

A look at more than
sixty years of international
soccer, as the World Cup
returns to Brazil

PELLÉ

with BRIAN WINTER

WHY SOCCER MATTERS

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A CELEBRA BOOK

Celebra

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For Dona Celeste, with much love

Introduction

I close my eyes, and I can still see my first soccer ball.

Really, it was just a bunch of socks tied together. My friends and I would “borrow” them from our neighbors’ clotheslines, and kick our “ball” around for hours at a time. We’d race through the streets screaming and laughing, battling for hours on end until the sun finally went down. As you might imagine, some people in the neighborhood weren’t too happy with us! But we were crazy for soccer, and too poor to afford anything else. Anyhow, the socks always made it back to their rightful owner, perhaps a bit dirtier than we originally found them.

In later years, I’d practice using a grapefruit, or a couple of old dishrags wadded together, or even bits of trash. It wasn’t until I was nearly a teenager that we started playing with “real” balls. When I played in my first World Cup, when I was seventeen years old in 1958, we used a simple, stitched leather ball—but even that seems like a relic now. After all, the sport has changed so much. In 1958, Brazilians had to wait for up to a month if they wanted to see newsreel footage in theaters of the championship final between Brazil and the host team, Sweden. By contrast, during the last World Cup in 2010 in South Africa, some 3.2 billion people—or about half the planet’s population—tuned in live on television or the Internet to watch the final between Spain and the Netherlands. I guess it’s no coincidence that the balls players use today are sleek, synthetic, multicolored orbs that are tested in wind tunnels to make sure they spin properly. To me, they look more like alien spaceships than something you’d actually try to kick.

I think about all these changes, and I say to myself: *Man, I’m old!* But I also marvel at how the world has evolved—largely for the better—over the last seven decades. How did a poor black boy from rural Brazil, who grew up kicking wadded-up socks and bits of trash around dusty streets, come to be at the center of a global phenomenon watched by billions of people around the world?

In this book, I try to describe some of the awesome changes and events that made my journey possible. I also talk about how soccer has helped make the world a somewhat better place during my lifetime, by bringing communities together and giving disadvantaged kids like myself a sense of purpose and pride. This isn’t a conventional autobiography or memoir—not everything that ever happened to me is contained in these pages. Instead, I’ve tried to tell the overlapping stories of how I’ve evolved as a person and a player, and a bit about how soccer and the world evolved as well. I’ve done so by focusing on five different World Cups, starting with the 1950 Cup that Brazil hosted when I was just a small kid, and ending with the event that Brazil will proudly host once again in 2014. For different reasons, these tournaments have been milestones in my life.

I tell these stories with humility, and with great appreciation for how fortunate I’ve been. I’m thankful to God, and my family, for their support. I’m thankful for all the people who took the time to help me along the way. And I’m also grateful to soccer, the most beautiful of games, for taking a tiny

kid named Edson, and letting him live the life of “Pelé.”

EDSON ARANTES DO NASCIMENTO

“PELÉ”

SANTOS, BRAZIL

SEPTEMBER 20

BRAZIL, 1950

1

“Goooooooooal!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

We laughed. We screamed. We jumped up and down. All of us, my whole family, gathered in our little house. Just like every other family, all across Brazil.

Three hundred miles away, before a raucous home crowd in Rio de Janeiro, mighty Brazil was battling tiny Uruguay in the final game of the World Cup. Our team was favored. Our moment had come. And in the second minute of the second half, one of our forwards, Friaça, shook off a defender and sent a low, sharply struck ball bouncing toward goal. Past the goalie, and into the net it went.

Brazil 1, Uruguay 0.

It was beautiful—even if we couldn’t see it with our own eyes. There was no TV in our small city. In fact, the first broadcasts ever in Brazil were occurring during that very World Cup—but only in Rio. So for us, as for most Brazilians, there was just the radio. Our family had a giant set, square with round knobs and a V-shaped antenna, standing in the corner of our main room, which we were now dancing around madly, whooping and hollering.

I was nine years old, but I will never forget that feeling: the euphoria, the pride, the idea that two of my greatest loves—soccer and Brazil—were now united in victory, the best in the entire world. I remember my mother, her easy smile. And my father, my hero, so restless during those years, so frustrated by his own broken soccer dreams—suddenly very young again, embracing his friends, overcome with happiness.

It would last for exactly nineteen minutes.

I, like millions of other Brazilians, had yet to learn one of life’s hard lessons—in life, as in soccer, nothing is certain until the final whistle blows.

Ah, but how could we have known this? We were young people, playing a young game, in a young nation.

Our journey was only beginning.

2

Prior to that day—July 16, 1950, a date that every Brazilian remembers, like the death of a loved one—it was hard to imagine anything capable of bringing our country together.

Brazilians were separated by so many things back then—our country’s enormous size was one of them. Our little city of Baurú, high on a plateau in the interior of São Paulo state, seemed a world away from the glamorous, beachside capital in Rio where the last game of the World Cup was taking place. Rio was all samba, tropical heat and girls in bikinis—what most outsiders imagine when they think of Brazil. Baurú, by contrast, was so cold on the day of the game that Mom decided to fire up the stove in our kitchen—an extravagance, but one she hoped would help heat up the living room and keep our guests from freezing to death.

If we felt distant from Rio on that day, I can only imagine how my fellow Brazilians in the Amazon, or in the vast Pantanal swamp, or on the rocky, arid *sertão* of the northeast, must have felt. Brazil is bigger than the continental United States, and it felt even bigger back then. This was a time when only the fabulously wealthy could afford cars, and there were hardly any paved roads in Brazil to drive them on anyway. Seeing anything outside your hometown was a distant dream for all but a lucky few; I would be fifteen before I ever saw the ocean, much less a girl in a bikini!

In truth, though, it wasn’t just geography that was keeping us apart. Brazil, a bountiful place in many ways, blessed with gold and oil and coffee and a million other gifts, could often seem like two completely different countries. The tycoons and politicians in Rio had their Paris-style mansions, the horse-racing tracks, and their beach vacations. But that year, 1950, when Brazil hosted the World Cup for the first time, roughly half of Brazilians usually didn’t get enough to eat. Just one in three knew how to read properly. My brother and sister and I were among the half of the population who usually went barefoot. This inequality was rooted in our politics, our culture, and our history—I was a member of just the third generation of my family born free.

Many years later, after my playing career was over, I met the great Nelson Mandela. Of all the people I’ve had the privilege of meeting—popes, presidents, kings, Hollywood stars—no one impressed me more. Mandela said: “Pelé, here in South Africa, we have many different people, speaking many different languages. There in Brazil, you have so much wealth, and only one language—Portuguese. So why is your country not rich? Why is your country not united?”

I had no answer for him then, and I have no perfect answer now. But in my life, in my seventy-three years, I have seen progress. And I know when I believe it began.

Yes, people can curse July 16, 1950, all they want. I understand; I’ve done it myself! But it was, in my mind, the day Brazilians began our long journey down the road to greater unity. The day when our whole country gathered around the radio, celebrated together, and suffered together, as one nation, for the very first time.

The day we began to see the true power of soccer.

3

My earliest memories of soccer are of pickup games on our street, weaving through small brick houses and potholed dirt roads, scoring goals and laughing like crazy between gasps of cold, heavy air. We would play for hours, until our feet hurt, and the sun went down, and our mothers called us back inside. No fancy gear, no expensive jerseys. Just a ball—or something like it. Therein lies much of the beauty of the game.

As for what I did with that ball . . . well, I learned almost everything I know from my father, João Ramos do Nascimento. Like virtually everyone in Brazil, he was known by his nickname—Dondinho.

Dondinho was from a small town in the state of Minas Gerais, literally “General Mines,” where much of Brazil’s gold was found during colonial times. When Dondinho met my mother, Celeste, he was still performing his mandatory military service. She was in school at the time. They married when she was just fifteen; by sixteen she was pregnant with me. They gave me the name “Edson”—after Thomas Edison, because when I was born in 1940, the electric lightbulb had only recently come to their town. They were so impressed that they wanted to pay homage to its inventor. It turned out they missed a letter—but I’ve always loved the name anyway.

Dondinho took his soldiering seriously, but soccer was his true passion. He was six feet tall, huge for Brazil, especially in those days, and very skilled with the ball. He had a particular talent for jumping high into the air and scoring goals with his head, something he once did an amazing five times in one game. That probably was—and is—a national record. Years later, people would say, with some exaggeration—the only goal-scoring record in Brazil that doesn’t belong to Pelé is held by his own father!

It was no coincidence. I’m certain that Dondinho could have been one of the all-time Brazilian greats. He just never got a chance to prove it.

When I was born, my dad was playing semiprofessional ball in a town in Minas Gerais called Três Corações—“Three Hearts,” in English. Truth be told, it wasn’t much of a living. While a few elite soccer clubs paid decent salaries back then, the vast majority didn’t. So being a soccer player carried a certain stigma—it was like being a dancer, or an artist, or any profession that people pursue out of love, not because there’s any real money in it. Our young family drifted from town to town, always in search of the next paycheck. At one point, we spent a whole year living in a hotel—but not quite the luxury kind, let’s say. It was, as we later joked, a zero-star resort for soccer players—as well as traveling salesmen and outright bums.

Right before my second birthday, in 1942, it looked like all that sacrifice would finally pay off. Dondinho got what appeared to be his big break. He was called up to play for Atlético Mineiro, the biggest and richest club in all of Minas Gerais. This was, finally, a soccer job that could support all of our family, maybe comfortably. My dad was just twenty-five; he had his whole playing career in front

of him. But during his very first match, against São Cristóvão, a team from Rio, disaster struck when Dondinho collided at full speed with an opposing defender named Augusto.

That was not the last we heard of Augusto, who would recover and go on to other things. But it was, sadly, the high point of Dondinho's playing career. He catastrophically damaged his knee—the ligaments, perhaps the meniscus. I say “perhaps” because there were no MRIs back then, no real sports medicine to speak of at all in Brazil, in fact. We didn't really know what was wrong, much less how to treat it. All we knew was to put ice on whatever hurt, elevate it, and hope for the best. Needless to say, Dondinho's knee would never fully heal.

Unable to make it on the field for his second game, Dondinho was quickly cut from the team and sent back home to Três Corações. Thus began the true journeyman years, a period that would see our family constantly struggling to make ends meet.

Even in the best of times, things had been tough—but now Dondinho was around the house a lot, trying to stay off his knee, hoping it would somehow mend and he could go back to Atlético, or someplace similarly lucrative. I do understand why he did this; he thought it was the best path to making a good living for his family. But when he wasn't well enough to play, there was hardly any money coming in, and of course there was no social safety net whatsoever in Brazil during the 1940s. Meanwhile, there were new mouths to feed—my brother and sister, Jair and Maria Lucia, had just come into the world. My father's mother, Dona Ambrosina, also moved in with us—as did my mother's brother, Uncle Jorge.

My siblings and I wore secondhand clothes, sometimes stitched from sacks used to transport wheat. There was no money for shoes. On some days, the only meal Mom could make us was bread with a slice of banana, perhaps supplemented by sacks of rice and beans that Uncle Jorge brought from his job at a general store. Now, this made us lucky compared to a great many Brazilians—I have to say that we never went hungry. Our house was of a decent size, not part of a slum—or *favela*, to use the Brazilian word—by any means. But the roof leaked, and water would soak our floor with every storm. And there was also that constant anxiety, which we all felt, including the kids, about where our next meal would come from. Anybody who has ever been that poor will tell you that uncertainty, that fear once it enters your bones, it's like a chill that never leaves you. To be honest, I sometimes feel it even today.

Our fortunes improved slightly when we moved to Baurú. Dad got a job working at the Casa Lusitania—the general store, which belonged to the same man who owned the Baurú Athletic Club, or BAC, one of two semiprofessional soccer teams in the city. Dondinho was an errand boy during the week, making and serving coffee, helping deliver mail and such. On weekends, he was BAC's star striker.

On the field, my dad showed glimpses—when healthy—of the brilliance that had once put him so tantalizingly close to the big time. He scored lots of goals, and in 1946 he helped lead BAC to the semiprofessional league championship in São Paulo state's interior. He also had a certain charisma, a way of carrying himself with elegance and good cheer despite the bad luck that had befallen his soccer career. Just about everybody in Baurú knew who he was and liked him. I was known wherever I went as Dondinho's son, a title of which I was, and am, very proud. But times were still tight, and I remember thinking even then that it wasn't worth anything to be famous if you couldn't put food on the table.

I guess Dondinho could have sought another skill, another occupation. But soccer can be both generous and cruel. Those who fall under its spell never really escape. And when Dondinho realized that his own dream was falling short, he dedicated himself, heart and soul, to nurturing someone

else's.

4

“Ah, so you think you’re good, eh?”

I would stare down at my feet, and smile.

“Kick the ball here,” he would say, pointing at a spot on the wall of our house.

If I succeeded—and I usually did—he would grin for just a moment, and then abruptly turn serious again.

“Very well! Now do it with your other foot!”

Blam!

“Now with your head!”

Blam!

And so it would go, for hours and hours, sometimes late into the night, just the two of us, me and him. These were soccer fundamentals at their most basic: dribbling, shooting, passing the ball back and forth. We didn’t have access to the city’s soccer field most of the time, so we used the space available, which consisted of our tiny yard and the street outside, which was called Rubens Arruda Street. Sometimes he’d tell me stories from games he’d played, and show me moves that he’d learned or invented himself. He also talked, on occasion, about his older brother, a midfielder who Dad said was an even better goal scorer than he was, but who died at just twenty-five—another promising career in the Nascimento family that tragically didn’t live up to its potential.

Mostly, though, it was just drills, learning the basic skills of the game. Some of the exercises were, in retrospect, pretty funny. One involved tying a ball to a tree limb up high and bouncing it off the top of my head for hours at a time. But that was child’s play compared to Dondinho’s technique for teaching me how to “head” the ball properly into the goal. He would grab a ball with both his hands and then hit me in the middle of my forehead with it, over and over again. “Don’t blink! Don’t blink!” he would say. His point was that to really be good, I had to learn to keep my eyes open when the ball hit my head. He even told me that, when I was just sitting around the house, I should pick up a ball and slam it against my head on my own. Which I did—I can’t imagine how ridiculous I must have looked! But, obviously, Dondinho thought it was very important—and he was right. It was a lesson that would serve me extremely well later on.

Besides the headers, there were two skills in particular that Dondinho wanted me to focus on: 1) Keeping the ball as close to my body as possible while dribbling, and 2) being able to do everything equally well with both feet.

Why did he emphasize these things? Maybe because of the small spaces we played in—on the streets of Baurú, and in yards and alleys. But also, perhaps, because my dad saw that I was pretty small and scrawny. As an adult, I would grow to be just five feet, seven inches tall; it was clear even then that I was going to be short. So unlike Dondinho, I wouldn’t have any natural physical advantage.

on the soccer field. If I couldn't knock other players out of the way, or jump higher than them, I'd just have to be more skilled. I'd have to learn to make the ball an extension of myself.

Dondinho taught me all these things, it must be said, at considerable risk. My mother, Dona Celeste, *dreaded* the possibility of her oldest son becoming a soccer player. And who could blame her? For Dona Celeste, soccer was this dead-end pursuit, a sure path to poverty. She was a strong woman, always looking out for us. It was often left to her to be the responsible one in a houseful of dreamers. She wanted me to spend my free time studying, so I could make something of myself one day. Then as now, she was like the angel sitting on our shoulders, always encouraging us to do the right, moral, constructive thing. She wanted better lives for all of us. So in those early years, when she caught me playing soccer, she would give me a good verbal lashing. And sometimes much worse!

Despite her well-intentioned efforts, my dad and I couldn't be stopped. What could she do? We both had the sickness. And as time passed, and we kept playing in the little yard, it got to the point where Dona Celeste would just walk outside, put her hands on her hips and heave a resigned sigh:

"Oh, great. Your eldest son! Just don't come complaining to me later when he's starving, instead of studying medicine or law!"

Dondinho would put his arm around her waist, and laugh.

"Don't worry, Celeste. Unless he learns to use his left foot properly, you have nothing to worry about!"

The parent with frustrated dreams of sporting greatness, training a son or daughter to follow in his or her footsteps—it's an old tale, one that is full of peril. Some children resent the burden that comes with these expectations. Other kids, placed under heavy pressure, simply snap. Some of them never kick a ball again.

I never felt any of these things. The simple truth was that I *loved* soccer. I loved the feel of the ball on my foot, the sun on my face, the camaraderie that came with great teamwork, the electricity that ran through my veins when I scored a goal. But most of all, I loved the time that I spent with my dad. During all those long hours we spent practicing, I don't think Dondinho ever thought that I'd be rich or famous, not during those early years, anyway. I think he just loved the damn game—and wanted to pass that love along to his son.

He succeeded. And I have to say, that love has never faded. It's deep inside of me, like religion, or a language you learn from birth. My dad's gone now. But the amazing thing is that, all these years later, I still can't separate my love for soccer from my love for him.

5

Throughout my life, I would have the honor of playing soccer in nearly all of the world's great venues—the Maracanã in Rio, Camp Nou in Barcelona, even Yankee Stadium in New York City. But my very first competitive games were played on the hallowed grounds of “Rubens Arruda Stadium”—which wasn't really a field at all, but the dusty street in front of our house in Baurú. Kids from the neighborhood were my first rivals. We used old shoes for goalposts; the houses were out of bounds (most of the time); and if an errant kick broke a streetlight or window, we'd run like crazy, although everybody usually assumed I was to blame, being known around town as the most soccer-crazy of the whole bunch. I guess that was the one downside of being Dondinho's son!

Our pickup games reflected why I think soccer brings people together like no other single activity. Other sports, like baseball or cricket or American football, require all kinds of expensive equipment and rigidly organized teams. They might have been off-limits to a bunch of poor, unorganized kids in a place like Baurú. But all we needed for soccer was a ball. It could be one-on-one, or eleven-on-eleven, and we were entertained just the same. In our neighborhood, I could run out there pretty much anytime of day and find at least six or ten other kids to play with. Our mothers were nearby, so they could keep an eye on us. But there really wasn't much to worry about in small-town Brazil in the 1940s—there were no cars, hardly any violent crime, and everybody in the community knew one another. So, no matter the time of day, Rubens Arruda Stadium was almost always playing host to a game of some kind, unless the referee—that is, my mom—broke it up.

Another great thing about soccer is that literally anybody can play—you can be small, tall, strong, or slight, but as long as you can run and kick, you're perfectly suited to take a soccer field. As a result, our pickup games gathered an incredibly diverse, varied group of kids. Each game was like a little gathering of the United Nations: We had Syrians, Portuguese, Italians, Japanese, and of course many Afro-Brazilians like myself.

In that sense, Baurú was a microcosm of Brazil, which absorbed millions of immigrants from all over the world. It was a true melting pot, just as diverse as—if not more so than—the United States. Many outsiders don't know that São Paulo, even today, has the largest Japanese-descended population of any city outside of Japan. Baurú was two hundred miles from São Paulo, and seemingly one-millionth of the size, but we also absorbed our fair share of immigrants who originally came to work in the coffee plantations just outside our city. My neighbors had last names like Kamazuki, Haddad, and Marconi. Soccer made us put aside whatever differences we might have, and I'd go over to their houses afterward to eat yakisoba, kibbe or just plain Brazilian rice and beans. It was a great introduction to the world, and it awakened an early appetite for other cultures—one I would be lucky enough to greatly indulge in coming years.

I was always in a rush to play, so I was usually the one who took charge of dividing up the teams

This was complicated. Why? Well, at the risk of sounding immodest, all those drills with Dondinho were starting to pay off. And that was becoming a problem. My team would win games 12–3, or 20–0. Kids started refusing to play, even those much older than I. So at first, I would try to keep everybody interested by creating lopsided teams, pitting three against seven, for example, and putting myself on the smaller side. When even that wasn't enough, I started playing the first half of the game as the goalie, just to keep the score close, before finally taking up offense toward the end. Playing goalie so often in those years was another decision that would echo throughout my life in the strangest ways, and eventually give me my most famous nickname, the one the world knows me by.

Nicknames are a funny thing in Brazil—almost everybody's got one, and some people have three or four. At that time, I was still known as “Dico”—which my family calls me even today. My brother Jair, was called “Zoca.” And when Zoca and I weren't on the field, we had all kinds of adventures with our friends around town—the railway station was just a few blocks away from our house, and we'd go there to see people arriving from São Paulo and elsewhere—it was our window to the world. On other days, we'd go fish in the Baurú River, right under the railway bridge; we couldn't afford rods or reels of course, so we'd borrow circular, wood-edged screens, and scoop the fish out that way. On many days, we'd go running with our friends into the forest that surrounded the city, where we'd pick fresh mangoes and plums from the trees and hunt birds, including one species called the tiziu, which briefly became another nickname of mine—because tizius are small, black and fast!

It wasn't all fun and games, of course. Nudged by our family's economic situation, I had started working part-time when I was seven. My uncle Jorge lent me some money and I bought a shoe shine kit—a little box with some brushes inside, and a leather strap for carrying it around. I practiced at first by shining for friends and members of our family, and then when I had the technique down, I went to the train station and shined shoes there. In coming years, I would also work at a shoe factory. For a brief time, I took *pastels*—a delicious, deep-fried Brazilian empanada of sorts, usually stuffed with ground beef or cheese or hearts of palm—that were made by a Syrian woman in our neighborhood and I delivered them to a vendor. He then sold them to passengers on one of the three rail lines that ran through town.

There wasn't much money in any of this—Baurú was poor, like the rest of Brazil. It often seemed like a city of too many shoe shiners, and not enough shoes. But, whatever I earned, I'd dutifully deliver all of it to my mom, who used the money to help buy us food. When times were good, she'd give me a few coins to go see a matinee on Sunday.

There was also school. Here, I'm afraid my performance wasn't quite equal to what I was doing on the field. My enthusiasm for soccer, above all, made me a difficult and often rebellious student. Sometimes I'd just walk out of the classroom and start dribbling a wadded-up piece of paper through the courtyard. Now, my teachers did the best they could—they tried to discipline me by making me kneel on piles of dried beans, or by putting balls of crumpled paper in my mouth to stop me from talking. One teacher would make me stand facing the corner, my arms outstretched, kind of like the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio. I remember one time I got in huge trouble for crawling under a teacher's desk and looking up her dress.

Over time, I got discouraged by school. There were lots of other things to do, and I'm sorry to say that my attendance became sporadic. This was sadly typical at the time—in the late 1940s, only one in three Brazilian kids went to school at all. Just one in six made it to high school. Still, this was little excuse. I would later regret not having paid more attention as a student, and would go to considerable lengths to make up for it.

For better and for worse, I reserved most of my considerable energy for the soccer field. It was a

place where we didn't have to think about poverty, or our parents, or long-ago tragedies. On the field nobody was rich or poor; it was a place where we could just play. We spent our days talking, breathing, and living the sport. Little did we know, soccer was about to be the backdrop for the biggest thing ever to happen in Brazil.

6

Then as now, there's nothing that gets people everywhere quite as excited as the World Cup. The tournament brings together countries from all over the world every four years for a full month of games, celebrations and pageantry. It's like a huge party where the entire planet is invited. I've been to every one of them for the last fifty-six years, as either a player, fan or designated "ambassador" to the sport of soccer. Based on my experience, I can say with some authority that there's just nothing better. The Olympics are great too, of course, but for my taste there's almost too much going on with all the different events. With the World Cup, it's only soccer—a tournament that builds and builds to an exhilarating climax, the championship game, when the new kings of the world are anointed.

It's such an institution now that it seems like the World Cup has been around forever. But in 1950 when it first came to Brazilian soil, the World Cup was still a relatively new idea—and it was on somewhat shaky ground. The first Cup had been organized only twenty years before, in 1930. A Frenchman named Jules Rimet, who was the president of FIFA, the global soccer body, decided to create a showcase for the ever-more popular sport. His plan was to gather teams every four years, at the midpoint between each Summer Olympics—hoping that it would increase the profile of international teams and also make a contribution to global harmony. Unfortunately, there were only men's teams back then—several more decades would pass until someone had the excellent, long-overdue idea of staging a World Cup for women's teams, as well.

The first few World Cups drew teams from countries as varied as Cuba, Romania and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), as well as already entrenched superpowers like Brazil and Italy. The World Cup grew in prestige and attendance, and by the 1938 edition, held in France, games were playing to big venues packed with tens of thousands of people. But there were several foreboding events at that 1938 Cup, such as when the Austrian team had to withdraw at the last minute—because three months earlier, their nation had been absorbed into Germany. The German team ended up incorporating several of Austria's best players, but they were eliminated in the first round anyway before a hostile, bottle-throwing crowd in Paris. It was, unfortunately, not the last time that politics would intrude on the soccer field.

When World War II erupted a year later, the World Cup—like so many other things—was put on hold for a long while. The war ended in 1945, but most of Europe was so terribly devastated, and focused on rebuilding its cities and factories, that years would pass before anybody thought it was possible to hold a global soccer tournament again. By 1950, it finally seemed like the Cup was ready to resume—but the organizers needed a host country that hadn't been touched by the war, and could afford to build the stadiums and other infrastructure required. And that's where Brazil came in.

Even after Brazil agreed to host the 1950 Cup, several countries were still too broke to send team

all the way to South America. This was before the age when everyone could travel by jet, and getting to Brazil from Europe could still take thirty hours and require several stops in places like Cape Verde and Recife, on Brazil's northeastern coast. Germany, which was still partitioned and occupied by the Allied powers, was banned from participating. So was Japan. Scotland and Turkey withdrew at the last minute. In the end, only six countries would attend from Europe, which besides South America was the other powerhouse of global soccer. This was too bad for them—but it seemed to be great for Brazil! We were still looking for our first World Cup title, and we thought we were way overdue. With a limited field of competitors, and the games on our home turf, how could we possibly lose?

In Baurú, as elsewhere in Brazil, all of us became consumed by World Cup fever—well, not so much by the Cup itself, but by the absolute certainty that we were about to be crowned the champions of the world. I was only nine, but definitely old enough to get swept up in things. “The Cup is ours!” I remember my dad saying, confidently, again and again, as we all listened to news of the preparations for the tournament on the radio at night. “The Cup is going to be ours, Dico!”

Among my friends, there was talk of celebrations and parades, and arguments over who might get to see the trophy themselves. We played our street games while imagining ourselves as the world champions. In fact, it was pretty amazing how, wherever I went, I couldn't find a single soul who even considered the possibility that Brazil might not win the whole thing.

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A new energy was taking hold in Brazil, and everybody could feel it. People seemed to have a spring in their step, a desire to impress the world, even in far-flung places like Baurú where the Cup was barely more tangible than a rumor. As such, our little bunch of players on Rubens Arruda Street felt inspired to do something bigger and better. We decided to go beyond just our usual pickup games and organize ourselves into a proper team, like the Brazilian national team, or Dondinho's BAC. We wanted to have all the proper gear—shirts, shorts, shoes and socks. And of course we'd need something better than a wadded-up bunch of socks for a ball.

There was one hitch: We didn't have ten cents among us.

I suggested to the gang that maybe we could raise funds by putting together a collection of soccer stickers. These stickers were all the rage at the time—they were sort of like baseball cards, with each sticker bearing a player's photo and maybe a few statistics as well. So my idea was to get all the kids to pool our stickers together and put them together in an album, focusing on the really popular teams from Rio and São Paulo, so the collection would be worth more. We'd then find somebody willing to swap the album for a real leather ball.

This plan was quickly accepted, but it still left us many miles short of our ambitious fund-raising goal. One kid nicknamed Zé Porto suggested that we could bridge the difference by selling toasted peanuts at the door to the circus and the movie theater. Ah, a great idea! But where would we get the peanuts? As it turned out, Zé Porto had a ready-made solution for this problem, too. He smiled deviously and suggested that we could just steal some peanuts from one of the warehouses down by the railway.

This idea made some of us really uneasy. I remembered my mom's dire warning that theft was one of the very worst sins. I could sense other boys thinking the exact same thing. But Zé Porto was quite the persuasive fellow. He argued that even if we couldn't get into the warehouse, we could break into one of the train wagons themselves, and, anyway, who would notice if a few bags of peanuts went missing?

"Besides," he added, "anybody who doesn't agree is a big shit!"

Well, we couldn't really argue with that. So down we all went to the train station, walking on eggshells the whole way. As one of the group's unofficial leaders, I was selected as one of the two kids who would actually slip inside the train wagons to get the peanuts. I had my misgivings, but . . . anything for soccer, I guess.

As we slipped into the train wagons, I couldn't shake the mental image of my mom looking over us, arms folded, shaking her head in disapproval and sadness. But it was too late to turn back. We cut the sacks open, and a tidal wave of peanuts came pouring out onto the wood floor. We frantically gathered them up in our pockets, our shirts, and in the rusty old bucket we had brought along for the

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