetorical gymnastics”?

In the course of this project, the commentators, analysts, and fans were found to employ a wide variety of rhetorical strategies related to the above myths and narratives. In the examination of these strategies, it was discovered that these people never really found the team’s lack of
international success in soccer to be a challenge to American Exceptionalism; in fact, many cite the constant struggle for supremacy as proof of the myth’s truth.

Methodology

As noted above, this thesis examines nationalistic rhetoric and American mythos in relation to soccer. To do so, the author chose to perform close textual analyses of several different mediated messages. The present section describes the media chosen and the rationales therefor. It also defines the coming chapters in order to facilitate understanding of this work’s chapters.

This introduction serves as the first chapter of this thesis. The second chapter gives background on relevant academic literature, sometimes populated with relevant examples and additions from popular sources. It first details literature on the “imagined communities” of nations, primarily focusing on the seminal works of Anderson (2006) and Billig (2013). In the next segment, literature on the topic of identity construction and performance is detailed, which connects nationalism and identity to the following section, myth and narrative. Next, mythic American Exceptionalism is combined with a history of American sport culture, which serves to provide understanding for the complicated relationship between the US and soccer. The literature review concludes with background on the matches between the United States and Mexico.

In the third chapter, the construction of a unique American soccer myth, known as the Dos a Cero myth, is analyzed. This myth consists of four matches between regional rivals United States and Mexico. Usually the two best squads in their qualifying region, the US and Mexico play not only for tournament qualification and medals, but for top spots in the group stages (i.e., the first round of elimination based on point accumulation) of tournaments. Since the early ’90s, the intensity of the rivalry has increased, perhaps due to the improvement of the USMNT and the introduction of Major League Soccer in 1996 (Turner, 2013). During the last four rounds of
World Cup Qualification, the US has played Mexico four times at Columbus’s Crew Stadium and won 2-0 each time. Hence the name “Dos a Cero,” the taunt American fans levy at the Mexican players.

In order to analyze the emergence and proliferation of the myth, the author obtained broadcast recordings of each match, along with relevant prematch, halftime, and postmatch studio analysis footage. The remarks of the commentary teams, studio analysts, and interviewees were rhetorically examined in order to identify recurrent themes in the broadcasts. The chapter highlights patterns related to nationalism and American Exceptionalism and remarks upon the implications of such motifs. The constructed schemata outline several reoccurring storylines in the broadcasts: the rivalry, the compliments on the good character of the American team, mixed commentary for the Mexican team, the narrative of the Mexican team cheating or acting unsportsmanlike (contrasted with the exemplary sportsmanship of the Americans), and finally the evolution of the Dos a Cero myth itself. The chapter concludes by explaining how these narratives coalesce to confirm mythic American Exceptionalism.

The fourth chapter focuses its attention on fan responses to the USMNT, analyzing the narratives constructed and reproduced by supporters around the world. The chapter uses the social media website and content aggregator reddit.com as the chosen text. Four soccer-related communities within the site were meticulously examined over the course of the 2013 Dos a Cero match and the 2014 FIFA World Cup Finals. Comments by reddit users who made reference to nationalism or American mythos were documented and categorized into themes. After explaining reddit and the chosen communities in depth, the chapter details the rhetorical work done by reddit users to recoup their feelings of American Exceptionalism with the nation’s unexceptional status in the world of soccer. Upon examination, three reoccurring narratives appeared. The first
was the storyline of the USMNT’s rise to regional dominance over Mexico, a narrative which also features in the Broadcast Analysis chapter. A second narrative paints Team USA as underdogs in the World Cup, while the third section details the growth of the US team over time and its supposed potential for future success. The chapter finishes with commentary on users’ penchant for “flipping the script,” managing to take evidence which appears to disavow the myth of American Exceptionalism and treat it instead as proof in favor of the myth. These fans see the ongoing campaign for international renown as confirmation of American Exceptionalism and the American Dream. The various iterations of the team have worked tirelessly to build success over time, a future victory always shortly to be realized, just as soon as the rest of the nation jumps on board. The commenters conclude with one another that when finally the rest of America sticks with soccer, the US will find victory.

The final major section combines the conclusions of the two analysis chapters. It details the rhetorical work done by American media figures and supporters to fit soccer within the narrative of American Exceptionalism, and the apparent ease by which they perform the task. It brings into question if these American myths can be truly disproven—if its adherents turn evidence against the narratives into proof for them, seemingly without much effort, can myths ever be abolished by contradictory facts or evidence? The chapter also describes the limitations of the thesis and gives direction toward which future researchers might look.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This thesis aims to make clear the connection between a root cause of both World Wars and the 26 billion views garnered by the 2010 FIFA World Cup (Michaels, 2010)—nationalism, that is. It endeavors to understand the relationship between nationalistic rhetoric, soccer, and the mythic ideal of American Exceptionalism. As the world’s most powerful and influential nation-state, the United States can be considered a hegemonic world power. In terms of soccer, however, Americans are decidedly not the world leader.

The question, then, is how American fans and media use rhetoric charged with nationalism to compensate for this lack of superiority. In order to explore this question, it is necessary to first understand the connections between nationalism, myth, and sport. In terms of nationalism, this work explores the definition of nationalism, its importance, and how nationalism becomes constructed through performative acts and rhetorical identification. The myth section elucidates how American Exceptionalism is a powerful and common nationalist myth, then connects this myth to soccer, a sport which does not fit the narrative. Finally, this thesis examines media coverage of four important soccer games, known as the Dos a Cero games, and fan websites in order to understand the question.

The Imagined Communities of Nation-States

The first section of this work will define the concept of nationalism while illuminating its relationship to sport and sport communities. This work bases its understanding of how nation-states are constructed from the seminal work of Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (2006). In his book, Anderson argues that nation-states and the related nationalistic inclinations are “cultural artefacts of a particular kind” which arose in Europe sometime after the Middle
Ages, most likely at the end of the 1700s (p. 4) and contemporaneous with (and perhaps even the root of) the shift from Renaissance rationalism to pre-industrial modernism.

Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 6), then further illuminates the elements of his definition. First, nations are imagined because they exist within the combined consciousness of members who will never—can never—all meet. As such, these nations are created where before there was no strong cultural collection, only rooted in a sense of psychological unity which connects an ‘us’ and is opposed to all of ‘them,’ the Others outside the ‘us.’ Take, for example, the pre-nation of France before its formation: At the time of the drafting of The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, the lands under ancien régime had regional flags, but no national colors, and the language in which the Declaration was drafted could be understood by only a minority of the region for which the Declaration claimed to speak and represent. Only this drafting minority would have considered themselves “French”; as such, the creation of the nation-state was a goal to be achieved, rather than a reality already in existence. In this way, the constructed national identity is an antecedent to the actual formation of the nation.

“Limited” is included in the definition because “no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). Nations must be constructed against an Other; that is, nations exist alongside other nations. A nation or political entity cannot exist in the absence of a separate unit. Even if the nation is not in direct conflict or competition with the Other, an Other must nonetheless exist. Nations are prescribed flags, colors, attitudes, and values that must be in some way different than the Others; were they not, how could the nation claim separation? As it will be shown later below, this process of national prescription requires an establishment of a hegemonic cultural order over the proposed nation. Where the pre-modern territory is
accustomed to a certain amount of expansion and shrinkage, for its borders are rough and do not require fierce demarcation or patrol, the defined nation seeks delineation, for how else might ‘we’ know where ‘we’ end and ‘they’ begin?

Anderson (2006) and Billig (2013) point to the need for nations to be “sovereign” due to the concept’s historical struggle against the Divine. The rise of collectively-ruled nation-states came at the direct cost of divinely-invested regimes. As rule shifted from centralized authority to citizen rule, roles shifted: God came to serve the nation and its citizens, especially those in positions of power, rather than the other way around (Butterworth, 2007).

Anderson describes lastly the nature of the “community.” Irrespective of real differences or inequalities between group members, the nation is “always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 7). Thus, US presidents might speak to their “fellow Americans,” regardless of the separation of power between them. The author notes that it is this sense of comradeship which most directly binds its adherence and makes the nation such an appealing concept that it would be more important than one’s own life. This unification of citizenry makes the nation greater than the sum of its parts. Thus according to nationalist reasoning, the community is much more important than the individual; or, as Billig writes “The rape of motherland is far worse than the rape of actual mothers; the death of a nation is the ultimate tragedy, beyond the death of flesh and blood” (p. 4).

The perils of nationalism warrant its examination. Grant Lyon (2011) made a great case for the close inspection of “dumb nationalism” in Huffington Post two days before the 10-year anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Blind American nationalism, he wrote, is at fault for the wrongful persecution faced by people of Middle Eastern descent—be they Muslims, Sikhs, or any other creed. Nationalist adherence is capable of astonishing and terrible things;
nationalism explains the success of the World Cup just as it explains the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia (Foer, 2006). Nationalism serves to blanket peoples with a constructed set of norms and ideologies, be it through self-identification or imperialist practice.

In 2013, Noam Chomsky gave an interview in which he outlined a much more serious and wide-reaching consequence of American nationalism. He claims in the interview that the Cold War and the more recent War on Terror are simply pretexts under which the United States seeks to dominate the globe by suppressing independent nationalists who seek to curtail American control and access to research. He cites the expansion of NATO—ostensibly a pact meant to protect Europe from the “Russian hoards”—during and after the fall of the Soviet Union. He asserts that if NATO were really a promise to shield against the Russians, NATO would have been obsolete after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, the US expanded NATO to former Soviet satellites. Chomsky says that NATO was instead meant as a way to control Europe and act as a base for increased US military presence the world over. With the end of the Soviet Union, new pretexts, such as the War on Terror, were created as the *raison d'être* for American military aggression the world over. The aggressive nationalism of the United States lies at the heart of these pretexts and the subsequent military action; American nationalism has grown outside the borders of the nation, and any nationalist group or society which seeks to subvert or reduce American influence is at risk of forcible removal. In this way, any organization that serves to resist the growing American nationalist supremacy is a danger to the established American control and must be eliminated. Such is the danger of nationalism, specifically the American brand of nationalism, and therefore the ways in which nationalism is created and replicated must be examined.
Nations continually support themselves with nationalistic displays and rhetoric. And they must do so; after all, “the battle for nationhood is a battle for hegemony, by which a part claims to speak for the whole nation and to represent the national essence” (Billig, 2013, p. 27). This is necessary because “few nations are so homogeneous that they do not contain sub-sections, which fall under [Anthony] Smith’s definition of ethnie: namely, a group which maintains a sense of its own historic uniqueness and origins.” In Selections from Prison Notebooks, Gramsci’s definition of “hegemony” involves a dominant group or class exerting indirect power over those lower in the social hierarchy (Hoare & Smith, 1999). This dominance must be continuously reaffirmed, lest those cultural sub-sections seek to split or overthrow the foremost order. One would be very mistaken, however, to think that nationalism is limited to the early construction of nation-states or malcontented sub-nations seeking independence from the state to which they legally belong.

“Banal Nationalism”

As noted above, citizens of nations routinely reproduce their own nationality, thus reifying the state itself and their place within it. There are very obvious examples of this reproduction of nationalism: the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance by schoolchildren, the celebration of national holidays such as the American Independence Day, and the singing of the national anthem at a sporting event all serve quite openly to reify the, even celebrate, the state. The last example above is germane to this thesis; the fans in the stands, hearts covered by hands, belt out the anthem, and the media packages and commercializes the spectacle for millions to see. As such, fans and the media become import sites of the continued renewal of nationalist rhetoric.

Billig reminds readers that citizens' nationalist spirit does not appear suddenly, as if from nowhere, on Independence Day, only to vanish back to obscurity on July 5th. Rather, there is a “banal nationalism,” to quote the title of Billig’s work, which continues to reinforce the nation-
state identity within the cultural consciousness of its citizens. In describing these more subtle acts of nationalistic as ‘banal,’ Billig means to highlight motions of nationalism which become so ingrained in society that they will be scarcely considered nationalistic. This classification depends wholly on the critical eye of the observer, to be sure: to some, the schoolchildren’s daily Pledge might be an obvious nationalist act, but for others it might be ‘just the way it is.’ Paying one’s taxes seems to be just a tedious motion come spring, but that act serves to legitimize the state insofar as one recognizes the state’s authority to do so. As these acts, rituals, and institutions are repeated time and time again, they become part of the scenery, the so-called ‘natural order.’ Banal nationalist rhetoric, then, can become blended into the perceived identities of entire populations.

**Constructing and Performing Identity**

To students of identity scholarship, the continuous process of ‘us-versus-them’ reification *ad infinitum* will sound familiar; this is precisely the process by which identities are formed and reproduced (Butler, 2006). This section seeks to explain how one’s nationality is an assumed identity by examining extant research on the topic. This work follows that of Osborne and Coombs (2013) in combining identity theory and social identity theory. The work of Judith Butler (2006) and scholars who interpret her works are also used to inform this unit. Before adapting these theories to national identities, the works will be briefly reviewed.

As Osborne and Coombs state, identity theory and social identity theory are more similar than they are different. In both theories, one’s identity is formed via their societal interactions, which take place in a pre-structured society into which every individual is born (Stets & Burke, 2000). They both claim that within each person there exists multiple selves, which combine and intersect. Finally, they both highlight the existence of social constraints from which an individual
interprets which behaviors are or are not acceptable, creating social rules for the individual to obey. These similarities aside, there is one main difference between the two theories: How exactly one’s selves become built. Osborne and Coombs describe this subtle difference between identity theory and social identity theory as “what one does” versus “who one is” (p. 675). Put simply, identity theory purports that one’s actions construct one’s identities, while social identity theory puts forth that one’s group affiliation defines the self. This distinction becomes important to the discussion of identity in all facets. Both are a part of the construction of a national identity.

In the case of identity theory, the individual’s actions define their identities. Using identity theory, an individual’s identity is created through the roles they fill in social interaction. These roles are then performed, usually not for ourselves, but for others. It should be noted that performance is an ongoing process consisting of individual performative acts, or behaviors (Osborne & Coombs, 2013). Behaviors inevitably receive some sort of feedback, which is integral to the role-filling process.

Nationalistic behaviors are a good demonstration for this process. Schoolchildren do not recite the Pledge of Allegiance for themselves; rather, this is a nationalistic behavior they perform daily for their teacher, who instructs them to do so because it is part and parcel of performing the role of “good American schoolteacher.” A student who questions this daily ritual might be reprimanded by the schoolteacher for acting un-American; this is, the student’s behavior was out of line with the student’s performance of American-ness. Something about the role of “American” is learned: The teacher’s feedback tells the student that questioning nationalistic rituals is bad, and they (and perhaps the whole class) are discouraged from doing so in the future. In this way, a role is performed, feedback is received, and identity becomes formed.
Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (2006) constructs a notion of identity specific to gender that is very similar to identity theory and can likewise be applied to national identity. Butler’s critical theory of gender performance conceptualizes gender as a performance that begins being taught at birth and is continually policed thereafter. The male child who sees their mother put on makeup and wants to try their hand at it might be reminded that ‘boys don’t do that,’ where a female child might be encouraged. Gender identity is so constantly reinforced that it seems to exist naturally in the world, intrinsically tied to a person’s physical sex; however, the behaviors a person performs are not tied to one’s gender. For example, male actors who identity as heterosexual wear makeup to fulfill their roles as actors in the same way a heterosexual female actress (or any queer actor/actress) would.

It is important to note that, in both identity theory and gender performance theory, identities are being constructed in opposition to other identities; i.e., the notion of a ‘man’ can only exist in relation to its counteridentity, the ‘woman,’ in the same way that ‘heterosexual’ identity only makes sense when compared to ‘queer’ sexuality, or American identity can only be constructed in opposition to identities which are distinctly un-American. These relationships are completely reliant on context. In one context, the role of ‘schoolchild’ and ‘schoolteacher’ might be counteridentities, while in another context, the relevant counteridentity to ‘schoolteacher’ might be ‘janitor.’ In this way, relevant counteridentities can be difficult to place. Regardless, it is important to remember that context is crucial for role identification.

Besides role-based identity construction, national identity is also constructed through group affiliation, as social identity theory predicts. With social identity theory, it is group affiliation more so than individual performances that defines the individual. Stets and Burke (2000, p. 226) give an excellent distinction between group affiliation and role identification:
“The basis of social identity is in the uniformity of perception and action among group members, while the basis of role identity resides in the differences in perceptions and actions that accompany a role as it relates to counterroles.” A group need only exist for an individual to identify with it, and no further work is needed. In fact, the individual may not even outwardly express their identification, though this may lead in-group members to mistake the individual as an out-group member (Osborne & Coombs, 2013). The role assumption of identity theory and gender performance theory requires counteridentities to exist, as an opposite or opposing role is needed to set up a reciprocal relationship.

Many of these identity and performance theories are congruent with Kenneth Burke’s understanding of how rhetoric serves to create group association and identity, through his concepts of identification and consubstantiality. For Burke, identification is to associate or be associated with the qualities or interests of another person or thing. Burke wrote in A Rhetoric of Motives (1950) that identification can work both in relation to the self and external to the self: One can note one’s own similarities to another thing or group just as one can note another’s similarities to an object or a group. Thus, one can self-identify as American because one recites the Pledge of Allegiance and sings the national anthem before sporting events (thereby identifying against not-Americans at the same time), and one can identify someone who watches soccer as a soccer fan, regardless if that person identifies themselves as a soccer fan or not. To identify (or be identified with) another entity is to be ‘consubstantial’ with it, wrote Burke. Consubstantiality results in entities becoming similar, by identifying, and at the same time counter-identifying with other identities. Such is the paradox of group affiliation.

Identification and consubstantiality mirrors the work on group identity theory, but Burke’s work specifically highlights the vital role played by rhetoric in group affiliation. It is
through rhetoric that one becomes consubstantial with other entities, and rhetoric must be likewise used to construct notions of consubstantiality between entities separate from oneself. Rhetoric, Burke would say, must be used to affiliate oneself with a nation, or more likely, other nationalists. Rhetoric is used to connect fans to their teams (e.g., chanting “U-S-A!”), and sports to nations (e.g., the requisite playing of the national anthem before every game). Rhetoric must be examined to explore the myriad connections of nationalism, fans, and teams, hence this thesis. The next subdivision of this work will focus on rhetoric’s role in the construction of narrative and myth, and the role of narrative and myth in relation to groups.

**American Exceptionalism as Narrative and Myth**

The telling and sharing of stories is a natural process. All cultures of people tell stories; it is one of the few things humans collectively share. This unique facet of humanity led Fish er (1984) to term humans “*homo narrans,*” the storytelling animal. An important part of the socialization process, humans come to understand that stories are not meant to be judged on a rational basis, but rather in terms of narrative fidelity and narrative probability, or how true the story is to one’s lived experience and the story’s internal coherence. According to Lewis (1987), this means that most people do not critically engage with narratives, making them very persuasive; stories essentially bypass the need for concrete facts. Lewis argues that because Reagan was so skilled in storytelling, he was able to say one thing (for example, that he would lower taxes) and escape reproach when he did the exact opposite (he ended up increasing taxes).

The former president was successful because of the way he framed the United States and himself in terms of successful American mythos. During his speeches, Reagan defined Americana: Reagan’s America was a divinely-chosen nation, prosperous because of its moral and military strength, and Reagan styled himself a “mythic hero,” projecting the image of a non-
political type, an outsider who gives the audience “just the facts.” Lewis argues that the American people bought into his ideology because the stories made sense. The American people did little in the way of questioning his narratives. And why should they have? After all, they are ‘just stories,’ and stories are not meant to be critically examined (Polletta & Lee, 2006). Yet the fact that these narratives went unquestioned during the Reagan presidency had powerful effects on the American people: Not only did they elect Reagan twice (by landslides each time), they also accepted his reasoning despite much of it being oversimplified or, worse, baseless. This powerful example illustrates the force behind what many consider to be ‘just stories.’

Some stories become some universally known and accepted as to achieve the status of a myth. What are myths? In Mythologies (1972, p. 109), Barthes defines myth as something larger than the individual components of a story; myth is "a system of communication, that it is a message cannot be possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form.” Billings, Butterworth, and Turman (2012, p. 63) take a simpler route, conceptualizing a cultural myth as a tale “designed to explain the world.” Myths are both sacred and fictional. According to Orfanos (2006), they have no real author or origin and have proven able to survive through time, as they are not bound to a specific era. The author writes that myths require self-identification on behalf of the culture. It follows then that those who adhere to a myth do so purposefully, taking in the relevant parts and disavowing the parts that do not apply. Myths continually circulate and underwrite many rhetorical performances of identity, especially national identity.

It is important to note that myths such as American Exceptionalism or the American Dream are not isolated stories that they take center stage in; rather, myths are the backbone of the narrative, the underlying and overarching assumption of the people who accept it and take it for
A myth is not simply a story, it is the story, repackaged and reproduced continually without thought. Combining Burke and Barthes, those who seek to identify with others will inevitably invoke mythic power to do so.

Barthes and Burke would agree with Parini’s introduction to *The American Mythos* (2012), in which he claims that “Every nation requires a story—or many stories, which taken together form a national narrative—about its origins, a self-defining mythos that says something about the character of the people and how they operate in the larger world and among each other.” National narratives serve to define what it means to be a member of that group, thereby unifying the populace and at the same time supporting the hegemonic powers and views they support. Traganou (2010) wrote of national narratives’ power to spur nationalist sentiment when evoked by sporting events (in this case, the 2004 Olympics in Greece). In America, different mythic American ideals have been used to support slavery, manifest destiny, and the “military industrial complex,” to name only a few atrocities, despite those ideals being freedom and godliness, ostensibly positive ideals. The power of national narratives have to perpetuate hegemonic structures, such as nationalism, necessitates their study.

All cultures and societies construct myths, and Americans are no different. In fact, they have been weaving tales about America’s extraordinary nature since before its colonial period, which Green, Muller & Meyer (2013) claimed was a contributing factor to its insurrection against British rule. In the above example, Reagan’s mythic America is special, granted preferential status by God. This myth, known as American Exceptionalism, is the central focus of this work. Simply put, American Exceptionalism can be understood as the idea that America is somehow unique and different from the rest of the world’s nation-states. This myth usually comes packaged with a sense of superiority; not only are Americans different from the rest of the
world, they are also somehow better for it. While this notion predates the United States’
preeminence on the world stage, its ubiquitous cultural presence throughout the world has no
doubt enhanced the power of the myth.

The concept that the United States “is a biblical ‘city upon a hill’ ” (Winthrop, 1630;
quoting in Parini, 2012) existed long before the American colonies would draft the Declaration of
Independence, and the belief has stuck around ever after. Its presence is still felt in the Pledge of
Allegiance, as well as the words of Presidents during every speech they give (e.g. Obama, 2014).
Indeed, President Obama has claimed that “In no other country on Earth is my story even
possible” (Obama, 2006; quoted in Beinart, 2014).

As discussed, imagined communities and the identities defined therewith can only exist
in the presence of an opposed community. American Exceptionalism follows the same rule.
Since its inception, American Exceptionalism has been conceived in opposition to other
(ostensibly inferior) societies. Markovits and Hellerman (2001) write that this sense of separation
began in opposition to England after the American Revolution, and soon spread to include all of
Europe, and the whole of the world soon after. With the successful defeat of the British
Empire, America had proven itself superior to the British crown, and its democracy set it apart
from the duchies, principalities, kingdoms, and empires of the Old World. America turned its
attention inwards, isolating itself from much of the rest of the world. This policy would last for
much of the 19th and 20th centuries, only ending with the rise of American cultural imperialism at
the end of World War II, to be discussed more below. During America’s isolationist period, the
notion of American Exceptionalism was tied to that of ‘Manifest Destiny,’ which was the idea
that it was America’s God-given right to expand westward in expansionist, imperialist pursuit of
wealth and power. Coupled with manifest destiny came the subjugation of Native American
peoples and their subsequent relegation to reservations. American Exceptionalism, then, became a vehicle for American power gain in the 19th century (Green, Muller & Meyer, 2013).

This would become problematic when United States and the Soviet Union emerged as superpowers at the end of World War II. Both nations began almost immediately to expand their influences over the rest of the world. The US did so through the Marshall Plan and the “containment” policy, whereby Communist countries would be allowed to continue existing, so long as states around them did not “fall” to communism as well. This US vs. Soviet global power structure quickly began to define the United States and its people. Remember that nations are “imagined communities” which must be defined in opposition to others. The existence of the Soviet Union gave the US a clear opponent against which to define itself. Therefore, if it was Communist to be collective, Americans were fiercely individualist. If Communists were atheist, Americans were “One nation, under God,” as the Pledge of Allegiance was altered in 1954 to indicate. During this time, American Exceptionalism continued and perhaps even expanded, since Americans began to see themselves as the “leaders of the free world” who were necessary to contain the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union.

The subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union meant victory for the US in the Cold War, seemingly verifying American Exceptionalism since the world was now ruled by one great superpower. The preeminence of the United States has had pronounced effect on the global markets and political structures, and this prominence served again to reinforce in Americans the idea that the county and its citizens were exceptional. The United States has since gone on to become the closest thing the world has to a global hegemonic culture, especially in terms of entertainment and popular culture. Markovits and Hellerman (2001) wrote that American popular
culture dominated popular culture around the world, with one caveat: the world of sport, to which this work will now turn.

**American Sports and American Exceptionalism**

This section outlines how the sports cultures of nation-states became defined, as detailed by Markovits and Hellerman (2001). Its goal is to explore the connection between sport and nationalism by illuminating the history of sport culture in America as opposed to the rest of the world, explaining why soccer never fully caught on in the United States as it did in most countries, and why the situation is a prime example of American Exceptionalism.

Before diving into the national sports culture of the United States, however, it is important to make the case for sport as a vital site for nationalist rhetoric the world over. Nationalism permeates every aspect of sport in ways both banal and obvious. Billings, Butterworth, and Turman (2012) detail the flak received by the NFL for the decision to skip the national anthem in the wake of a long delay of game. Even counties with troubled nationalist pasts will see outpourings nationalist fervor, as anyone who has been to Germany during the World Cup can attest. In these ways, sport and nationalism are intrinsically linked.

Markovits and Hellerman note that the formation of a nation’s hegemonic sports culture is tied directly to the history of industrialization and the development of mass societies. They contend that all cultures have a limited “sport space” which cannot expand infinitely. These sport spaces became more or less solidified in the period between 1870 and 1930, and once filled, it becomes almost impossible for other sports to enter the nation’s hegemonic sport culture. This is because of the cultural ‘feedback loop’ around the sport; its position in the sport culture is constantly reinforced by the media, the population, and established its cultural myths, becoming a self-supporting pillar of the national consciousness.
America is ruled by three (and a half) sports: Baseball, football, basketball, and, in some areas, hockey. These sports are commonly referred to as the “Big Three and a Half.” Markovits and Hellerman detail that the US is the only country in the world whose “hegemonic sports culture,” defined as “the sports culture that dominates a country’s emotional attachments” (p. 10), is split between more than two sports. Most countries have just one dominant sport (usually soccer), but it is not uncommon for countries to have a split sports culture (be it fairly evenly or one sport taking a backseat to the more popular one). The US, on the other hand, is unique in its much-divided sporting landscape.

American sports, as well as soccer, originated as children’s games, which then began to be played by older men for exercise. Ironically, games involving balls were seen as childish; nonetheless, upper-middle class gentlemen in New York City began organizing baseball clubs in the 1840s. During this early period, cricket was originally more popular than baseball in America, but it failed to maintain its footing in the hegemonic sport culture. This is due directly to its status as an English import. Played mainly by upper-class English immigrants and those upper-class Americans who wanted to associate themselves with English gentlemen, cricket players emphasized the sport’s Englishness; a poor choice, perhaps, if those players wanted their chosen sport to stick around. This development illustrates how national identity and sports are closely tied, with American national identity being defined through sports in opposition to the sports of other countries.

Middle and lower class Americans did not appreciate the pretentiousness of the cricket players, and the myth that baseball was an American-made sport (Arango, 2010), however false, increased Americans’ favor of the sport against its foreign cousin. Cricket stayed in the upper echelons on American class structure as baseball became the sport embraced by those of lower
social standing—and baseball won out in the end. Markovits and Hellerman note that the 
embrace of the middle and lower classes is requisite for any sport to be accepted into a nation’s 
hegemonic sport culture. These classes constitute a majority of the population; the consumption 
and reproduction of these sports will determine a sport’s popularity and, thereby, its place in a 
nation’s sport space. This is a pattern that will repeat in the spread of gridiron football and 
basketball in America, and soccer in the rest of the world.

As with baseball, football began as an English game (rugby, in this case) adapted by 
Americans into a sport of its own. American football got its start in colleges. As with the cricket-
playing gentlemen, the young men of the American university campuses embraced a view of 
sport which favored friendly sporting competition. Once the rules of the game had been 
established, football spread rapidly through the network of American universities. As Markovits 
and Hellerman note, “Universities and their teams soon become the sole purveyors of sport on a 
meaningful competitive level for large areas of the country” (p. 43). Although collegiate support 
would help spur football on towards popularity, this support would be utterly lacking for soccer, 
which will be shown to have hindered its growth (and, arguably, might still be a hindrance) in 
the United States.

While baseball and gridiron football were foreign sports adapted by Americans into 
sports all their own, basketball is a uniquely American creation. No creation myth or college 
student organization can claim responsibility for basketball’s design; that honor belongs solely to 
Dr. James Naismith, who invented the sport in 1891 (Griffiths, 2010). The new sport soon spread 
through the popular YMCAs, where Naismith had worked, but the successful dissemination of 
basketball across America is due to the three factors, according to Markovits and Hellerman: its 
inherent “American-ness,” the initial accessibility of the game, and the acceptance of the NCAA.
Being a unique American invention was a trait that baseball, football, hockey, and soccer could not claim. Many Americans, in their nationalist mindsets, felt a fondness in their hearts for it for this reason only. Basketball, like soccer and unlike the other sports in the Big Three and a Half, can be usefully practiced alone, making it more accessible for competitive play. Many leagues sprouted up over the US, each filled with various teams of amateur, semi-professional, and professional status. The Harlem Globetrotters toured the country and the world, spreading the uniqueness of the game around. This early lack of a formal, national structure lent the game an ease of entry that helped spurn its growth.

Whereas baseball, football, and basketball reinforced American nationalism, hockey presents a curious case. Hockey is not an American sport, and unlike any of the Big Three, has never been altered to fit American preference. The keys to hockey’s continued existence in America boils down to two factors: First, like the Big Three, it became established in America in the key formative time before 1930, and most importantly, Americans considered it ‘American enough.’ As Markovits and Hellerman theorize, Americans accepted hockey readily because it did not seem so foreign in actuality. Canadians and Americans, they note, share the longest unguarded border in the world, signifying the easygoing relationship the countries have. They may have different governments and slightly different ideological systems, but Americans and Canadians have gotten along rather famously. Sharing a language and culture, the nations evolved in tandem, allowing one another’s inventions to lack a sense of foreignness. For what it’s worth, Americans may as well have invented hockey themselves, for all its Canadian origins has meant to Americans.

While sports of its own making dominate the sport landscape of America, it is not an understatement to say that Americans sports have had minimal impact on global sporting culture.
Few countries outside the US have accepted the Big Three in any major way: Many Caribbean countries and Japan love baseball and a few Mediterranean countries have taken up basketball rather seriously, but these trends are more recent and have more to do with the newfound near-hegemonic status the United States has gained since the end of World War II. American sports have dominated American sport culture for over a century; no other country can claim the same about any of the Big Three. Tellingly, of the Big Three, basketball is the only one that is part of the international Olympics. Although it might be arguably the most popular spectator sport in America, gridiron football boasts few teams outside the United States. Baseball may claim a World Series, but only one team from outside the US, the Toronto Blue Jays, has ever appeared in it (ESPN.com, 2014). Their appeal to Americans aside, the sports of the US have not made a significant international impact. This lack of international impact has much to do with the status of soccer in the rest of the world.

The lion’s share of Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism, Markovits and Hellerman’s seminal work oft cited for its in-depth analysis of the title topic, is devoted to explaining how exactly soccer, which would become by far the world’s most popular sport, failed to have a significant presence in the United States. In the examination of America’s exceptional, hegemonic sports culture, this work has already alluded to some of these issues, especially that of the ‘crowding out’ of American sport culture which soccer experienced. Yet soccer’s historically ephemeral presence in America deserves further elucidation, as this is the central focus of this thesis.

The first reason Markovits and Hellerman give for soccer’s major absence in American sport space is its pronounced “foreignness.” Whereas the Big Three and a Half were American concoctions (with hockey’s Canadian origins apparently deemed “American enough”), soccer
was unabashedly un-American. This is especially evident in structural terms. Unlike American leagues, which are sovereign unto themselves, professional soccer leagues around the world are subject to FIFA (French: Fédération Internationale de Football Association; English: International Federation of Association Football), the international governing body of soccer, which presides over the sport around the world. FIFA recognizes 209 countries under its authority, split into six confederations. Most countries have a semi-professional or professional league, and many countries have more than one (currently, the United States has three). In order to gain FIFA’s recognition, a league must apply with the nation’s representative governing body and agree play by the Association’s rules (both literally in terms of the laws of the game and metaphorically in terms of the league’s acceptance of FIFA’s authority). FIFA does take and historically has taken a very active role in its members’ leagues.

American leagues’ experiences with both the national and international governing bodies have generally been fraught with difficulty. Originally known as the United States Football Association, the US’s representative branch was formed in 1914 when two rival soccer associations were forced by FIFA to merge into one organization for recognition, becoming one of the earliest FIFA member states. Markovits and Hellerman write that the USFA did almost everything wrong in its early years: the officials actively identified themselves as immigrants (certainly not earning any respect from the nativist American society) and made a point to preserve “the foreign flavor and European origins of the game” (p. 101). The USFA made no attempt to ingrain the sport in the network of colleges from which football and basketball would gain so much popularity.

These failures robbed soccer of a basis for native-born Americans to become inculcated with the game. As established, the mythic American Exceptionalism that pervades US society
supports the idea that the US developed from the best aspects of Europe and further improved upon them, and yet the USFA was actively boasting its inherent ‘European-ness.’ In the American mindset, the notion supporting a sport made by foreigners, played by foreigners, and enthusiastically governed by foreigners would have seemed laughable at best and insulting at worst. Americans had plenty of Americanized sports to support.

It should come as no surprise that the amateur, semi-pro, and professional players of soccer in this early stage were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. In many ways, note Markovits and Hellerman, playing soccer was a way to retain connection to the heritage one’s family left behind in the Old World. Clubs often had names in German or Italian, bespeaking their founders’ identities (though, in a surprisingly American twist, club constituency was never limited by race or nationality; Scots could and did play for Italian teams, Americans played for English teams, etc.). For many Americans, this nomenclature served as a reminder of the purposeful divide soccer had from the Big Three and a Half.

The second major reason Markovits and Hellerman offer for soccer’s failure to launch in the US is the historical ineptitude of American professional soccer leagues. These leagues have been habitually numerous and short-lived in the United States; to make this point, the authors include a “by no means … exhaustive list” of 50 leagues which “have existed in one form or another—and at one time or another—in the United States” (p. 103). This ephemerality of leagues is telling of Americans’ difficulty adapting to the international (read: un-American) sporting model. Whereas in the US professional leagues are controlled mostly by franchise owners, soccer leagues in Europe and Latin America more closely resemble state institutions than the market-driven business of the American sports scene. In Germany, for example, all clubs (with the exception of those founded by corporations, such as Bayer Leverkusen, owned by
the Bayer pharmaceutical company) are 51% controlled by members, meaning that a company or individual owner can only ever own at most 49% of the market share in a club. Compare that to the United States, where the Green Bay Packers are the only community-owned major league sports team. These contrasting sporting models reflect different sporting ideologies—in North America, the market reigns supreme, while in the soccer powerhouses of Latin America and Europe, the soccer leagues are institutionalized (Markovits and Hellerman, 2001, pp. 103-104).

The third point Markovits and Hellerman make to explain America’s absence of soccer is the lack of proper integration in the college scene. As noted above, soccer got crowded out of the US hegemonic sport culture early; baseball claimed the lower classes while football spread throughout the middle class university structure, and basketball took over through urban YMCAs. The authors write that soccer only gained traction on college campuses in the wake of football being limited or banned due to its brutality. As such, soccer’s debut came tainted with the notion that soccer was at best a sport for recreation, not real competition, and at worst it was considered to be played by the men not ‘manly and tough enough’ to play football. Due at least in part to its perceived “sissyness,” the sport never drew many talented college players, nor did it ever draw a significant following.

The next unit highlights the importance of nationalism to soccer’s growth in America. Although progress is evident, success on the global stage is necessary for the sustained evolution of the sport in the United States. In order to achieve this, a different conception of the relationship between the “foreign” sport of soccer and America becomes an exigence for the fans and media of the sport. This points directly to the central question of this work: How do the media and fans use American Exceptionalism to compensate for the “foreign feel” of the world’s most popular sport in light of America’s historically poor performance in it?
America’s Soccer Successes: Toward Dos a Cero

This section seeks to highlight the importance of international competition to soccer and the American soccer scene. This work first uses women’s soccer—“yet another American Exceptionalism” (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003)—to highlight this significance, then moving into the recent fortunes of the men’s game and its effect on soccer’s popularity in the US. The American women are dominant on the world stage, without a doubt one of the best by any metric; however, the men’s team languishes in mediocrity despite America’s rabid consumption of (men’s) sports. This serves the central thesis of this work by giving a major reason why the Dos a Cero games to be analyzed are so important to the US Soccer Federation (USSF; formally the USFA), the players, and the fans alike.

The American women’s team has had significant successes on the international stage. The US Women’s National Team (USWNT) won the first Women’s World Cup in 1991 and won it again in 1999. The team has also won four Olympic gold medals (most recently in 2012), as well as nine Algarve Cups (an annual women’s international competition held by the Portuguese Football Federation), which the team most recently won in 2013. Markovits and Hellerman write about the USWNT twice: In Offside (2001), and again in 2003 in a piece that posits that the reason women’s soccer has been so successful in America is precisely because the men’s game has not. “After all, July Foudy, Mia Hamm, Brandy Chastain – to mention but three stars – are more widely recognized than their male equivalents in the United States, be they of the Alexi Lalas or Brandon Donovan generation” (Markovits and Hellerman, 2003, p. 14). Perhaps the authors did not realize how well they make their point: Landon Donovan would certainly have not been as well-known as Brandy Chastain in 2003.
There is an important parallel to be drawn between the women’s and men’s games concerning the integral role played by international competition and the professional leagues: In both cases, the success of the national team on the international stage led directly to the creation of a professional league which had otherwise not existed. This highlights another instance of American Exceptionalism expounded by Markovits and Hellerman (2001): Whereas in most countries in which soccer rules the hegemonic sports culture there exists a successful professional club league (or in many cases several) in addition to and somewhat separate from the international World Cup competition (in which players compete based upon their nationality rather than club contracts), the top-level professional leagues for both men and women in the US are tied intrinsically to the national team and cannot be removed from this context.

The notion that the success of the national teams is absolutely critical to soccer’s fight toward acceptance within America’s hegemonic sports structure is central to both Markovits and Hellerman’s *Offside* and this present work. Although Americans’ ambivalence toward international competitions such as certain Olympic sports and the World Cup (often rooted in ideas of nationalism and American Exceptionalism) has been established (Buffington, 2012; Markovits & Hellerman, 2001), the authors of *Offside* argue that those Americans with a personal and/or economical stake in the success of soccer in the United States must rely on Americans’ senses of nationalism and American Exceptionalism if they hope to see the sport prosper Stateside.

This argument might seem ironic at first glance; after all, this work has until now given reason after reason for why American notions of nationalism and superiority have restricted and prevented soccer from attaining a place in the hegemonic sports culture of America. Markovits and Hellerman contend that these forces are so powerful that they must be harnessed *in favor of*
soccer if the sport is to succeed, and that is where the national teams come in. The idea is simple: Americans overall may not know soccer well, much less enjoy it, but Americans do know American pride. Therefore the key for the USSF to grow soccer in America came down to two interrelated aspects: Building soccer to be ‘American enough’ (like hockey), and long-term success on the international pitch.

Bringing soccer under the fold of ‘American-ness’ began with a top-down approach from the United States Soccer Federation (USSF or US Soccer), the third iteration of FIFA’s US national branch. Markovits and Hellerman (p. 201) detail the goals FIFA put forth in granted the 1994 World Cup to the US: First, maximum profit for itself, the USSF, and the nine cities who would host the games. Second came obtaining the viewership of the casual American sports fan, who might not follow sports intensely, but who would watch mega-events such as the Super Bowl. Lastly and perhaps most importantly for the extended prominence of soccer in the States came the use of the World Cup to garner interest in a new top-level men’s professional soccer league, known as Major League Soccer, or MLS, to which this work will now turn attention.

As Markovits and Hellerman note, a key factor in maintaining a successful soccer presence in America is ridding it of its foreign feel. MLS seems to be using a hybrid strategy to accomplish this: the league helps pay big transfer fees for foreign talent such as Thierry Henry and David Beckham while simultaneously encouraging teams to bring up their own local talent through youth camps. The authors predicted a sort of “one-two punch.” The big-name, high-profile players would lend the league credibility and bring in casual fans who want to see world-class stars play, building a supporter base and laying the groundwork while the youth leagues work to create powerful new American stars as hometown heroes, cementing the teams within the community. They estimated this would take a generation to come to fruition.
Markovits and Hellerman have again proven their prescience. MLS was formed in 1993 and played its first season in 1996. In December 2012, the Columbus Crew, one of the original 10 MLS teams, signed 19-year-old Wil Trapp, a product of the Crew’s youth academy (TheCrew.com, 2012). In an interview with soccer blog The Shin Guardian, Trapp grew up “about 15 minutes from Crew Stadium” and has been a Crew fan as long as he can remember. It seems that the authors have correctly hit upon MLS’s strategy, and it is not lost upon the bloggers at The Shin Guardian:

“Trapp is part of that first generation of MLS players like Steven Gerrard [Captain of English side Liverpool] or Danny Welbeck [young striker of Arsenal FC fame] who were born in a town, lived in that same town and now have the option of playing for their boyhood club.

The European cliché rooted firmly now in a sport that’s now firmly rooted.” (The Shin Guardian, 2012)

It seems that the Americanization of soccer that MLS is attempting to cultivate is paying off, but that does not mean all of its goals have been achieved. As previously alluded to, the second strategy that the USSF wanted to use to spread soccer in America was creating long-term success in international competitions. Several programs were enacted to this end. First was Generation adidas (then, sponsored by Nike, called Project-40), a program created by MLS and the USSF meant to encourage young players to enter into professional contracts with the MLS without graduating college, due in large part to the lack of development players generally receive in college previously noted in this piece. Young talent could enter professional contracts earlier, supported by MLS and the program’s sponsor in case their careers do not pan out. USMNT stars
such as Michael Bradley, Landon Donovan, Tim Howard, and Clint Dempsey are just some of the successes this program has helped create (scaryice, 2010).

Another venture created to stimulate international success was Project 2010, a 1998 report which was supposed to serve as “guideline on what the authors believed was needed for the USMNT to win the 2010 World Cup” (denz, 2010). This report, which was supposed to lay the plans for how the US could position itself to make a realistic challenge at the World Cup in 2010, cannot be considered a real success, as the USMNT exited the competition in the second round, losing to Ghana. It cannot be said, however, that the project was a complete failure. Many of the organizational suggestions were implemented, and the Team USA has continued to improve (USsoccerPlayers, 2010). In fact, 2013 saw the USMNT winning more games than ever before, and securing World Cup qualification for the seventh straight time (US Soccer, 2013).

Despite this growing success, however, soccer remains outside of the primary American sport space. As I have argued, achieving primacy requires articulating soccer in terms of American nationalism, especially through addressing the myth of American Exceptionalism. A certain difficulty becomes apparent: Without success against other nations on the world stage, it is difficult to articulate rhetoric using American Exceptionalism when Americans are clearly the inferior. An examination of the four Dos a Cero games and media coverage together with the relevant online fan discussions is important because it provides a window into how nationalist rhetoric is applied to soccer.

This project will now combine the focus on the importance of nationalist supporters concerning the USMNT and US Soccer. In soccer, so-called ‘home-field advantage’ is said to play a real role in the outcome of the game. Home-field advantage for the United States, however, has proven a historically difficult atmosphere to achieve. To make this point, the
authors of *Offside* detail the 1998 Gold Cup final against rivals Mexico. Although the match was played in Los Angeles, the over 90,000 fans present “were all Mexicans, making the crowd of Mexico’s ‘twelfth man’ man instead of one for the American team” (pp. 239-240). The authors detail how every dispossession the Americans faced were greeted with cheers, while set pieces were greeted with news for the Americans and the hail of debris onto the field toward the players. This sort of abuse was commonplace before the year 2000, when increasing American support would help propel Team USA forward.

Team USA would play its first true home game complete with home support in February of 2001. Chasing their fourth straight World Cup qualification, the USMNT would play conference rivals Mexico in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus was said to be chosen for a few reasons: first, Columbus had just constructed North America’s first and only soccer specific stadium two years prior. Second, Columbus was known for its passionate crowd of Midwesterners, who then-coach Bruce Arena correctly anticipated would come out in support of the United States as opposed to Mexico (Straus, 2013). Finally, Arena assumed that the cold Ohio winter would have adverse effects on their Central American rivals. Strauss quotes the Columbus Crew’s then-owner Lamar Hunt as saying that the Mexican nationals chose to warm up inside their locker rooms, rather than outside, due to the biting chill. The Americans went on to win that game 2-0, shocking their opponents in front of the first pro-USA crowd Team USA had ever experienced.

The 2-0 win in Columbus had lasting effects which could not be predicted. With World Cup Qualifiers occurring every four years, USSF has chosen Crew Stadium as the site for all three matches against Mexico, and each game resulted in a 2-0 win for the United States. The series of similar victories resulted in the creation of the *Dos a Cero* narrative; the 2013 meeting between the United States and Mexico in Columbus was met with an unprecedented amount of
media coverage, as well as a collaboration between USSF and the main Team USA supporter’s union known as the American Outlaws to break the record for the largest supporter’s section in US National Team history (Clare, 2013; Staus, 2013; Yoder, 2013).

These events point to the media and fandom as two key sites for the exploration of the intersection of American Exceptionalism and soccer. Doing so will shed light on how the world’s most popular game is used to construct, reify, and renew nationalist identities. In order to examine these sites, I will be focusing on the media representations and coverage of the games as well as the online fan communities. The investigation of the media coverage and representations will elucidate how these nationalist identities are communicated to American consumers through popular media networks, and the examination of fan communication online will reveal how American supporters manage and contribute to the narratives of American Exceptionalism.

The next chapter of this thesis will investigate the media representation and coverage of the Dos a Cero games, including the four games themselves. Following this chapter will be a section covering online fan communities. Finally, this work concludes with the implications of these acts of banal nationalism.
Chapter Three: Broadcast Analysis

In his 2012 article published in the founding issue of the journal *Communication & Sport*, Walter Gantz wrote “Sports is [sic] important because it has the potential to capture and captivate the attention of the world (e.g., the World Cup) and serve as a common bond, binding people together across gender, race, religious, and political divides” (p. 177). The author’s intent with the article is to praise the ability of sport to bring people together. This chapter serves to present an image of sport that appears somewhat contrary to Gantz’s, an image of sport’s ability to divide populations by analyzing the ESPN broadcasts of the four *Dos a Cero* games played in Columbus, Ohio during the World Cup Qualifying years of 2001, 2005, 2009, and 2013.

Sports broadcasting is an important area of study for several reasons. At the purely economic level, broadcasting rights provide both sporting and broadcasting organizations with millions of dollars. Disney’s ESPN alone was worth over $50 billion in 2014—compare that its sibling network, ABC, which is worth just over $3 billion, and it becomes apparent that sports broadcasting is a money-generating juggernaut (Badenhausen, 2014). While not exclusive to sport, broadcasting and advertising have become conflated and perhaps inseparable from one another. Broadcasting brought advertisement to sport: Basketball features media timeouts to make room for commercials, while soccer teams run about the pitch wearing corporate names and logos for spectators to absorb via television. Advertisements ring stadiums named after corporate entities; leagues, teams, and individual players sign their names and likenesses to brands; and commentators mention commercial (or, in the case of the 2009 *Dos a Cero* game’s, governmental) bodies to the television audience.

Commercialism is not the only reason that sports broadcasting should be studied. As noted by Whannel (2012):
“The Olympics and the football [soccer] World Cup have, as is well understood, become mega events—Television has made sport global. Any event that can command hundreds of millions of viewers, that can cause streets to empty and traffic to dwindle, that can link spectators in bars, cafés, and public squares around the world, has to be significant.” (p. 8)

To his point, sports broadcasts should be studied because they are global phenomena that affect the lives of individuals the world over. Though they have already been stated, the ratings of the 2010 World Cup are worth mentioning again: Around 26.29 billion cumulative views (Michaels, 2010). In accordance with 2010 population estimates from the Population Reference Bureau and the UN Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat (2010), the world population at the time was just under 7 billion at the time of the World Cup. That means that the World Cup was viewed almost four times per person in the world. Certainly those billions of people did not view the World Cup in person; indeed, the AP reported that the 64 matches of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa was attended by 3.18 million people, less than the 1994 and 1998 World Cups held in the United States and Germany, respectively. Billions of people are watching the World Cup (and the associated qualification matches) via broadcast television. This thesis supports Whannel’s assertion: The sheer volume of spectatorship warrants the study of sports broadcasting.

It is established, then, that sports broadcasting is important both in terms of money and in terms of people. Rather than research the economic side of sport, this thesis examines the socio-cultural aspect. One logical question to ask about the World Cup and the media surrounding it might be “What exactly is contained within these broadcasts?” Situated within the context of the
United States, the World Cup, and nationalism, this thesis seeks to give some answer to this broad question.

The present chapter examines how the myth of American Exceptionalism is constructed by American media broadcasts by specifically inspecting the broadcasts of the four *Dos a Cero* games, as well as the relevant pregame, halftime, and postgame media. The decision to focus not on the World Cup itself but a string of qualifying matches set in a specific setting (Crew Stadium in Columbus, Ohio) and between two specific competitors (the US and Mexico) for this chapter is one of narrative construction and volume. While there is likely a wealth of nationalistic rhetoric within the World Cup competition itself, the *Dos a Cero* myth is unique to the United States. Adding even more broadcast analyses to this chapter would not explore the myth in any relevant way; however, the following chapter will examine media surrounding the World Cup itself in order to gain a more global view on nationalism, American Exceptionalism, and soccer. Before the chapter is outlined, however, it is necessary to clarify what exactly is being explored in this chapter, as well as the methodology of the study.

As suggested by the title, this chapter will examine recordings of television broadcasts of the four World Cup Qualifiers (WCQs) played Columbus, Ohio’s Crew Stadium. The competitors were the United States Men’s National Team and the Mexican National Team. Depending on the media source, these two teams are respectively known as either “the USMNT” or “Team USA” (although the team’s official name is “the Stars and Stripes”) and the Mexican National Team or “El Tri.” This thesis uses the first two US names interchangeably, as well as “the United States” or “the US” and will usually refer to the Mexican National Team as “Mexico,” as the commentators and fans often do.
It must be mentioned that the author had somewhat limited access to television recordings, especially those of the 2005 and 2009 games. While recordings of all the games were available in some aspect, availability for each match differed. The first game was provided in its entirety through US Soccer’s channel on YouTube.com, complete with prematch, halftime, and postmatch commentary. Another copy of the ESPN2 broadcast was provided to the author via DVD recordings, though for this first game the YouTube version was superior in terms of content and quality. For the second Dos a Cero broadcast, shown on ESPN Classic, DVD recordings were available to show the first half, halftime, second half, and some postgame material, though no prematch footage was available. The 2009 game was available via recording with prematch, first half, halftime, second half, and postmatch material all included in one recording. Like the first Dos a Cero game, this match was shown on ESPN2. The 2013 Dos a Cero match, broadcast on ESPN, contains the most material. The prematch broadcast for the fourth game lasted just over 15 minutes, and the postmatch material clocked in at a little over 20 minutes. A recording of the halftime material, however, was not available to the author. With these descriptions, a more complete understanding of what this thesis means by phrases such as “media coverage” and “sports broadcast” is attained.

Schema Construction

This chapter uncovers several schemata which form the Dos a Cero myth. These schemata appeared inductively through a close reading of the texts rather than from a theoretical construction. As such, the framework of this chapter is the creation of the author. This analysis includes the commentary and match analysis available in each of the four broadcasts, broken into several subsections and draws conclusions about this aspect of the Dos a Cero myth. It will first examine the nationalistic rhetorical strategies used in the commentary before exploring the
broadcasts’ use of the *Dos a Cero* myth itself, including explicit ways in which the commentators and media coverage contributed to the creation and transmission of the myth. It also makes note of the changes in fan culture depicted by the broadcasts. Following the analysis subsections, the paper concludes with an explanation of how these two important aspects of the broadcasts combine to construct a narrative of mythic American Exceptionalism.

Before continuing on to this chapter’s analyses important to understand how the analyses were coded. Upon the viewing and annotation of the four matches, it became clear that the broadcasts were multifaceted, and that not every aspect should be dealt with in the same way. For example, much of the commentary during the games is spent highlighting plays and individual players, much of which has no relevance to the central thesis of nationalism in the myth construction and the ways in which Americans seek to recoup their supposed exceptionalism. Such commentary has been largely omitted from the study.

**Broadcast Analyses**

As noted above, the analyses are broken up into several subsections. First explored are narratives with a distinct nationalistic angle. The *Rivalry* narrative examines the nationalism at work in the broadcasts. Following that, *Praise for Team USA* looks at the commentary’s largely positive view of the home team. *Commentary on El Tri* addresses the more mixed view of the Mexican national team by analyzing what little praise the team receives and describing the struggles highlighted by the commentary teams. Comments which suggest that the Mexican team is cheating or playing in an unsporting manner received its own section named *Unsporting Mexicans* due to the divergent evolution this storyline takes after the first game. These nationalistic rhetorical narratives combine over time to form the *Dos a Cero* myth. The analysis then turns to an examination of the *Evolution of “Dos a Cero” in Commentary* in order to
provide a more nuanced look at the explicit mentions the myth receives from the network during the matches, including the building of the myth by the American fanbase in the broadcasts.

Rivalry

“You’ve got Mexico at the different end of the scale who’s struggling big time to get enough points, the US just trying to close this thing out against their biggest rival. These are what players play for, these are the atmospheres. The crowd’s tremendous. Everything is really set up to one more time, can the US rise to the occasion and beat their big rivals and qualify for a World Cup.” (Kasey Keller, match commentary, 2014)

Of all the games analyzed, the prematch material for the 2013 Dos a Cero match is meant to create in the audience a feeling of immense importance for the game by weaving notions of nationalism into the rivalry. It is telling that the country names are most commonly used to reference the teams, instead of the names of the teams themselves. The rivalry between the USMNT and El Tri is consistently framed as a rivalry between nations, not simply two teams. Here, the players act as representatives of their nations competing against other nations, instead of simply members of a unit playing against another team. As players come and go, the narrative and the nations persist, and the rivalry continues.

Sports rivalries are common, and soccer is no exception. Because the sport has been established in many places for such a long time, rivalries often run long and deep, and the specific causes vary. The crux of the issue, however, is always one of identity. Teams are constructed ideas, or “imagined communities,” and team identity can become conflated with different ideals. For example, the root of the rivalry between Glasgow clubs Celtic and Rangers is sectarian in nature. As Richard Wilson put it, “What is being asserted is two identities:
Rangers and Celtic. There are other boundaries: Protestant and Catholic / Unionist and Republican / Conservative and Socialist…” (2012, p. 87). Similarly, Sid Lowe’s study of the historic rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona unravels the Spanish/Castilian—Catalonian conflict that is revived with every el clásico match (see Lowe’s 2014 book for a detailed history on the conflicts surrounding these teams). When religion, nationalism, and political leanings become conflated with one’s identity, there can be violent and terrible results.

Crucially, it must be noted that any rivalry is a rhetorical construction. Regardless of the “reason” which makes the conflict special, all rivalries are created by rhetoric. The most pertinent example of nationalistic rhetoric in all four Dos a Cero games is that of the rivalry between the USMNT and El Tri. Nationalism lies at the heart of the rivalry between the USMNT and El Tri, and the matchup is described by sportscasters in every game as very physical. The commentators of the 2001 game refer to the game in the prematch as a “clásico.” The term is sometimes used to denote a match which will likely be hard-fought and intense; significantly, the fact that the rivalry between Real Madrid and Barcelona is in itself fraught with its own bloody political and nationalistic history would not be lost on the commentators making the reference. In the introduction to the game, the two casters immediately frame the matchup as “a bitter rivalry,” and “one of the bigger regional rivalries in world soccer.” These comments inform the audience that the previous meetings between the two teams have been filled with conflict.

In fact, all four games are preceded by a brief narrative, each of which mentions the rivalry. These prematch stories are significant because they are planned and written by the network prior to the match, with the goal of setting up the narratives of the night for the audience to follow. In addition to naming the game a clásico, the two commentators from the 2001 match set up the match as “the Cold war, soccer-style,” a reference to the frigid February temperatures
and the heated competition between the two teams which invokes the bitter Cold War period between the US and the USSR. For the first of these four matches, the rivalry is “tremendous,” “a bitter rivalry,” and “one of the bigger regional rivalries in world soccer.” Perhaps surprisingly, the commentators for the second Dos a Cero game do not spend much time in the prematch on the rivalry narrative, only describing Mexico as “a bitter rival” to the US team. Instead, the rivalry is briefly detailed by key members of the team in a short introduction video; however, the main focus of the video is the fact that a win for either side would qualify that team for the World Cup, rather than the rivalry between the two teams. By contrast, the 2009 prematch material paints the World Cup in South Africa as somewhat secondary to the match: “From far off Africa, rhythms call. But right now, there’s a rival to beat.” The imagery of the video is mostly players from both teams bowling one another over in harsh challenges and the US scoring impressive goals on Mexico. The commentators, one of whom gained his fame as a prominent US international player, immediately begin talking about the “passion” and “national pride” that comes with the meeting of the two nations during World Cup qualification. The connection between national identity and the game surfaces again. It is clear that this matchup is more than just a game; rather, nationalism takes the stage, and the players become national representatives.

The rivalry becomes further intertwined with nationalism in the prematch footage of the 2013 match. Instead of featuring players in this match’s introduction video, fans of both teams are depicted dressed in the colors of their teams and talking about the rivalry in nationalist terms. It begins with a fan of El Tri speaking Spanish (as all Mexican fans do throughout the video; none of them speak any English in the video), saying “The USA Mexico rivalry is in the heart of many people.” According to the US fans, the game means a lot. “It’s two countries and all the pride at stake.” “We have to defend our home turf.” A Mexican fan comments, “Just like the
USA went to play in [Estadio] Azteca [where El Tri play home games, and where the US recently recorded its first ever win in a friendly and first ever draw in a WCQ], we can go and play in Columbus.” This fan seems to be implying that that Mexico can affect a similar result at Crew Stadium. Another El Tri fan comments immediately afterward, “There’s no fear with going to Columbus.” At the end of the video, a US fan and a Mexican fan shake hands, wishing one another luck in their respective languages.

After the video, the analysts take over, remarking on the pro-USMNT fan tweets and inspirational remarks which US Soccer recorded and posted in the tunnel before the lineup. While commentator says that the idea in the abstract might sound “hokey,” it is actually rather moving. The camera pans over and zooms in on a number of these messages: “You guys make us proud to be Americans! We support you through thick and thin! Go USA!” “Greatness awaits the few who truly seek it. Make this country proud.” Another invokes American militarism: “Wear the uniform of your country with pride and serve with honor. And I thank you for your service.”

The co-commentator notes that neither the players nor the fans require inspiration for USA vs. Mexico: “These guys are already all jacked up, ready to go. And I’ll tell you what, this crowd in Columbus has set the bar over the years, but this could just absolutely blow the roof off.” As the teams make their way onto the field, the commentators mention the last message in the tunnel, a quote from the coach of the 1980 “Miracle on Ice” myth, the late Herb Brooks: “You were born to be a player. You’re meant to be here. This moment is yours.” The quote is a reminder of Team USA’s Cold War-era victory over the USSR’s dominant hockey team in the Lake Placid Olympic games. The historic win has since been mythologized as a kind of “David and Goliath” matchup, as suggested by the name “the Miracle on Ice.” The inspirational quote was part of Brooks’s prematch motivational talk. In this context, it was meant to inspire Team
USA in the tunnel right before the face-off against the team’s biggest rival, as it did the Team USA of 1980.

Taking their lead from the prematch material, the rivalry mentions continue into the match proper, with all four games featuring direct and/or indirect references to the antagonistic relationship between the two teams. The most common way in which the rivalry is indirectly referenced is through an excessive or unnecessary amount of fouling and hard challenges between the two teams. While hard challenges and tackles are certainly a part of competitive soccer no matter which teams are playing, commentators in all four games seem to present it as particularly severe between the US and Mexico. As such, references to excessive fouling have been coded as rivalry mentions because they tended to be mentioned together; that is, such harsh challenges occur precisely because of the intensity of the rivalry between the US and Mexico.

Although the “bitter rivalry” gets the spotlight in the prematch content of the 2001 match, most of the commentary is spent on topics outside the nationalistic narrative and thus outside the scope of this thesis. Still, it does feature indirectly in the form of references to the physicality of the event. Within the first thirty seconds of the 2001 game, a Mexican player challenges a US player harshly and is called for the foul. Remarking on the event, one of the commentators refreshes the topic: “There will be a lot of fouling tonight. Both of these teams will ask and give no quarter.” Later, the commentators mention again Mexican players “getting away” with injuring American players. One player in particular, Cobi Jones, is called a “veteran of wars with Mexico”—a telling quote that mixes American militaristic rhetoric into the narrative. Teams may play matches, but these matches are wars, fought not by mere teams, but by nations. In all, the rivalry is mentioned these three times in the first Dos a Cero matchup.
The 2005 match commentary spends much more time than its prematch material making reference to the physicality of the conflict and makes several direct references to the rivalry itself. In the match itself, the rivalry is mentioned six times. There are two references during the halftime analysis, as well several references in the postmatch interviews of the players and coach. The first mention comes during a free kick when American and Mexican players are shoving one another. The referee pauses the game to make them stop, the commentators remark that the referee “wants to have a handle on [the physicality] so nothing happens. He knows the history, the rivalry.” Later, after a series of fouls without the referee’s intervention, the commentators agree that “This is the one game that you probably shouldn’t let it [the fouling] go because it’s such a big rivalry they [the Mexican players] can get carried away.” During the halftime analysis, the analysts are unsurprised at the harsh fouling. “It’s expected. These are two big rivals, two teams who really don’t like each other, so when they [the Mexicans] get a chance to take a shot at them [the Americans], they’re gonna take a shot. All game long you’ve seen it. Ball gets hit, boom, a foul. Little late shots.” Late in the game with the US up by two goals, American DaMarcus Beasley takes a blatant, hard foul from Mexican player Duilio Davino. The commentators remark that the already high amount of fouling is likely to increase due to the goal deficit on the part of El Tri. Another harsh foul minutes before the final whistle is linked to “frustration” on the part of the Mexican team. After the game as the analysts take over, they comment on the victory as “always sweeter when you beat Mexico, and it’s always even better when you beat Mexico to reach the World Cup knowing that Mexico is still not in yet. So yeah, it’s definitely a little bit of that rivalry…” The players as well acknowledge the event as special in the postmatch material. Oguchi Onyewu called it “This game was a little bit of redemption, a
little bit of revenge.” Landon Donovan said there was “no better scenario than to beat them, beat them easily, and go to Germany.”

Four years later in 2009, the American-Mexican rivalry took a slightly different turn. The broadcast was billed by commentators and commercials alike as part of ESPN’s “Rivalry Week,” in which several rival college basketball teams would be playing one another. It seems that ESPN chose to lump the US-Mexico soccer rivalry into the “Rivalry Week.” With the spotlight fixed on the increased competition and physicality, the rivalry was again chalked up to the history between the two teams with the commentators also calling it an “aggressive dislike” for one another. The hard physical play was mentioned five times, with two of those times being references to Mexico’s propensity for late tackles, chipping at US players off the ball, and trying to injure and hamper American players. The game gets heated after Rafael Márquez, the Mexican captain, kicks American goalkeeper Tim Howard in the knee, earning himself a red card and expulsion from the match. A confrontation between the two teams ensues, and one of the commentators remarks “And now the rivalry picks up!” Perhaps surprisingly, this is the final time the rivalry is mentioned either directly or indirectly, with the only exception being a mention to viewers that they can learn more about “this great rivalry” on the ESPN360.com website. In the postmatch analysis, the competition is mentioned once: “Then in the 67th minute, this great rivalry on Rivalry Week comes to a head,” as Márquez earns his red card. This is a reference to the increased physicality of the game, attributed by the analyst to the historic rivalry between the teams.

It might come as a surprise that out of all four Dos a Cero matches, the 2013 game has the least to say about the rivalry. Without a doubt, the analysts and commentators are more focused on the teams and the Dos a Cero myth than the rivalry itself. It is mentioned directly
only once in the prematch analysis, once directly and once indirectly in the first half, once going into halftime, and only once again afterward. The second half is devoid of rivalry references, and only Tim Howard references the rivalry in the postmatch, saying “As a US player, you’re judged by how you do against Mexico.” It may seem that the rhetorical attention of the broadcast has been shifted from the US-Mexican rivalry to the Dos a Cero myth, but this is not exactly the case. The fourth match can abandon talking so explicitly about the rivalry because the Dos a Cero narrative cannot exist without USA vs. Mexico; the rhetoric surrounding the rivalry has evolved, becoming a constituent element of the rhetorical strategy that is the Dos a Cero myth.

Praise for Team USA

While the commentators before 2013 spend a lot of time rhetorically building the rivalry between the US and Mexico, it is certainly not the only type of nationalist rhetoric contained in the broadcasts. This section details the commentary about the USMNT, largely in the form of praise given to the American team by the analysts and commentators. Included in this subsection are comments whereby the analysts and commentators detail improvement by the American squad, or detail team bonding and unity, as these are good qualities in team sports like soccer. The final paragraph in this section details the small bits of criticism lobbied at the Americans throughout the broadcasts.

The first match of the four begins with a comment about the Americans having “bonded into a strong unit” in the matches leading to the 2001 game. Once American Josh Wolff scores, the US players are labeled as “brilliant.” The commentators are surprised by the Americans’ strong showing, saying a bit later in the match: “The US bringing the attack at Mexico. This is exactly the opposite way we thought this game would go.” Right before the end of the 90 minutes, the commentators again praise the US’s improvement, saying, “The United States has
come a long way in a short amount of time, but beyond any other quality, it has shown a massive amount of grit.” In the postgame analysis, it is said that “A scrappy game in many respects, but the US overcame adversity … and won on home soil…” to beat Mexico. In this game, the commentators are surprised by the American victory, chalking up the win to the Americans’ ability to “overcome adversity” with their “brilliant” and “scrappy” style of play and “massive amount of grit.” These compliments build the Americans into an underdog team which succeeded due to determination and hard work in the face of hardship. Statements in this fashion are clear references to the mythic American Dream, the idea that individual success is the direct product of individual effort.

Coverage of the 2005 Dos a Cero match began quite similarly to the 2001 game, beginning with the analysts mentioning that the US competes “as one team, one nation”, connecting the ideas of sport and nationhood into one being. Unlike the commentators from the first match, they are optimistic about the US’s chances against Mexico. In the first half, it is mentioned that the US has been in control of the rivalry since 1999, and they credit the Americans’ success to the creation and growth of Major League Soccer, America’s top-flight professional league. Later, they remark that Mexico have not won on US soil since 1999.

DaMarcus Beasley is called an “MLS success story,” as he returns to play following a harsh challenge. In the postmatch coverage, the analysts return to the topic of MLS once more, observing that more soccer-specific stadiums like Crew Stadium are being constructed for MLS teams around the nation, and they say that this is “how soccer will succeed in the US.” These references to MLS take as gospel the notion that more soccer being played in the US will certainly lead to an improved national team, which the next chapter will show is a popular line of thought for Americans, especially fans.
The third *Dos a Cero* match also begins with praise for the Stars and Stripes, referencing how the team has still not lost to Mexico since the turn of the millennium. As play began, the commentators mentioned how El Tri have not beaten the US in their last 10 meetings, though the Mexicans sounded confident about their chances. After the win, analyst and former USMNT player Alexi Lalas notes that “if you’re a US soccer fan, you should be proud.” The Americans were described as “dominant” during the halftime and postmatch analysis, while it was commented that Mexico hadn’t played poorly, the Americans had just played better. In the postmatch content, Lalas compared the American team of the day to previous teams: “You’re seeing an American team here do something that previous American teams haven’t been able to do. That is, come out, be professional, have a maturity, manage the game, be patient. Great result … this is a great way for the US to start out.” As with the previous matchups, Lalas builds a narrative of American improvement over squads in the past, praising their development over their predecessors.

The prematch analysts of the most recent *Dos a Cero* game took somewhat longer to mention the success of the Americans versus their Mexican rivals than did their predecessors, but it was mentioned nonetheless. They compared the recent success of the Americans in WCQs to the misfortunes of El Tri as well as how Jurgen Klinsmann, manager of the US team, has never lost to Mexico as a player or manager. During the match, England commentator Ian Darke mentions how well the US plays on US soil, but noted that “the World Cup will not be played on US soil.” It is mentioned in the second half that only Jamaica have ever scored against the US at Crew Stadium, prompting Darke to say “It is a bit of a fortress,” a common soccer metaphor for a venue at which a side is rarely defeated. In the 63rd minute of the game, Icelandic-American Aron Jóhannsson is mentioned, having just swapped nationalities from Iceland to America in
order to play for the Stars and Stripes, implying the Americans’ soccer superiority as the reason for the change. These early comments play up the idea that the US team will not be beaten; its coach has a great record against their rivals, and with young players like Jóhannsson beginning to switch their allegiances to the States, it becomes less likely that the USMNT will be beaten at their “fortress.”

As the game closes, the growth of American soccer is cited as the reason for the likelihood of a 7th straight World Cup qualification to be clinched with the win. After the conclusion of the match, it is mentioned that early qualification “seemed very distant back in February,” and Landon Donovan mentions that “… when I started 15 years ago you would never have a game like this, so I’m proud to be a part of this growth.” With these statements, Donovan continues the narrative of the American team’s improvement over time, a storyline which comes into question during the postmatch analysis.

In discussing the strengths of the team during the postmatch coverage, sports analyst Bob Ley sits with two famous US internationals-turned-analysts, Alexi Lalas and Kasey Keller. When Ley brings up how US coach Jurgen Klinsmann (a German World Cup winner) questioned the tactical and stylistic abilities of the US team, the latter two cut him off. Lalas describes how the team’s reliance on defensive play, counterattacking, and set pieces—or, as Ley names it, “grit, heart, and hustle,”—“can still be beautiful.” Lalas thought the team showed with their performance that they understood what it means “to be an American player and to go out as an American national team and play.” Keller concurs, stressing that the team may have its weaknesses (though, notably, he does not name them), it must continue to focus on its strengths—“heart … physical ability, there’s an opportunity on set pieces, counterattack… Now, do you want to control the game at times? Of course. But not… Why would you throw away
your strengths?” The analysts then cut to goal highlights, avoiding more discussion of potential weaknesses or areas of improvement for Team USA.

The defensiveness of the former national team players when the topic of weaknesses arises brings to light a common trend of discussion about the American team which echoes deeply with rhetoric related to the mythic American Dream. As noted at the beginning of the section, the American national team was rarely scrutinized during the broadcasts, and the above discussion highlights this well. The team’s description of a defensive team who relies on set pieces and counterattacking play to score describes a team which cannot create chances from organized, attacking play. Teams described as such lack the tactical awareness and technical ability to control the flow of a match and score from proper team play. For Lalas and Keller, though, these less positive aspects of play are not qualities the US needs to abandon; in fact, the analysts turn the Americans’ defensive, less skill-based style of play into a positive force. They are even integral aspects to being an American player, according to Lalas. They seem to imply that technical skill and strategic play are not necessary for the American team to win. The implication is that the Americans lack raw ability, but they make up for it in what Ley calls “grit, heart, and hustle.” Why should we change how we play, the former players seem to think, when we work so hard? They seem to think that hardworking, determined mentality will eventually be rewarded, as it should be in accordance with the American Dream.

Commentary for the other Dos a Cero matches also lacked much criticism for the American team. The commentators for the 2001 game were very uncritical of either team, but especially the US. In the entire broadcast, the two commentators only criticize a US player one time, and even then it is light. They do not criticize the team as a unit at all during the broadcast. This lack of reproach for the USMNT continues into the second and third Dos a Cero matches,
in which the commentators and analysts do not criticize the Americans even once during the coverage. The most recent of the four matches does feature some criticism, but this criticism is attributed to individual players instead of the team as a whole. Clint Dempsey was somewhat chastised by the commentators for never having scored against Mexico and, later, was judged to have gone to ground too easily in hopes of a free kick in a dangerous area of the pitch, which is the only hint the commentators ever give that the Americans might sometimes embellish fouls against them. This pro-American bias shows a clear hesitance to discuss any negatives of the US team, which is especially evident in the 2013 match.

*Commentary on El Tri*

Unlike their American counterparts, the Mexican nationals were subject to a variety of praises and criticisms throughout the four broadcasts and the accompanying media content. This section will identify times when the ESPN analysts used nationalistic rhetoric to color the commentary and analysis in relation to the Mexican national team. It looks at both praise and critiques, while the following section analyzes commentary which specifically suggest that the Mexican team or its players cheat or play unfairly.

Mirroring the low amount of criticism the Americans received, El Tri do not receive much praise from the commentators and analysts, especially in the latter broadcasts. The contrasted commentary is worth noting: According to the broadcasters, the Mexicans have individual skill and flair, and they should be the better side. They also attempt to game the system by playing offside, exaggerating contact, and harming the Americans unnecessarily. Despite all this, the USMNT wins. They play fair, and they play with a shared team drive and determination to win. The 2001 commentators conclude that shared resolve and “heart” is how the American David first defeats the Mexican Goliath, and by the fourth match, the tables have
turned. With the advent of the *Dos a Cero* myth, the Americans assume control of the matchup, and the Mexicans come to the American “fortress” in Columbus already on the back foot.

The Mexican team gains the most praise in the first broadcast. They are called a “regional dynasty” in the prematch coverage, and it is mentioned in the first half that the Mexicans have been the superior team in previous meetings when World Cup qualification is on the line. As the match unfolds, the commentators are clearly surprised that the Mexicans are losing the match, which directly implies that they are the better team. Finally, it is mentioned in the postmatch coverage how difficult it is to beat Mexico during World Cup qualification, as they had at the time only 10 defeats in more than 90 games played.

During the broadcast of the 2005 match, there was no commentary or analysis coded as praise for El Tri in nationalistic terms. The commentators and analysts did not refer to the team positively in terms the author coded as nationalistic rhetoric. On the other hand, the 2009 *Dos a Cero* broadcast did feature some praise for the Mexican national team using nationalistic terms. The broadcasters mused at the beginning of play that perhaps Mexico would finally upset the US in Columbus, and said later in the half that such a thing was inevitable, given enough time. Later the commentators make it clear that Mexico’s inclusion in the World Cup is a foregone conclusion; Mexico’s qualification was a matter of when, not if. The only nationalistic praise for El Tri in the 2013 match comes from American goalkeeper Tim Howard, who calls Mexico a good team. Any other praise given during the broadcast is used for individual players on the Mexican squad.

In following with the organization of previous subsections, this section details the criticism lobbied at El Tri by broadcast commentators and analysts using nationalistic rhetoric.
As with previous sections, comments about individuals and those which do not use nationalistic rhetoric are outside the scope of this project and have been excluded.

The first *Dos a Cero* match contains little criticism of Mexicans as a team. Early in the game, the sideline reporter makes briefly details some of the steps the Mexican team has taken to deal with the frigid February temperatures in Columbus (one of the main reasons the venue was chosen for the match in the first place): They did not come out onto the pitch to warm up, they had taken vitamin supplements, and the team underwent mental visualization sessions to “focus out the cold.” The reporter added, “You don’t have to be Cleo the late-night psychic to realize the cold has already gotten to their heads.” Besides this short report, the only other real criticism of El Tri is a brief mention in the first half that the manager’s job might be in jeopardy. Curiously, there is no criticism of El Tri when a mass confrontation occurs due to a swat to the face of an American player off the ball, which could have resulted in a yellow or red card according to the rules of the game concerning violent conduct had the attack been noticed by the referee or the assistants. Instead of criticism, a mention of the rivalry’s physicality detailed by a previous subsection, or even an insinuation that the Mexican players behave in an unsporting manner, the event is brushed aside by the commentary team, and the Mexican captain is actually praised individually for the “classiness” he displayed in attempting to calm the situation down. In all, the commentators of the 2001 game are much more lenient on El Tri in terms of nationalistic rhetorical criticism.

It was mentioned in an earlier subsection that the commentators of the 2001 *Dos a Cero* match were surprised that the Americans were in control of the game, instead of the other way around. From the commentary in the match four years later, it is clear that the opposite is now true. In both halves, it is stated that “Mexico would be happy with a tie.” As previously
mentioned, this match commentary makes reference to Mexico failing to win in the States since 1999. Additionally, the commentators gave El Tri backhanded praise, saying that the Mexicans have skill but were “not showing up to play.” By the end of the match with defeat at hand, they remark that the Mexican manager’s position is likely now in danger, even if the team does successfully reach World Cup qualification. The postmatch analysis focuses on praising Team USA rather than further criticism of the Mexican nationals.

The 2009 commentary team follows the upward trend of criticism toward El Tri. Within the first five minutes of the match, the commentators criticize Mexico for not scoring on a good chance. Inside the 15 minute mark, Mexico are criticized four more times: There is a mention of this group of Mexican internationals having difficulty finding playing time for their clubs, the pressure on the team’s Swedish manager is mentioned on two separate occasions, and there is a comment about Mexico’s 10-game winless streak against the Stars and Stripes. During halftime, the Mexican player’s chance at goal is criticized again, and when play resumes, his failure is mentioned once more. Later in the second half, the pressure to win for El Tri’s manager is brought to the fore once again. “You can’t have an ‘okay’ Mexican national side. Their national pride is too strong. You can’t be 4-4-1 at this stage.” After US international Michael Bradley scores a late goal in stoppage time, the commentators remark that the forthcoming win was a great way to start this round of qualification “against the other best team in this CONCACAF region, and maybe not so much anymore. Mexico under a lot of pressure.” During the postmatch analysis, criticism lobbied at the Mexican team is at the forefront of the commentary, with much of the time spent focusing on what the team should have done. Three players—Dos Santos, who missed the early chance; Márquez, the Mexican captain who earned a red card during the match; and Sanchez, the goalkeeper who let in the late ball from Bradley, are grilled by the analysts, and
the manager’s potentially volatile position is brought up twice. For the first time in these Dos a Cero matches, criticism of El Tri takes a central position in the commentary and analysis.

In the final Dos a Cero match, Mexican “fragility” again gains a spotlight in the commentary and analysis. The difficulties Mexico have faced are mentioned in opposition to the successes of the USMNT, and Mexico are called “fragile” before the game is five minutes old. Before the 10 minute mark, Ian Darke remarks that “Mexico are in something of a pit of despair.” With the US playing somewhat poorly, Alejandro Moreno, the only Latin American commentator—and the one who spends the most time talking about Mexico—says that Mexico need to score before the US improve in the game. Javier Hernandez receives a backhanded compliment for being a valuable asset for the Mexican squad while failing to ever score against the States. Former US international Taylor Twellman remarks that if the scoreline stays at 0-0, the Mexican team—though not the Americans, apparently—are in trouble. Before the half, Mexico’s ongoing struggles in the qualification rounds for the World Cup and in this game in particular receive two more expositions. At the restart, it is mentioned that Mexico’s football industry would lose upwards of half a billion dollars should Mexico not qualify for the World Cup, which Darke describes as “unthinkable.”

When the Americans first score, Darke remarks that “the crisis for Mexico deepens.” “Mexico’s fragile confidence” is criticized, and their play is deemed “too predictable, too nonchalant.” Minutes later, the team’s play receives more criticism, and moments later are called “cornered tigers who need to show some teeth.” The need for Mexico to press the attack against the States is mentioned a few minutes later, before a sideline announcer in the “Mexican camp”—another Latino man—criticizes the Mexican team for letting down their “legions of fans” who are shocked at their poor performances. Again, only a few minutes go by before Darke
again criticizes El Tri, noting that they are “really looking down the barrel.” Within another five minutes, Mexico’s qualification woes are brought up again: It is remarked that they have only scored four goals in the run up to the World Cup thus far, which Darke describes as “a massive problem.” After letting in another goal, Darke asks Moreno if Mexico can hope to qualify, “playing like this?” Dark says that the manager can’t be fully blamed for the poor play. “You have to ask questions of the players.” Minutes later, the players are blamed for buckling under the pressure and breaking down. Darke mentions to Moreno, “How heartbreaking is this for the Mexican fans? But they won’t get any sympathy from anyone here.” Moreno answers, “Heartbreaking but not surprising.” At the end of the match, right before the final whistle, US captain Clint Dempsey is brought down in the penalty area and a penalty kick is awarded. Darke comments on the situation, “And this has turned into an absolute nightmare.”

In the postmatch analysts Alexi Lalas and Kasey Keller took opposite positions on Mexico’s implosion, both acknowledging the crisis for El Tri. Said Lalas, “I take no glee in the demise of El Tri and what Mexico has been through because I ultimately feel that a WC is better with Mexico in it. However, you gotta earn it, you gotta be able to get there, and this has been an absolute disaster from start to finish.” Keller responded with a chuckle: “I have a smile, I have a great feeling inside with the struggles of Mexico right now. I’m enjoying every minute of it. … It’s fun once again to see the US here in Columbus possibly book their ticket to a World Cup again against Mexico.” Returning to the commentators, Twellman remarks on the possibility of further pressure on El Tri pending an unfavorable result in an ongoing match involving Panama and Honduras, which was still in play at the time. Moreno comments, “There was only one team on the field in the second half, and you have to ask questions of Mexico. Character, fight, heart. None of that was there here in the second half in Mexico, in a game they needed. Not a game
they wanted. They needed to get points here, and they were not able to show that fight. The final criticism of the broadcast goes to Darke, who said “I just thought the lights were off and there was nobody home in the second half, they just looked dead in the head. Frankly, it was a terrible performance by Mexico, bearing in mind the situation.”

The above comments about El Tri’s supposed lack of determined play contrast directly with the praise the Americans received. A picture of American Exceptionalism is painted: While the American team may lack the skill and technique that the Mexicans have, that gap is overcome by the “grit, heart, and hustle” shown by the Stars and Stripes. Examining the combined praise of the USMNT against the criticism lobbied at the Mexican internationals, it can be seen that mythic American Exceptionalism is upheld. The Americans succeed throughout the years because of their determination and their will to win, even though El Tri should be the better team. By contrast, the Mexicans are a team with fragile willpower who lack the drive of the American players. Unlike the USMNT, who make their countrymen proud through victory, El Tri lets down their fans and their nation. The unified spirit of the American team continually proves too much for the individually-gifted Mexicans to deal with. The story of the American Dream is realized, four times over.

Unsporting Mexicans

The final subsection of National Narratives details comments which suggest that the players of the Mexican national team are attempting to cheat or play in an unsporting manner. These comments are almost never direct criticisms of the Mexican team; rather, they are treated as “facts of life” or “just part of the game” when playing against Mexico. If the commentators are to be believed, it seems almost taken for granted that El Tri will try to cheat or play dirty, especially against the US. It will be shown that these sorts of comments, which diminish over the course of
the four matches, is a different kind of rhetorical strategy which is morphed by the commentary teams to serve mythic American Exceptionalism. As with the other subsections, this one is divided chronologically by game.

In the first Dos a Cero match, there are a total of six comments coded into this category. Three come within the first ten minutes: First there, is a reference to Mexican players attempting to sneak offside and win the ball without getting called for their illegal positioning. A moment later, the Mexican goalkeeper is said to be “showing off” by going down to save the ball. Another minute goes by before yet another Mexican international is called offside, with the commentators implying that they will cheat by playing offside and hoping the referee at the sideline does not catch them. Later in the half, the commentary team mentions how El Tri is “getting away with” injuring American players. Late into the second half, there is a replay shown where a Mexican player clearly overacts in the penalty area, hoping for a foul and a penalty kick. The commentators are not amused. “On the last corner kick, Hernandez in between a couple of defenders. The minute he feels a white sleeve even brush up against him, he goes falling to the turf. Trying to buy a call, and sometimes he’s good enough to do it.” After the brawl almost breaks out in the 89th minute, the commentators suggest that El Tri are hoping to push the Americans into getting carded for violent conduct:

Many tempers out of control here … Obvious frustrations on the part of the Mexicans, but they need to show better sportsmanship, frankly. But you know what? They’re also trying to bait the United States. They know this is a 10 game series, and the fact is, if they can get a couple yellow cards racked up on the US side of things, maybe later on down the road the United States will be missing some players. So it’s all part of the gamesmanship.
Such, it seems, is how El Tri were viewed in 2001. The Mexicans play a dirty game, the commentators profess, and the team is good at it. Whether it’s playing offside for an additional leg up, embellishing contact for cards and penalty kicks, or attempting to injure Americans both on and off the ball (especially if the referee isn’t looking), the Mexicans will do anything to gain an additional edge over their American opponents. They don’t even stop when the match is surely lost: just before the final whistle, the commentators note that the Mexicans players still attempt to “bait the United States [players]” into receiving yellow cards for unnecessary fouls, which could accumulate down the road in the qualifiers and result in American suspensions. Clearly this commentary team sees the Mexicans’ unsportsmanlike play as a calculated, systematic effort meant to give them the upper hand over time.

The 2005 commentators also took issue with El Tri’s apparent penchant for fouls off the ball. As mentioned, the commentators lament the additional physical aspect of the rivalry, saying that Mexico take “cheap shots” at the Americans, and they openly accuse referees of letting such incidents slide when performed against the US, “more so than any other team in the region.” After the second half restart, the commentary team mentions how a Mexican player “sells” a foul to the referee. Finally, when DaMarcus Beasley is fouled hard, it is mentioned that such challenges “could get worse with the scoreline,” implying again that Mexican players will continue to attempt to injure American players in an attempt to swing the match back into their favor. Again, there is no mention that Americans attempt to do the same.

The 2009 Dos a Cero commentary team continues the trend of accusing the Mexican team of being unsporting. In the middle of the first half, the commentators accuse the Mexican goalkeeper of “cheating” by putting the ball more forward than it should be for a free kick. The sideline reporter comments on a voodoo doll of a US player, apparently meant to “dissuade the
Americans from playing well.” After the red card to Márquez, the commentators note that the Mexican captain “always shows his dislike for the US,” suggesting again that the Mexican players are fine with injuring their US counterparts if it gives them the advantage.

There is only one point in the 2013 game at which a player on El Tri is accused of playing unfairly, and it is quickly passed by. Dos Santos “goes to ground very easily,” but he is not given the usual yellow card for simulation, which is the official FIFA term for a player “flopping” in an attempt to get the referee to award a penalty kick. Rather than chide Dos Santos for his simulation or insinuating that El Tri sometimes attempt to simulate fouls, the commentators seem more aggravated at the referee’s decision not to book Dos Santos. This is the only time that the commentators suggest that the Mexican internationals might attempt to play unfairly or cheat.

There are two main aspects of the “unsportsmanlike manner” narrative which reveal its nationalistic roots. Firstly, there is only ever one mention which comes close to a suggestion that the Americans might sometimes embellish fouls for an advantage or play more roughly than allowed for in the laws of the game. This clearly suggests a nationalistic bent; surely it cannot be that only the “Other” team embellishes. The second aspect may be more subtle. It is noticeable that the commentators mention or imply that the Mexican players cheat much less frequently after the first game. This is especially noticeable in the 2013 match, during which there is very little use of this narrative at all. This should not be viewed as an implication that El Tri simply straightened up its act after the 2001 game; the flagrant aggression from Rafael Márquez in the third match is evidence enough of this.

The use of this “Mexican cheaters” rhetorical strategy is an extension of American Exceptionalism. The moral of this story is that Americans triumph, even when the other team
fails to follow the rules. The Stars and Stripes do not need to embellish fouls, play offside, or “get chippy” with their opponents—the Americans will win because of their natural superiority. It is simply their way.

Why then the dramatic difference in the use of this strategy in the first match? The answer comes from the commentators themselves, who explain throughout the match that Mexico are the dominant power in the region. At this stage, the USMNT should be outclassed by its rivals, hence one commentators saying things like, “The US bringing the attack at Mexico. This is exactly the opposite way we thought this game would go.” They mentioned how “the US overcame adversity” to beat Mexico. This narrative is used here as a face-saving technique; not only is El Tri a superior team, they do not play fair, either. How is the US supposed to beat the dominant power in the region if their opponents don’t even play by the rules? With “a massive amount of grit,” according to the commentators. They are Americans, after all.

This section has explained the nationalistic rhetorical strategies at work in the four Dos a Cero broadcasts. The next segment of this work examines the explicit mentions of Dos a Cero in the broadcasts and draws conclusions on the myth-making at work.

*Evolution of “Dos a Cero” in Commentary*

Media personalities and the networks for which they work have a distinct motive for directly participating in the construction and proliferation of sports narratives. Put simply, storylines sell. This agenda underscores how necessary it is to inspect media figures’ direct involvement with the Dos a Cero myth. The last section examined the nationalistic narratives which helped contribute to the myth, but those references are indirect. The present section clarifies the role of the media and the match-day fans in the myth-building process.
The earlier sections of this chapter outlined how Jack Edwards and Ty Keough, the commentators for the 2001 match, focused on the surprise win by the Stars and Stripes. In the second match commentary, Marcelo Balboa and JP Dellacamera focus much more on their jobs as analysts than myth-building, though they do mention that Mexico have not won on US soil since 1999. These two matches lack straightforward references to the *Dos a Cero* myth, which does not yet exist. Instead, the first allusions to a developing storyline at Crew Stadium begin in the postmatch content of the 2009 match when interviewer Pedro Gomez mentions the three 2-0 results to US international Michael Bradley. Before this period, no media figure had done so.

“*Dos a Cero*” itself does not come into the commentators’ vocabulary until 2013, when Ian Darke and company cannot mention the myth enough. The 2013 match coverage bears a stark difference to the previous games where the *Dos a Cero* myth is concerned. The prematch material makes explicit mention of the myth right at the beginning, and again just before the three match commentators are introduced. As the coverage waits for the match to begin, the commentators remark upon the storyline once more. The myth resurfaces again during the first half, and at halftime it is pointed out that Mexico have played almost 300 minutes against the US without scoring. *Dos a Cero* is not mentioned again until Landon Donovan’s far post tap-in prompts Ian Darke to exclaim, “Donovan makes it 2, it’s that scoreline again! Columbus 2-nil USA over Mexico! Brazil beckons! *Dos a Cero* yet again! Those glum Mexican faces tell a story, but a party has started here in Columbus again.” A few minutes later, Darke remarks on how the fans are chanting “*Dos a Cero*”.

The explicit mentions in the prematch and match commentary show a stark difference to the others, but the narrative really takes over once the final whistle is blown. When the match is called to an end, Darke cries, “Lightning doesn’t strike twice in Columbus, Ohio, it’s struck four
times! It’s *Dos a Cero* again! Mexico are beaten, and the USA now are as good as on that plane to the World Cup Finals!” Analyst calls Dempsey’s penalty miss “poetic” and says it “keep[s] the script intact for the fourth *Dos a Cero* qualifier.” These explicit references reify the *Dos a Cero* myth as the culmination of a process by which the Americans have finally achieved some measure of international glory. Finally, the US has prevailed and can take its rightful place as the regional superpower, adding soccer to its list of top places. With the *Dos a Cero* myth, American Exceptionalism is realized in soccer.

As stated at the beginning of this section, these explicit storyline remarks are necessary to examine because the media has a direct stake in the construction of this myth. ESPN has been given a unique, coincidental gift by the USMNT and El Tri. These 2-0 victories form an easy connection the network can market to American fans, and the increased interest in soccer means more broadcast money. The making of this myth is imperative for the network, especially when the wisdom of Markovits and Hellerman in *Offside* (2001) is remembered: The success of the USMNT is directly related to the growth of soccer in the US, with nationalism as the vehicle for the sport’s growth. A storyline that paints the American players as overcoming a superior foe through shared resolve is an easy sell for Americans who want to feel connected to an American miracle in the making. As such, the *Dos a Cero* myth embodies all the nationalism and American Exceptionalism analyzed in this chapter.

The first aspect, the rivalry, is the cornerstone around which the *Dos a Cero* myth is built. It tells the story of an American team uniting against its historic, “bitter” nemesis. Mexico was the dominant regional power in the past, but the US has repeatedly overcome them through hard work and determination, despite lacking the individual ability and skill that the Mexican players
are said to have. Both teams have their nations counting on them, but El Tri lacks the character their American counterparts have. These victories are sweet for the American “war veterans.”

The praise heaped onto the Americans is another important component. The players are made to be a team of workhorses, striving for victory as a unit and showing grit and determination all the way up until the final whistle. They do not let their resolve wane, nor do they let the weight of the rivalry overcome them. Even when the Mexican team presses hard, they stay focused and look to win. As the next chapter on fan rhetoric will show, this strategy is a favorite among soccer fans the world over, who grow to enjoy watching the Americans’ dogged play, even if the team loses in the end. Rhetoric in this vein confirms American Exceptionalism, as it is the perseverance shown by the US which makes up for their shortcomings and puts the team on par with the greats of the world.

The especially negative commentary about the El Tri makes up the final two parts of the Dos a Cero myth. For all their skill, the Mexican players cannot come together to beat (or even tie) the resolute Americans. They show a weakness of character not found in the US players, trying to draw fouls from light contact and attempting to injure the Americans when the referee turns his back. And when the pressure is on, the Mexicans crack; by the fourth game, remarks about the team’s fragility are commonplace. The Mexicans usually start strong, but every minute without a goal adds more stress, and every American shot is a nail in the coffin of El Tri’s chances to flip the script on the Americans. Eventually the ball hits the back of the net, and the brittle Mexican willpower breaks down.

The Dos a Cero myth is the sum of these four rhetorical strategies. The continuing storyline of a weaker team banding together to beat a greater power at their own game is appealing, especially when that power is a historic rival who plays dirty even though they are the
superior side. What is perhaps ignored is the healthy amount of chance needed to make this myth work. Beating a better team four times is one thing, but beating them with an identical scoreline four times requires some serendipity. After all, the myth could not exist if the USMNT was always supposed to win; there is nothing exceptional about beating a lesser opponent. There is not room in the myth for luck, though. The American Dream is supposed to be achieved through the hard work of exceptional Americans, not by a lucky bounce of a ball or a poor split-second decision by an opposition goalkeeper. No, for this myth to have power, it must be due to the united determination of the American team.

It would not be unreasonable to think that the cure for this idealized thinking would be defeat; when finally the Americans are beaten, mythic American Exceptionalism is denied and reason can once again come to the fore. The next chapter shows, however, that this may not be the case. It analyzes online fan responses during the latest Dos a Cero match and the 2014 FIFA World Cup Finals in Brazil. These fans employ rhetorical strategies similar to those analyzed in this chapter, creating an overall narrative of the US team growing to dominate its region, performing well during the World Cup despite being an underdog, and always looking toward an imagined future where victory is assured.
Chapter Four: Internet Fan Community Analysis

This thesis posits that fan communities are an important site for study because of fans’ crucial role in the sport-media complex (a term coined by Jhally, 1984). In this seminal work, Jhally states that the sports/media world places audiences in the role of materialist consumers. Commercialized sport cannot be sustained without fans engaging with the media aspect of sport, providing the organization with advertising revenue. Of course, these advertisers are counting on the fans to make the investment worthwhile by also purchasing what is being sold, be that something sport related (a pair of cleats, for example) or the product sold by a sponsor, such as Coca Cola. As has been frequently professed throughout this thesis, this translates to, at the very least, a multibillion dollar sports/media industry, which is entirely attached to the consumers which devote their time and money to sport—i.e., the fans. They are the foundation upon which sport is built; without their financial support, the industry cannot survive. Therefore it is integral to analyze not just the broadcasts being consumed (as the previous chapter did), but also the responses of the people upon which the sports/media industry is dependent.

How these fans communicate about nationalism is also a vital consideration in relation to this chapter. Monetary support is one thing, but that alone cannot not explain the almost spiritual aspect of fandom. The fans may not always be the creators of narratives and storylines, but they are certainly always integral in their conception and reproduction. Fans are the primary audience for the messages analyzed by the previous chapter and it is therefore imperative to investigate directly how they themselves communicate and make use of nationalistic rhetoric.

On Reddit

The selection of text was an important consideration for this chapter. In the modern world of readily accessible Internet access, there is no shortage of user-generated information on almost
any sport-related topic. This chapter’s study analyzes threads from reddit.com, a popular content aggregator both globally and in the US. Far from a simple content aggregator, reddit is also a powerful social networking tool. It is divided into thousands of sections known as “subreddits” to which users subscribe themselves. Users refer to individual subreddits as they appear in the address bar of a browser, and they appear in this thesis as such (e.g., /r/Gunners is a subreddit for fans of English soccer club Arsenal FC).

Because reddit is entirely user generated, wholly anonymous, and has no editors, anyone can create a subreddit. Thus, subreddits can be as general or specific as their creator desires: the most popular subreddits tend to be general, such as /r/funny, the most popular subreddit at almost 6.5 million users subscribed as of July 2014. Because the site has no editors, users control which content gets popular and which content is ignored. To do this, users can “upvote” or “downvote” content, which the site’s content formula collects. This voting system prioritizes popular content while less popular is de-prioritized, meaning that more popular content gets seen more often while less popular content may get relegated to pages deeper in the subreddit. The algorithm also weights newer content so that it has a chance to be viewed and voted on, instead of being instantly relegated to nothingness while stale content rules as the top links. The site also includes a comments link for every submission. Each link allows for users to comment on and discuss the submission, allowing for any user to engage in a discussion about any submission. Adding to the reasons of reddit’s use in this chapter is the site’s immense popularity. Alexa.com, a subsidiary of Amazon.com which analyzes website traffic through total number of visitors and pageviews, ranked its global popularity at 54\textsuperscript{th} in the world and 19\textsuperscript{th} in the US as of July 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2014 (Competitive Intelligence, 2014).
Reddit as a Measure of Fan Opinion

This combination of popularity and discussion format is the reason that reddit was chosen for this analysis. Rather than following several different blogs, for example, reddit discussions allow for potentially millions of voices from all over the world to be heard. Opinions can come from anyone with Internet access, potentially allowing people from all walks of life to be analyzed. The anonymity of the site increases the likelihood that people might be less reticent to contribute their “true” feelings, rather than be worried that their peers might think ill of them. Additionally, the site is primarily English-based; although nothing prevents a user from commenting in another language (and many do, especially in subreddits devoted to non-English languages and countries), most discussion occurs in English, ostensibly for ease of communication. This was an important concern for the author during the multilingual event that is the FIFA World Cup.

Methodology

In analyzing comments from reddit.com, it is important to note that the present chapter expands upon the scope of the previous chapter—rather than examining only broadcasted matches between two specific opponents, the chapter at hand analyzes fan reaction in a fan-created space. The reason for this expansion is twofold: First, analyzing match thread comments for the Dos a Cero games alone yielded a slanted perspective; although the World Cup Qualifying matches take place within the context of the mega-event, they occur within regional contexts limited by geography. The final qualifying matches occur almost a year before the tournament begins, which distances the Qualifiers from the Cup temporally as well. The second reason that this chapter takes an expanded approach is that this increased perspective yielded many more responses, further adding to the usefulness of this study. As such, the present chapter serves as a truer metric of how fans communicate with one another about nationalism and mythic narratives,
through the lens of a popular social site. The chapter examines reddit threads from four different soccer-related subreddits with the intention of discovering different lenses through which the same events are seen. With this consideration in mind, the four subreddits are described below.

Four soccer-specific subreddits were chosen in order to narrow the number of threads analyzed. Each have different types of audiences and varying numbers of subscribers. The most general soccer-specific subreddit is “/r/soccer,” which boasted over 250k subscribers as of July 2014. While the choice of the word “soccer” instead of the more globally popular “football” hints at reddit’s abundant popularity in the States, /r/soccer is both the most widely visited and diverse of the four subreddits chosen for analysis. It regularly features soccer related content from England, Germany, Italy, and the United States, as well as other nations. Another subreddit with almost as many subscribers, /r/worldcup was added to the reddit’s list of default subreddits during the length of the World Cup, which significantly increased its exposure to reddit users. Due to the increased visibility, the subreddit grew quickly to just over 240k subscribers. As the name implies, this subreddit is devoted to World Cup-related content. The other two subreddits chosen were more related to the United States in an attempt to obtain more American-centric viewpoints, which gives the study a better view of how Americans develop and deploy nationalistic rhetoric. The larger of the two American subreddits is /r/MLS, which is used for discussion about the US’s highest level of professional soccer. It is also commonly used for discussion of the national teams of United States and Canada (men’s and women’s teams alike), in which all 19 MLS teams are located. This subreddit is particularly interesting because writers for the official MLS website, mlssoccer.com, have been known to take part un-anonymously in community discussions, and several players, coaches, and media figures, players, and coaches have done question and answer sessions on the subreddit. This lends the community a semi-
official status as a “go-to” community for American soccer discussion. The MLS subreddit has over 26k subscribers. The final subreddit chosen for analysis was /r/ussoccer, named after FIFA’s American branch. At just under 9k subscribers, it is easily the smallest subreddit of the four. It is also the most “fan-centric,” with content focusing less on analysis and more on general celebration of the USMNT and American soccer as a whole. Its inclusion can be seen as an attempt to observe the thoughts of those more interested in the fandom side of American soccer than the analytic and statistical aspect. All subscriber counts are accurate as of July 2014.

Another helpful aspect of these subreddits is the “subreddit flair” option by which users can choose to have a symbol near their username. Such symbols are generally used to show a user’s club identification and allegiance (e.g. an Arsenal FC crest displayed), but many users have elected to sport national team flair during the World Cup. Because any user may choose any flair whenever they wish, it should not be assumed that, say, a user sporting Spanish national flair is Spanish; however, because the user is self-identifying with a national side, it might give clue a as to the user’s national sympathies, if any. Of course, a Spanish user could hold any passport and simply wish to identify themselves with the Spanish side, to continue the previous example. The /r/ussoccer subreddit offers flair to its users, but there are no non-American flairs available, ostensibly because the community is meant for fans of the US national sides only.

With the four subreddits accurately defined, this chapter will next describe how threads within the individual subreddits were chosen. Deciding which comment threads to analyze was an important aspect of this chapter. Today’s world of information saturation means that viewing every comment thread in a single subreddit would be almost impossible, let alone the multiple subreddits that the scope of this chapter allowed for. To this end, only discussion threads or article posts in the aforementioned subreddits which suggested that the United States or the topic
of nationalism could be a potential topic of discussion were considered for examination. Viewing thousands of comments in any single subreddit would be out of the ability of the author for this project, so being selective in which threads were analyzed was an important consideration.

It must also be noted that not every comment in a given thread should be coded as significant to the present study. The lion’s share of comments in most threads had nothing to do with nationalism or America whatsoever; most comments focused on evaluations of players’ performances, team tactics, match reactions, and other miscellaneous content wholly unrelated to the topics this thesis seeks to explore. Irrelevant comments have been omitted from this project. The threads also had highly disparate amounts of comments. At the top end, the /r/soccer match thread contained over 20k comments, while one thread analyzed in the /r/ussoccer subreddit contained just 31 comments. Of course, most of these comments are not useful to the study—particularly those contained in match threads—for the reasons listed above in this paragraph.

Reddit’s system of users’ “upvotes” and “downvotes” works to the benefit of the study here. In-the-moment reaction responses and other such comments quickly become buried by more insightful commentary which users vote upward. As such, the author did not necessarily need to view thousands upon thousands of comments; eventually the comments cease to be strings of conversations and instead devolve into hundreds of users simply reacting to goals and complaining about or praising individual players. In the few threads where this trend presented itself, the author considered that thread’s usefulness fulfilled. Thanks to reddit’s voting system, conversations and poignant commentary float to the top of even very dense discussion threads.

**Negating a Contradiction**

In this chapter, fans continually respond to an apparent contradiction in this work: How can a team which failed to qualify for world competition for 40 years and has never won an
international competition be considered exceptional by any means? The fan comments in this chapter continually refute this contradiction. Although the United States has yet to build a winning team, the fans construct and make use of their own narratives to erase, or at least minimize, the contradiction. The narratives, explained below, serve to recoup mythic American Exceptionalism by turning a team that has yet to hoist the World Cup into a tough, hardworking nation on the brink of a soccer revolution.

After separating relevant comments from the irrelevant, the remainder were analyzed via rhetorical analysis. As with the previous chapter, these schemata were developed inductively from the analysis and were organized by the author. Specifically, the author looked for comments which suggested themes of American Exceptionalism, nationalism of any sort, the Dos a Cero myth, and/or commented on the performance of the USMNT and/or El Tri during the World Cup or previous international matches. Depending on the content of the individual comments, they were then categorized into one of the overarching narratives which appeared during the rhetorical analysis: “Regional Dominance,” “World Cup Underdogs,” and “Growth and Future Potential,” respectively. Comments in this chapter appear as examples of their theme. When an exemplar comment includes elements of more than one narrative, it appears in the most relevant category and its combined narrative significance is noted. In some instances, counterarguments were made which objected to the dominant narratives, and these have been included as proof of resistance to the prevailing stories espoused by the fans on the site.

It should be noted that all quoted comments appear in their original, unedited form; in seeking to achieve authenticity, the author has made no attempt to “clean up” any grammar, punctuation, or capitalization errors, and any vulgarity appears as it did on the site. Comments were copied and pasted directly into this chapter. The only editing done by the author was to
remove instances where a user has created a new line (i.e., a new short paragraph) in order to better fit the format of the thesis and avoid blocked quotes where they might be otherwise unnecessary or multiple, short paragraphs which look strange in an essay, and a few instances where a user may have forgotten a word, used a word incorrectly in another’s place, or had a confusing error. Such errors have been corrected in with brackets or with the *sic* notation.

First, the three narratives are described and their examples are given. Afterward this chapter turns its attention to the interplay between the three main narratives and how they each serve to support mythic American Exceptionalism in their own way and as unit.

**Identified Narrative Themes**

As mentioned above, the study of relevant reddit fan comments yielded three overarching narratives: That the USMNT had become the dominant power of their FIFA conference (known as CONCACAF), that the USMNT had been underdogs during the World Cup, and that there exists great winning potential in the future of the men’s national team. Once each of these themes have been described and exemplified, the ways in which each theme reinforces the myth of American Exceptionalism will be described.

*Regional Dominance*

The story of America’s rise as the supposedly dominant power in the USA vs. Mexico rivalry has been well documented in the previous chapter. The growth of the *Dos a Cero* myth was easy to see through the broadcasts over time: during and after the fourth match, supporters were chanting the scoreline nonstop, and some American commentators even expressed joy that their southern neighbor’s fortunes had faded in recent years. The broadcasters spent much of their time commending the States and admonishing the play of the Mexican team. While some of those same sentiments from the broadcast are present in the fan comments, the fans on reddit
take different attitudes, constructing a narrative of how the United States has become the masters of CONCACAF, using nationalism as the backdrop. After describing the role of the *Dos a Cero* myth on reddit, the section turns to analyze redditors’ discussions of topics related to nationalism and racial identity.

The material related to CONCACAF and Mexico comes from the few threads about the 2013 *Dos a Cero* World Cup Qualifier in the /r/MLS and /r/soccer subreddits. Understandably, this qualifier did not garner as much attention as the games of the World Cup Finals. As with most match-related threads, comments were mostly related to the performances of the teams and individuals. In stark contrast to the storyline’s increasingly dominant presence in the media and with the fans in the stands, there were no specifically significant mentions of the *Dos a Cero* myth in the reddit threads. The myth was celebrated in the comments, but unlike the topics of racial identity and nationalism following this section, it was not widely debated. There was an avalanche of celebratory comments when the goals were scored, as well as when Clint Dempsey missed a penalty kick during injury time that would have brought the score to 3-0, which many users in both threads commented could only have been to preserve the mythic scoreline. The slew of comments prove that redditors were quite aware of the myth and had no qualms with perpetuating it, but there was no discussion worthy of specific exemplary analysis for this chapter. For the purposes on this work, it is significant that the users were conscious of the myth and participated in its propagation.

Although the *Dos a Cero* storyline did not receive much discussion attention on the reddit threads, the related concerns about national and racial identities made noteworthy appearances. These issues came up directly in several instances in a match thread on /r/soccer. User enjoyingbread (2014) set off a wave of defensiveness, explaining-away, and other reactions
when they said, “As a Mexican-American, it sort of annoys me how much of racial thing this rivalry becomes. And how ESPN in a way, promotes it for more viewers. I know they're a business and it generates more interest and profits. Personally, I go for both teams and I have no favorites. I am proud to be American and Mexican.” For this user, the nationalism inherent in the event has become conflated with a racial, perhaps racist, quality, and they have accused ESPN of promoting and commercializing the experience. Many users responded that the nationalist aspect of the competition had nothing to do with race. From one poster:

As an American that loves the game, I don't buy into the racial business in these matches or US international play in general. Our players come from everywhere, and many of them could have chosen to play for other countries.

It's not about your bloodline, and it's not about old wars [tell that to England]. It's about proving that we can improve to the point that we are a good match for any team in the world.

Best of luck and least of injury to both teams. I hope we show some skill and determination out there. (Shteevie, 2014)

A user called larkhills (2014) wrote, “everybody likes a rivalry. as long as its not violent, its all in good fun. theres nothing wrong with national pride.” Several users responded to larkhills to tell them that 1940s Europe would disagree (rivethaus, 2014; sadwer, 2014). Nazi references aside, some users were not as diplomatic as Shteevie. A user with US Soccer flair, franklin_stubbs [1] (2014) responded, “You must be new to soccer. Every rivalry is racial, and most are much worse than this.” SomethingSomethingJr (2014) weighed in with, “I've never seen it as a racial thing. I'm a Mexican-American and when it's game time, I fuckin' hate Mexico.”
The user enjoyingbread wasn’t the only one worried about the nationalism in the event, however. Sporting Mexican flair, user DriftingJesus (2014) commented, “Good luck to everyone. Hopefully it will remain civil and nobody will feel the need to remind me that they think I'm an uncivilized brute.” franklin_stubbs [2] (2014), attempted to be diplomatic in return: “I only hate Mexico's national team, I got no beef with the rest of the country. Buena suerte, amigo. Pero menos suerte q los EEUU!”

These comments and the others like it paint the picture of a fanbase which looks upon national rivalry and pride as positive constructs. This seems particularly true if the user is showing US Soccer flair; no user sporting American symbols questioned whether the nation-on-nation competition format was a positive construct, and many of those attempting to sidestep or explain away the issues of nationalism and racism showed American flair. The frequency of such comments suggests that reddit users who self-identify with the US tend to support constructs of nationalism, support nationalistic competition, and either do not see racism as a part of the World Cup’s nation-on-nation competition or do not consider it an issue.

Further down the string of comments, a user called wvrevy troublingly attributed national identity with the imagined borders about which Anderson (2006) was so concerned:

I think it pisses a lot of American fans off that so many of the Mexican fans are AMERICAN. You live here, you should be rooting for THIS country. I can even forgive the ones that were born in Mexico and moved, to some extent. But the fans that were born, raised, and choose to live in this country while badmouthing it and acting like most of the other Mexican fans in Azteca? Sorry, but yeah...that pisses me off. It's like an Englishman born and raised rooting for Germany or France over his own country. (wvrevy [1], 2014)
The user was challenged on the point (SuicideBomber7, 2014), and it was mentioned that a person can be raised in one place, yet be inundated with another culture, thus identifying not with where one was raised, but how. Seemingly undeterred, wvrevy fired off again:

Maybe so. But if they're born here and raised here, they ARE Americans, not Mexicans. Yes, their heritage is there, just as mine is in Italy. But if the US takes on Italy, I can promise you I have ZERO conflicting loyalties just because my father or grandfather were from there. I live in the US, and I support the US team. It's as simple as that. It makes me sick every time we play an [sic] Hispanic team and the US fans are outnumbered in a stadium in our own country. (wvrevy [2], 2014)

The unquestioned and fervent nationalism that wvrevy suggests in their posts is worrisome. To this user, the arbitrary borders of the nation-state define where one’s allegiances should lie, not the nature of one’s cultural heritage or upbringing. This adherence to national boundaries is troubling because at its core the World Cup is a nation-versus-nation conflict. While the decision to support the US squad might be “simple” for wvrevy, such a conclusion is not as simple for every fan or player. Such a mindset creates a hostile environment for those who disagree. With simplistic national support, one runs the risk of conflating the national team support with other types of nationalism.

While most of the comments relating to CONCACAF and Mexico come from the few discussion threads that surrounded the Columbus WCQ, some anti-Mexico sentiment remained during the World Cup. After Brazil’s humiliating exit to Germany, in which they lost 7-1, threads appeared on /r/MLS and /r/ussoccer asking if the 1-0 loss to Germany the US suffered during the group stage of the Cup was seen as more respectable. Several users on /r/ussoccer
took to using what user ben29 called “the transitive property of soccer” to put the US above Brazil, Mexico, and other teams. User Disimpaction used this “property” on Mexico, who had played to a 0-0 against Brazil in the group stage: “We held Germany to 1 goal, and Mexico couldn’t score on Brazil. Therefore we are still better than Mexico, which is nice.” (Disimpaction [1], 2014). When challenged that the US are superior to Mexico due to the 2013 Dos a Cero match, the user expressed a desire to play their rivals again soon because Mexican goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa played very well during the Cup (Disimpaction [2], 2014).

Taken together, the above sentiments combine to form the notion that the United States is the best team in their region, a struggle many years in the making. To achieve this feat, the squad had to steal the crown from their greatest rivals, Mexico, against whom the USMNT have been progressively improving. In the sections below, it will be shown that this nationalistic ideal of dominance is seen by the fanbase as the first step toward the nation’s rise to soccer supremacy on a global scale, a position of authority that the community seems to expect and feel entitled to.

**World Cup Underdogs**

The chapter’s next section analyzes comments pertaining to the somewhat controversial topic of the USMNT’s underdog status in world soccer. While users’ general comments seemed to support and inherently accept the notion that the US are underdogs in world soccer, some redditors interrogated the notion. The topic was particularly popular after the Belgium vs. USA match, a tense American loss in extra time which resulted in the team’s exit from the tournament.

This section turns first to comments indicative of users’ general acceptance that the US should be considered an underdog in the world soccer realm. None of the following comments elicited a disagreeing response; these comments went either without response or were agreed with. Such comments are included to show that most users on the site seemed to accept that the
underdog myth applied to the USMNT and shed some light on how users chose to apply the myth to the team. The section then turns to examples in which users dismissed the notion of the USMNT’s underdog status. Although it may seem a contradiction at first, these dissenting comments also serve to uphold the American myths this thesis has examined.

In the more accepted underdog comments, users tended to portray the US’s supposed underdog status in a positive light. For these redditors, being the underdogs was part of what made the US successful in the World Cup campaign, and it made them more popular with unattached viewers. Interestingly, many of such comments came from users sporting English flair. These users especially credited the US team to playing with a sense of determination and “heart” they accused their team of lacking. Atrixer (2014), posting in the /r/soccer post-match thread, was one such English user:

I feel with the US being underdogs the tournament they have nothing to lose, they play with spirit and a lack 'fear'.

The problem with England, is because it's been so long since we last won anything major, there is so much pressure on the players. Anything short of winning is seen as a disaster. The players also have a lot more riding on their shoulders, a bad performance at a world cup, or taking risks that cost the team could and will negatively effect [sic] their entire career. These England players make their living in the best league in the world, where the whole world watches them, they don't want to take chances and risk losing that.

In the same thread, another English poster shared similar sentiments:

I must say, despite all the rather irritating freedom jokes and soccerball champions comments that the actual US team on the pitch has won me over.
I love an underdog but they have shown this tournament that they will move on to something bigger and better very soon. Tonight's match was breathtaking and the resilience and determination the Americans showed was inspirational. Howard was absolutely epic in goal, Yedlin heroic, and Gonzalez immovable just for starters. The coach has been charismatic and extremely likeable. Despite today's result the team can leave Brazil with their head held high because they sure as hell left a mark on this tournament and on the international football community. I am unbelievably happy for them that they didn't just roll over and put up one hell of a fight. Who knows, if Wondolowski could've put it away and the lino acknowledge it was onside things could've been completely different. I think I've just found my second team after England. (HeeyMaan, 2014)

These two posters were some of the many on the site who applauded the way the US played. The team was commonly praised for its work ethic throughout the match, and remarks about the potential of the team were prevalent wherever the underdog status was mentioned. Users seemed to think that the US would not be underdogs for long, as the above comments indicate, even if the nation is not a traditional soccer power player. This notion and its relation to mythic American Exceptionalism will be more closely examined in final section of this chapter, which looks more closely at comments referring to the future potential of the USMNT.

The underdog myth is a crucial part of the puzzle of soccer and American Exceptionalism. In parallel to the broadcast analysis of the previous chapter, this comment analysis yielded a clear picture of a team rising through the ranks to challenge the big teams of the soccer world, punching above their weight not through individual skill or ability, but by sheer
determination and work. Posters painted a picture of a team with the will to succeed no matter how grim the situation looked; to be sure, the team must find success soon.

This sentiment has the distinct aura of the myth of the American Dream, which asserts that anyone can be successful if only they try hard enough. The underdog myth is the next chapter in the story: First, the US surpassed perennial rivals Mexico to become the best team in CONCACAF, becoming relevant in the soccer world by doing so. Next, the US looks to overcome the top teams of the FIFA world, just as they overcame Mexico. As the story is constructed, the upstart US started from the bottom and was able to achieve regional dominance through hard work and dedication. With the first goal met, the team has set its sights on the giants not of a single conference, but of the world. While the team may be minnows now, it will only be so long before the US captain hoists the World Cup skyward. Or so the story goes. Not every user subscribes to the narrative that the team is on the verge of greatness, and some even disavow the notion that the US can be considered underdogs at all.

Argument on the topic came mostly from users with American flair and in the ussoccer subreddit. In a thread reacting to the loss to Belgium, user SauceConstanza called out the original poster for remarking that the American team had proved themselves to the world. In their first post in the thread, the user argued that “… The US showed the world that a #12-15 Ranking is exactly right for the US.” (SauceConstanza [1], 2014). The comment asserted that the US had achieved exactly what should have been expected for the team given their world ranking. When user md5423 ([1], 2014) countered that the result was impressive because of how many of Belgium’s players compete on some of the best club teams in the world while most US players do not, SauceConstanza [2] (2014) replied in turn:
I was mostly with you until the "US soccer is no longer a joke to the rest of the world comment." US Soccer ISNT (or at least SHOULDNT be) a joke to the rest of the world. Shit, I bet portugal remembers the 3 goals they conceded in WC2002.

Part of what I was saying - and part of my dislike for that Underdog video - stems from this disingenuous claim that the US is some embattled underdog just working away and trying to grind out wins. The US has a top 15-20 (if not higher) league in the world after ONLY 20 YEARS. There are seriously only a dozen countries that beat the US consistently - and they beat EVERYONE consistently. The only heads the US turned this world cup are the ones that were shoved up some ass before that.

Responding to a different user on the same topic, the user elaborated their point further:

But again, my point is that your premises are all off. Like you have belgium as one of the "premier teams in the world" and the US as what? not? For much of the last 20 years, the US has been ranked and performed WELL ABOVE belgium. This happens to be a particularly great period for Belgian football, but on virtually EVERY MEASURE the US has been better than Belgium for the last 2 decades. Moreover, are you saying that Belgium is a Semi-Final caliber team? One of the 4 best in the world? If not, then that means that Belgium is a Top 8 Team in the World and the US is a Top 16 Team in the world. These are NOT entirely different tiers. Though on this day the Teams themselves may have been of a bit more different caliber, US Soccer is not leagues behind Belgian Soccer. That
whole rhetoric of this being some huge underdog battle and losing 2-1 as a moral victory of showing that US can compete with the Big Boys are ridiculous.

This game showed us that this current Belgian team is a Top 8 team in the world and that the US team is just outside that level, as a Top 16 Team in the world. Now, tell me, who on earth didnt think that was at least relatively true heading into this tournament? If ANYTHING, BELGIUM's making the Last 8 is BY FAR the bigger surprise considering they haven't been there in nearly 30 years. The US has gone as far as they did in this world cup MORE THAN HALF THE TIME over the last 20 years.

I think your assessment shows a lack of perspective. (SauceConstanza [3], 2014)

The posts by the above user demonstrate well the argument of those who argue against the idea that the US is an underdog in soccer. Can a team truly be underdogs if they have participated in every iteration of the competition since 1990? It is worth noting that the USMNT was ranked 4th in the world in April 2006 (fifa.com, 2015). Like SauceConstanza, opponents of this notion point to other teams in the competition, such as CONCACAF rival Costa Rica, who have appeared in fewer World Cups and have worse average FIFA rankings. User jpoRS (2014) echoed this sentiment in a thread in the comments of a picture thread in /r/worldcup. They were responding to a comment in which the poster made reference to the USMNT being historically irrelevant in world soccer:

I think you're coming at it the wrong way. We are relevant in soccer. With the exception of Internet trolls and the willfully ignorant, people knew part of what would make Group G a challenge is because we were in it. If you asked players who they would rather face, us or Iran/Korea/Cameroon etc, they would pick the
other guys. Even if you turn the stakes up to countries like Croatia or Ecuador or Ivory Coast, we wouldn't be the "easy" choice.

Why don't we dominate? You could ask the same question about hockey or baseball, "real American" sports where we do have the best league but we aren't the final word in international competition. Sometimes other people are just better. (jpoRS, 2014) [Italics in original]

As with SauceConstanza, jpoRS argues that the US cannot be irrelevant in the global soccer scene because so many other supposed “soccer nations” fail to find the sustained success that the American team has. Besides that fact, jpoRS also makes the statement that American teams aren’t always successful in the “‘real American’ sports” for which they are best known.

These comments represent a small population of users who push back against the underdog narrative that is generally accepted and applied to the USMNT. The small pool of dissenting comments speaks to the prominence of the myth, which is an integral piece in the construction of a narrative that has exceptional American team making its way to world soccer prominence. They also speak to another confirmation of American nationalism: The team is not an underdog because it already stands among the giants of the World Cup. The American team is seen by these users as competing alongside the best teams of world soccer, despite lacking the silverware to make that claim. The posters claim that it is not winning competitions which make a team important in the world of sports, it is simply enough to consistently compete against them.

The next section details comments pertaining to the US team’s growth over time and its future potential for success. This third and final segment completes the narrative. Following this section, the chapter reaches its conclusion.

*Growth and Future Potential*
This section focuses on the prominence of the notion that soccer in America is improving over time. Coded within this section are comments relating to the growth of USMNT as well as comments suggesting that soccer is or will be becoming more popular in the US. While it seems natural that most of this talk would come from the US-specific subreddits and from users sporting US flair, there were some users who claimed non-American heritage or showing non-American flair who praised the future of the USMNT as well. In addition, the author did not find many dissenting opinions to this idea. It is possible that these opinions were downvoted into invisibility or that disagreeing users decided not to voice their opinions due to the site’s popularity among Americans, but it also speaks to the prominence of this notion that so few opposing views were found. This section is further divided between two different types of responses: improvement on the past and future-focused optimism.

**Improvement on the Past**

This subsection details comments which remark upon the changes in US soccer from previous years. Typically positive, most users described an upward trend from the past. This thinking dovetailed nicely with the second subsection, forming a narrative describing how the sport in the US has improved and is likely to continue the trend.

Interestingly, comments about the team’s progress were evident much before the World Cup even began. Immediately following the USA vs. Mexico WCQ, fans were already making mention of this supposed growth from previous USMNTs in a postmatch thread on /r/ussoccer. From user CiscoCertified (2014): “Let's just reflect on where our Soccer team has come in the past 15 years.” This user seems satisfied with the way the team defeated their biggest rivals. A user called electrodylan (2014) weighed in as well, providing the following personal account:
Personally I didn't get into soccer more than just tangentially until after the 2010 World Cup. I've witnessed the growth as a member of that growth and it has been fantastic. I love it, I've felt and seen the growth locally, I've watched the improved TV coverage with the evolution to the brilliant NBC premier league coverage, and I've watched non-soccer fans become interested in the US national team. It's been glorious. *Edit - Not to discount the great work that has continued with MLS coverage through ESPN and NBC, who are my primary sources for TV coverage. It's been great to see the growth.

Disagreeing somewhat with the above users, DougieFFC (2014) places the real improvement on how soccer fandom has developed: “We were pretty good in 2002. I'd rather reflect on how US soccer fandom has advanced in that time.” To this user, the team itself may not have progressed much, but soccer’s American following has.

As will be shown below, the lion’s share of discussion about US soccer’s improvement from the past came after the USMNT fell to Belgium. It seemed that the US’s dramatic exit from the tournament had an effect on reddit users, and they took to the site en masse to weigh in. Some of this discussion centered on how the sport has grown in past years. A comment from user md5423, who posted a thread in /r/ussoccer after the US exited the World Cup, is perhaps the most indicative of the feeling these sorts of comments generally portrayed: “Wow. That had to be the craziest 15 minutes of my life right there, the players put up one hell of a fight and can hold their heads high. We showed the world that we are a strong team and only getting better. I am proud as can be of the team and I believe that the future holds good things. … Next up: RUSSIA 2018.” (md5423 [2], 2014) This comment has been coded into both this subsection and the next because it constructs and reinforces a notion of team growth from the past that is likely
to continue into the future, as many of the comments in this vein do. In the same thread, user KillrNut (2014) echoed the above poster:

Just got back from the AO Cleveland watch party. I AM DAMN PROUD OF THIS TEAM. AND IF YOU AREN'T, THEN GET THE FUCK OUT YOU POSER. Everyone said US had no chance in the group. They advanced. Everyone said Belgium would crush the US, US played Belgium to extra time, and still kept fighting down 2. Tim Howard is GOD as far as I'm concerned. USA WILL RETURN STRONGER. GO YANKS!

The above poster furthers the narrative created by md5423 [2] by adding an “us-vs-them” element. It seems to this user that “everyone” is against the US, doubting the nation’s team and putting it down. The poster takes the conflict to heart, adding aggression by way of capital letters and swearing.

Fans with non-American flair also commented on how the team played compared to years past. A user with England flair had this to say:

You guys should be fucking proud of your team. As someone who lives in London I was watching on the BBC tonight and your team and fans could not have won more respect. Everyone knows that your team have to be taken seriously now and that your [sic] not a novelty team anymore. I've heard people talk about the way in which the USA team doesn't have a culture and history, a style of football, behind it. Well this is how you create that. In 4 years time [sic] when you guys turn up to Russia the world will no longer have no expectation. The world will expect you guys to turn up and play the brand of hard working do or die football you have now become known for. (theyeatthepoo, 2014)
From the above, it would seem that even some users who claim to be non-Americans have been influenced by the narrative that the USMNT have continuously improved over the years. Along with the support from non-American users, there did not seem to be any posters who argued against the idea that Team USA has improved over the years into the present. The next subtopic, however, proved to be more contentious.

**Future-focused optimism**

The next subfocus in this section describes comments which turn attention toward the future of the US team and the sport in America. Together with the previous subtheme, an idea of an upward sporting trend is formed: The US has been improving over time, and the future can only hold more success. This notion also applies to the millions of American youth players; surely, users seem to think, the more exposure kids have to the sport, the stronger the team will grow.

Much like the previous subsection, most of this discussion came after the US fell to Belgium; as soon as the US were out of the tournament, users began discussing the future of the team, especially in the two US-centered subreddits. Users tended concentrate their comments on the bright future of the team overall, though many also mentioned the developmental potential of specific players, some of which had never represented the US in a competitive match.

In terms of looking forward, some users, such as AbstergoSupplier (2014) in a /r/MLS post-match thread, expressed a mix of feelings, both sadness for the loss but optimism for the future: “My heart is in a million pieces right now, but I'm damn optimistic for the future. We made it through the group of death, we didn't allow a goal to Belgium for 90+ min. I hate that we're not advancing but I'm damn proud of the boys” (AbstergoSupplier, 2014). While others users echoed AbstergoSupplier’s feelings of sadness and hope, other top-voted comments were much simpler, such as this comment by self-proclaimed Indian user idenedyou28 (2014):
“Calling it now. Semifinals in 2018.” User VanDelay_Industry (2014) agreed, saying, “We're on our way up.” Many users, including some who claimed non-US national heritage, predicted greater success in the future of the team.

As mentioned further above, some users focused less on the growth of the team and more on how the sport’s popularity had increased from previous years. Many of these users made predictions that soccer’s impending rise would come as others sports’ popularity declined. This notion lends credence to the concept of “sports space” introduced by Markovits & Hellerman (2001) and described in detail previously in this thesis. The idea is that a community only has so much “sport space” within its sum awareness, and once that space is filled, new sports cannot easily enter or compete against the dominant sports in that space. Many of the comments about the growth of soccer in the future included sentiments that soccer’s American future would come as a direct benefit of the decline of other sports.

The most commonly targeted sport for a future decline from which soccer could benefit was American football, particularly because of the prominence of concussions and injury-related brain disease in high-profile football players. Several discussions of this topic took place, with some very in-depth comments filling sizeable chunks of page. In a thread in /r/worldcup, user 8footpenguin (2014) described their belief that American parents will begin keeping their children from playing American football due to fear of brain injury. The user mentioned the very public suicide of NFL player Junior Seau, who committed suicide to get scientists to examine his brain for chronic traumatic encephalopathy, which the player believed was caused by his time playing professional football. To the poster, the player’s suicide marked a turning point away from professional football—or could in the future, at least. Baseball and hockey were also mentioned as eventually losing ground to soccer. Users mentioned declining youth participation
and match attendance as their rationale for this potential future change in American sporting culture.

Continuing the above comment, 8footpenguin (2014) continued their assessment by mentioning that regardless of whether or not the NFL’s popularity sees a decline, soccer’s rise is inevitable anyway due to the sheer amount of American youth playing the game and the rise of American soccer heroes. An excerpt from the comment: “I played soccer when I was a little kid like a lot of other Americans, but all my heros were American Football players. There were no Tim Howards or Clint Dempseys, and no one I knew cared about soccer. Now it's a country where the entire nation is obsessed with the USMNT. More than even the World Series or the NBA finals, at least in WC cup play.”

According to this user, soccer heroes were not in popular awareness in the past, which might have led to Americans children falling out with the sport. This exemplar post supports another of notion of Markovits & Hellerman (2001) in which the authors claimed that American youth will continue to abandon soccer in their teen and adult years unless the USMNT begins to succeed on the international stage, thereby elevating its players to stardom for young Americans to admire.

8footpenguin (2014) was not the only poster to mention American children looking up to American soccer heroes as a reason to be optimistic for the future of American soccer. In a thread dedicated to Tim Howard’s record-breaking goalkeeping performance against Belgium, an anonymous user (2014) stated, “We're young. We're growing. Tim Howard did us a service. Like Taylor said at the time, kids will remember Howard vs. Belgium. More kids will play soccer. We will win.” The user expresses a belief that Tim Howard will be remembered and revered by young Americans, which will keep them interested in consuming and playing the
sport. For WorldWarWilson (2014), in the same /r/worldcup thread as 8footpenguin (2014), the sheer amount of American children involved in the sport means future success: “We have 20 million kids in the US playing soccer. American quality is on its way to the World stage.” For users like WorldWarWilson (2014), the key to soccer’s future American growth lies in children, while others focused on a notion of “sport space.”

For users with this viewpoint, the assumption is that more American children becoming exposed to soccer and sticking with the sport will lead directly to success on the world stage. The problem is not American soccer ability; the issue is population-based. If more (unquestionably exceptional) American youth were involved in the game into adulthood, the national team would surely benefit. These posters and those like them do not question the nation’s ability to produce top players, nor these future kids’ ability to perform in world competition. For them, the more young Americans play soccer, the better the national team will do. The issue American soccer constantly faces is not an absence of exceptional Americans, and the nation’s dearth of international glory does not disprove American Exceptionalism. When finally enough Americans pay attention to the sport, America will produce top players, and we will win. American Exceptionalism is the rationale for the team’s future success, and the myth is so widely accepted that it need not (or, perhaps for the unaware, cannot) be named.

It must be noted that there was some small amount of pushback against this narrative. A user sporting Belgium flair commented:

If the US wins, football would be a little bit more popular next world cup maybe, but they'd still just move on to the next sport. In Belgium, football is uniting our nation after years [of] political infighting between the Dutch-speaking north and
French-speaking south. Before, you were either Flemish or Walloon, while now everybody is becoming proud to be Belgian again. (MaritimeMonkey, 2014)

The poster here recognizes the narrative of soccer’s ability to unite disparate communities such as the socio-political differences of Belgium, but they apparently do not believe that American attention will remain with soccer after the World Cup ends.

Non-American redditors in the more international subreddits were not the only ones to express some doubts about the popular narrative of the World Cup yielding dividends for the American national team and the sport in the country overall. After the Americans exited the tournament, a thread about soccer’s popularity was created in /r/MLS, one of the two American-centered subreddits. While the thread was filled with hopeful responses about other American sports declining and Americans becoming interested in soccer via the World Cup, user tk423 (2014) expressed some doubt. “This talk happens every four years for sure. Thats why Men in Blazers (a popular soccer podcast) has the tagline "soccer is the American sport of the future. As it has been since 1972."” While the poster did qualify the response with a hesitant hope for a “steady upward trend” in American soccer viewership, the post does at least put the brakes on the dominant narrative that soccer is certainly on the cusp of popularity in the United States.

Another user posted a similar thought in another /r/worldcup thread, this one showing a picture of Americans’ reactions to Chris Wondolowski’s stoppage-time miss against Belgium. On the topic of keeping American interest in the post-World Cup time, user Cirusness (2014) mentioned, “… Its a big swell, a surge, then it dies for four years. What we have to figure out is how to keep that passion through the four years no?” Posts from Americans which questioned the idea that their compatriots would start to take interest in soccer after the World Cup concluded were structured similarly, using past tournaments as their rationale for countering the
dominant narrative somewhat while simultaneously expressing hesitant hope that this might be the year that the enthusiasm sticks.

Not every comment took a firm stand on whether or not future improvement could be assured. For some users, this World Cup cycle served as a litmus test by which to gauge future expectations and optimism. User FullTarker (2014) provides a telling example, taken from a thread in the ussoccer subreddit:

i think this tournament showed just who we are and where we are at. we won the game we should have - ghana - almost won but tied the one we were 50/50 going into - portugal - and lost to the big boys. next step is turning the 50/50 game into a sure thing and making music vit the big boys. and if the ball bounced our way one or two times in that match we'd be through to play argentina. our coach has vision and can get us to that level. let's hope julian green is our own james rodriguez - if so we will be an anglo-latino-germanic juggernaut and will roll through the russian steppes like genghis fucking khan.

The above commenter considers the matches the US played in terms of their outcomes and makes comparisons thereby: The US is better than good teams like Ghana, on par with very good teams such as Portugal and Belgium, and just below the elite status of footballing nations the like of Germany, the eventual World Champions. With some fortunate development, they believe, Russia 2018 could see America dominate the competition.

This comment also makes mention of one young player in particular, Julian Green, whose goal against Belgium seemed to validate his controversial inclusion on the roster, for redditors at least, and give them hope that more young players like him might find even more success in the next World Cup. This kind of player-focused responses was another common theme in looking
toward the bright future of the USMNT. Many posters—again, particularly those users in the American-based subreddits and those with American flair—focused their comments on the younger American players who were their making their first World Cup appearance, as well as those who might be included in the next World Cup in 2018. Comments of this order were mostly similar; users expressed excitement at the younger American stars-to-be, usually listing players they thought would be the best assets to the future of the team and listing these players (sometimes literally) as a core reason for their optimism.

In the ussoccer subreddit, user Yazbremski (2014) provided the most complete example for this theme as they looked positively toward the next World Cup. Their expression of confidence gives a good impression of the general sentiment vis-à-vis the young players who featured in this campaign and the younger internationals who will fill the gaps of the older players in 2018:

I think that if this team develops as they could, we'd be hard pressed not to be a favorite in 2018. We have so much speed and talent that's young, it's not even funny. I was a Green doubter but watching him play tonight changed that. He's super raw but he has the talent. Green, Yedelin, Chandler, Gonzalez, Brooks, Mixx, AJ, Jozy were all on this squad plus all the guys right on the cusp like Nagbe, Corona, Packwood, Gil, Gatt, Agudelo, Will Bruin, Boyd, Jack Mac. The future of American soccer is bright and 2018 is going to be a DOOZY.

Also continue to trust in Jurgen. We need him. The man has shown glimpses of his overall master plan with the young subs he's used. Trust in Klinsmann keep him until 2018. (Yazbremski, 2014)
In the /r/MLS Belgium vs. USA post-match thread, user TropangTexter (2014) echoed the above post, albeit with a more staid tone:

we need better attacking midfielders, and the hope is with an older Green, Nagbe, Shipp, Gil, Flores, etc, we will in 2018. That's the position we really needed help with to match the Belgians, they were there for the taking on breaks and counters all game, but even with the speed we had with Yedlin, we just couldn't do it. Hope this inspires the youth development system we have here to improve in the development of talent. The heart was there, but we just didn't have the ability to match Belgium's. Just simple as that.

Enough of this teaching kids how to win shit by unqualified coaches, more teaching kids skills. A result like this has to inspire the grassroots level here to do better.

Anyway, proud of this team, yeah while at times they left you asking for more with how they played, but I won't begrudge them due to the Altidore injury as I think that really affected how the US looked going at teams more than people would admit. They got out of the group, guys like Yedlin, Brooks and Green gave me hope for the next cycle, and Howard went out as a World Cup starter as a hero (TropangTexter, 2014)

Here, the poster communicates optimism for the future, but with a manner of criticism toward the team’s overall skill and youth coaches which were absent in other comments. Even with the criticisms, however, the post sticks to the prominent narrative of future-oriented optimism effected by so many American users on the site.
First CONCACAF, then... The World (Cup)!

This chapter now turns its attention to the interplay between the three main narratives and how they each serve to support mythic American Exceptionalism. The first narrative described how soccer-minded users of reddit.com discussed how the American men’s national team became the dominant in their FIFA conference, the second detailed the notion that the US was (or was not) an underdog in the 2014 FIFA World Cup, and the third detailed users’ opinions on the team’s apparent growth from previous years and its future improvement potential.

The first narrative supposes that the Americans’ apparently exceptional nature has propelled them to CONCACAF supremacy. Despite the small soccer culture in the US relative to other countries in the region, the US has beaten the odds and emerged as the region’s dominant power—just as the nation is the dominant national power. The Americans have finally conquered their biggest rivals, Mexico, who by all accounts look scared to play at Columbus’s Crew Stadium; the Dos a Cero myth has seen to that. After four consecutive 2-0 wins, the war against Mexico, as the commentators routinely term the matchup, has been won. It’s only a matter of time, it seems, until the USMNT wins away at the intimidating Estadio Azteca. It’s said that the US team works harder and plays better as team than the other squads in CONCACAF. The Americans have finally taken their rightful place as the undisputed champions of the region—and meanwhile, the typical American doesn’t even really care for soccer.

Redditors see this place of regional prominence as the logical first step toward achieving the same global dominance in soccer as the nation wields politically. As it stands, however, Americans are an upstart, underdog soccer nation ready to prove their doubters wrong. The team showed its grit and determination by getting out of the toughest group stage, users claimed. They vanquished their past demons by defeating Ghana, went toe-to-toe with eventual Cup winners
Germany (remember, the US only lost 1-0, whereas Brazil lost 7-1!), and were this close to beating a very strong Belgian squad. The underdogs punched exceptionally far above their weight, claimed the redditors, and it won’t be long before teams the world over find themselves conquered in the same fashion as the CONCACAF teams. Soon, the whole world will fear American soccer, it is said.

The third narrative analyzed how redditors believe that the USMNT has improved over past American squads and is only expected to keep improving as time wears on. More Americans are following soccer, more young Americans are getting involved in the sport and sticking with it, and American soccer culture will continue its ascent, possibly overtaking other sports’ “sport space” as it grows. The underdog status of the American squad could become a thing of the past as soon as the 2018 World Cup in Russia, some redditors professed. Additionally, as more American youth soccer players will take notice of the successes of the USMNT legends such as Landon Donovan and Tim Howard, they be inspired to follow in their footsteps. These exceptional new American players will guide the team to victory, sometime in the to-be-determined future. From its powerful position in CONCACAF, redditors predict that the USMNT will soon take its rightful place among the best soccer nations in the world—if it has not already done so, that is. There were some commenters who chose to ignore the team’s lack of world trophies (or real progress in the World Cup Finals tournament, for that matter) and already count the nation among the soccer greats.

Throughout the comments analyzed is a clear tone of expectation. The myth of American Exceptionalism is at the root of this attitude, underwriting the posts. American fans do not appear to see the lack of real international success on the part of its national team as an argument against the exceptionalism of the nation; in fact, the overarching notion is that American Exceptionalism
is in many ways proved by the national team. In the four reddit.com communities, users’ posters combined to create and reify three major narratives: the team’s Regional Dominance, its position as World Cup Underdogs, and its Growth and Future Potential, with each storyline extolling American Exceptionalism in its own way. Few users ever questioned if the team deserved the success it had gained so quickly. When the Americans qualified for the World Cup in 1990, it was the first time they had participated in the competition in 40 years; the team has qualified for every successive World Cup. Impressive though this feat may be, the reddit community wants more, and the ascent to global prominence cannot come soon enough.

By advocating so fiercely for the nationalism inherent in the nation-vs.-nation competition and, the fan community analyzed in this chapter appears to believe that the world should feel America’s global influence in the soccer world as well. There is an air of importance in the nation’s rise to relevance in the soccer world—if the United States and soccer are both important on the global stage, then the United States must show the world it can compete in soccer, too. This ascent is not a question of if, but when. Redditors seem to believe that American dominance must spread to the World Cup competition, and the sooner this happens, the better.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

As this thesis comes to a close, the words of Parini (2012, pg. 1) bear repeating. “Every nation requires a story–or many stories, which taken together form a national narrative–about its origins, a self-defining mythos that says something about the character of the people and how they operate in the larger world and among each other.” According to its myths, the origins of the United States lies in its exceptionalism. Americans enjoy an elevated status, in their own eyes and, to some, in the eyes of God (Lewis, 1987). Taken at its best, this supposed exceptionalism might propel an American forward, perhaps chasing the fabled American Dream and, hopefully, finding some success in that endeavor. At its worst, it can cloud their judgment, obscure the truth, and perpetuate systemic and institutionalized problems. In short, America’s shared mythos is problematic, and as the analyses in this thesis show, those stories are potent.

In both analysis chapters, a mythologized picture of the USMNT was created. The first chapter analyzed the four Dos a Cero matches and the eponymous myth they produced. Over time, the media figures of those matches described the ascension of the Americans to dominance in their region, a national triumph over their Mexican rivals. That myth is built around American Exceptionalism, telling the story of a weaker team achieving victory not through superior ability but through determination and willpower. It also ignores the serendipitous nature of the games, and it obscures the real quality of the American team.

The second analysis chapter shows that this obfuscation does not only apply to figures in the American sports media. The online fan responses during international competition closely resembled the rhetorical strategies used during the Dos a Cero matches. Fans negated the contradictory evidence of American Exceptionalism provided by America’s lack of success with comments about the regional dominance of American soccer and the team’s status as an up-and-
coming soccer nation, a giant in the making that will achieve the same level of success in world 
competition that it has attained in its corner of the world as soon as the whole nation embraces 
the sport. Fans seem to believe that the team is on the verge of international success, despite the 
most recent World Cup seeming to provide evidence to the contrary.

The research questions asked in the introduction of this thesis centered around 
discovering how Americans negotiate their mythic Exceptionalism in a situation in which that 
myth can be directly challenged. It might be that these research questions presumed too much; 
perhaps it was wrong to assume that the myth would be directly interrogated at all. In both sets 
of analyses, there did not seem to be any dilemma when the myth was met with the reality of the 
lack of success by the US. The Mexican players’ superior technical prowess never troubled the 
media figures’ belief in American Exceptionalism, and the USMNT’s exit from the World Cup 
Finals in the first stage of the knockout round only seemed to confirm the myth in the eyes of the 
fans. The consensus seems to be that American soccer is on the rise, no matter what the actual 
results say.

In the rhetorical strategies revealed in the two analysis chapters, significant blame- 
shifting strategies were employed. The professional broadcasters in the Dos a Cero games 
interpreted the scrappy victories against their cheating adversaries as proof for American 
Exceptionalism, and they continually used the wins as a reason to look past the greater technical 
skills of the Mexicans and toward the exceptional play and determination showed by the US. 
Fans explained away the team’s performance in the World Cup by calling them underdogs in the 
competition and looking toward the possibilities the future will hold if youth players develop into 
stars and more Americans develop a passion for the sport. In this mythic soccer world, winning 
only really matters if it’s an American victory, and international glory is always on the horizon.
Perhaps these results should not be very surprising. Recall that Orfanos (2006) wrote that myths require purposeful self-identification, which necessitates recognizing the evidence that seems to confirm the myth and ignoring any proof to the contrary. These actions are clearly on display in both analyses. The media figures saw the Americans win four straight times with a conveniently repeating scoreline and constructed a storyline around it; the Mexicans being the better players overall means nothing when the scoreboard shows the Americans in the lead. The fans likewise ignored the mediocre run the USMNT made in the World Cup Finals, concentrating instead on their ephemeral underdog status and the impending growth of American soccer culture and the young stars-in-the-making. Mythic American Exceptionalism can only ever be confirmed through these strategies which dismiss conflicting evidence.

The confirmation bias on display in the analyses has troubling implications. Conventional wisdom would suggest that the obvious path to disproving a falsehood is to provide proof of the lie; however, the situation is clearly more complex than that. How can a deep-rooted national narrative such as American Exceptionalism be unwritten if its adherents construct rationales which turn contrary proof into a direct confirmation of the myth? If proof cannot even induce much doubt, can one ever hope to debunk national myths? This thesis unfortunately cannot provide those answers, and thus more research must be conducted. Yet this thesis offers a small sample that suggests that debunking myths are not enough. As the example of America’s lack of soccer success illustrates, even evidence contrary to the myth can be reinterpreted through the lens on an unquestioned American Exceptionalism. Paths toward future academic research are suggested after the limitations of this work are described.
**Research Limitations**

No study is perfect, and this thesis is no different. The material in this thesis was analyzed and written by one author, and it is important to keep in mind the dangers of accepting any one viewpoint at face value. Critical thinking should be engaged toward all things, this work included. Related to this limitation, having only one author limits the amount of analysis which can be reasonably performed. It was mentioned earlier in this thesis that there were aspects of this project which could not be completely examined due to resource constraints, particularly in the fourth chapter.

With more time and more researchers, it would be possible to analyze more material. More broadcasts, more fan responses, and additional media outlets could be examined if supplementary resources were devoted to this project. An expansion of this work could provide a more detailed and concrete view of the topics discussed throughout this thesis. As such, this study can serve as a platform from which to launch future communication and social science research into the topics of sport, nationalism, and narrative.

**Future Research Considerations**

Sport is an area too long overlooked by social science researchers. While researchers in the biomedical field have been studying training exercises and treatments to keep athletes healthy and economists have been during clubs and teams into sporting franchises, social scientists have, until recently, largely ignored the world of sport. This oversight leaves ample opportunity for the academy to enter the field. Indeed, the gap is so wide that identifying how to start closing it may be the most difficult part.

One way to begin researching sport in the social sciences would be to use this work as a springboard toward further exploration. This thesis examines a very specific iteration of a very
general, overarching American theme. There are surely many other representations of American Exceptionalism and the American Dream in different sporting contexts. Future studies could use this work to make the transition to other sports, or work within soccer to look for additional myths. It would be interesting to examine how Americans deal with the prospect of a 2014 Dos a Cero match at Crew Stadium to see if the narrative is continued, particularly if the scoreboard veers from the script. This section gives more general suggestions for research below, both within the sporting world and without.

The intersection of nationalism and sport has further far-reaching than just the specifics of this thesis. Sport is not immune to geopolitics; indeed, the nationalistic and cultural elements on display in the Real Madrid vs. Barcelona matchups described by Lowe (2014) are enough to prove this point. On that topic, what if the 51% of Catalans Lowe (2014) cites as being pro-independence get their wish, and a Catalan nation separates from Spain? Spain’s La Liga has already confirmed that Barcelona would not be eligible to complete in the league, which would effectively end the historic el clásico matches. Consider also the role FIFA plays in the legitimization of nations. FIFA is the body that decides which countries “count” in terms of global soccer, and it recognizes borders how it wishes. Should Catalonia receive its sovereignty, FIFA—not the new nation—would decide who “counts” as a Catalan national for their international matches, as FIFA has its own rules to govern a player’s nationality. It also recognizes Gibraltar as its own state despite Spain not recognizing the southern province’s independence. Notably, FIFA does not allow the two to compete against one another for fear of an international incident. And what of war? The conflict is still hot between Ukraine and Russia contemporary to the publishing of this thesis. Do those Ukrainian clubs in Crimea move to the Russian league, even though the peninsula’s absorption into Russia is not widely recognized by
the international community? And what of the native Crimeans? Will FIFA deem them Ukrainian or Russian? Only time will tell how these events play out. What is certain, however, is that FIFA’s unique role as a nation-legitimizing force is well worth additional analysis.

Nationalism is not the only socio-political concern facing the world of sport. Matters of race and ethnicity, income inequality, and issues faced by gender and sexual minorities are only a few of the global matters which affect sport as they do any other aspect of life. Black soccer players still endure racist monkey chants in many parts of the world. There are charities devoted to giving poor children “indestructible” soccer balls to play with. Clubs such as Arsenal FC in England are launching campaigns to combat discrimination of gender and sexual minorities. In this way, sport organizations can act as powerful agents of social change, an aspect of sport which should be further analyzed. The world was watching when Anthony Ujah, a Nigerian striker on loan at FC Köln, celebrated a goal by displaying an undershirt message which read “Eric Garner #ICantBreathe #Justice” (Turner, 2014), a powerful message of solidarity and protest reaching across cultures. Soccer itself is not immune to protest, as clubs like FC St. Pauli in Hamburg, Germany have shown. Its left-wing, anti-fascist supporters “proudly wear their politics on their sleeves,” often literally (Montague, 2010), and since the club itself is 51% owned by the fans, the club must act in line with its supporters’ politics. Among their progressive agendas is the “Against Modern Football” movement, which denounces the commercialism and financial concerns in the modern game of soccer. These are just a few examples of sport being used as a platform for protest and social change, a worthy subject for future sport-related study.

In addition to the above suggestions, identity scholarship continues to be an important site for research. It may well be that identification is an intrinsic part of the human experience, but because identities cannot exist without other identities to organize against, group friction will
always occur. So long as people encounter discrimination because of their identities, there will be work to do in minimizing that negative experience and creating a more open and free world. More research should be conducted to better find ways to reduce inter-group hostilities and increase acceptance.

Another potential research subject germane to this thesis is that of American myth and narrative. This work has presented problems related to the American Dream and American Exceptionalism, and American soccer is certainly not the only site at which these myths are being reproduced. It is therefore worthy to look for and examine other places where they appear. In the rhetorical strategies analyzed in this thesis, American Exceptionalism served as the unstated warrant to justify a future of American dominance in the soccer world. Such a future would add to the areas in which American society takes on a semi-hegemonic form; where else in the world could American Exceptionalism be used to justify American dominance? If such a thing is occurring in the soccer realm, it is surely occurring in other places Americans more often direct their attention. American myths should be identified and critiqued as much as possible, so future researchers should continue this effort.
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