

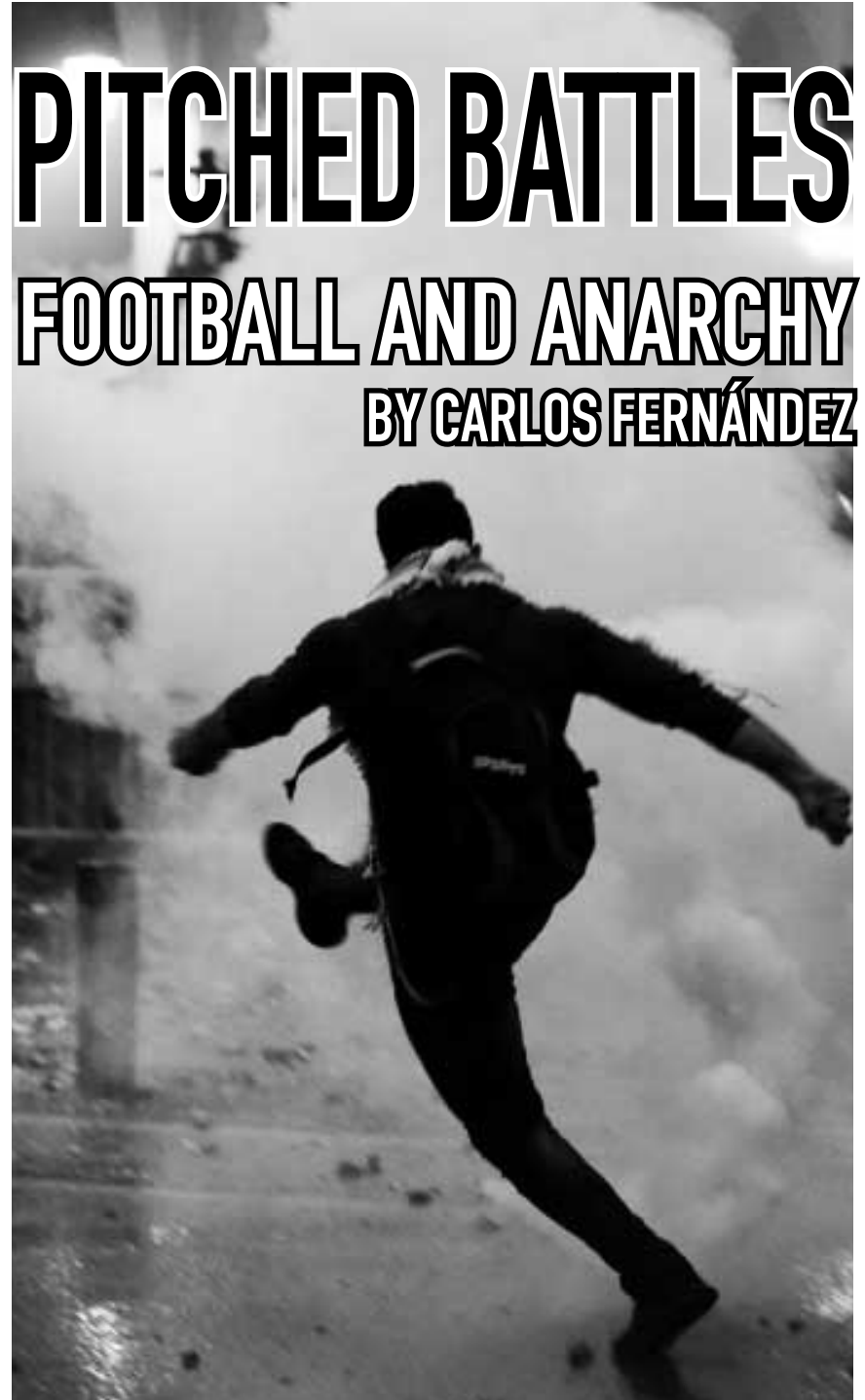
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PITCHED BATTLES

FOOTBALL AND ANARCHY

BY CARLOS FERNÁNDEZ



In one moment during Cameroon's near-victory over England in a 1990 World Cup quarterfinal, affinity took on a real, visible shape. The attack that put Cameroon one goal ahead was thrilling not only because it shamed one of the best teams, but also because it was executed so brilliantly. That Cameroon's play was both a thing of plain beauty and an underdog's success suggests how a moment of affinity can be poetic and concrete. In a recent Chicago Arsenal game, a teammate's simple pass surprised the other team and suddenly put our team into a fast break. After a couple more passes, we scored, as stunned as our opponents. Aren't such lucky chains of events the way we often imagine resistance, if not revolution, might happen? The magic of play touches the revolutionary imagination like poetry or art: It can spark a vision and feeling of things changing.

Of course, football doesn't appeal to everyone. But neither does any art or other cultural expression. What good does it do for revolution if its appeal isn't universal? The question is not a zero-sum situation, where we should either use the sport or discard it. The game can be changed. We can build team cohesion and skills with more in mind than just winning games. We can make it fun for more people, even for those who don't play. The potential of football as a part of political struggles requires that the sport be opened up again.

Skilling, sharing, and affinity must be made inclusive. On the football field, anarchist teams should adjust the pace and mood to keep new players involved. The game allows this by its fluid nature: offense can involve more passing than sprinting and defense can concentrate on containing its opponents. This general advice needs to be made more specific with regards to gender. Women should be a part of every team and all macho behavior should be kept off the field. It would be a great day when sexist put-down used against players, a common aspect of professional play, would be replaced with banter like, "Don't be such a male chauvinist! Pass the ball!" (I'm sure it would be catchier, though.)

TOWARD A CONCLUSION

It seems to be about simplicity: Football, at its heart, is a simple game, and anarchism, from the heart, is a simple wish. The sport's fundamental ease has taken it around the world and dragged us with it. It's one of the most wonderful things when we meet someone new at a game, or our bonds strengthen at dinner or a bar after we play. If the football field is essentially a meeting place for play, it must then extend to wherever people enjoy being with each other. That's where anarchy might start, or at least where it can blossom. When the idea of self-organization can be made obvious by how a goal is scored or how a team trains, anarchism seems like no great feat. Bringing football and anarchism together is a natural, symbiotic thing. The pitch, what Gramsci called a "great open-air kingdom of human loyalty," needs to be made ours.

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In the Aguascalientes IV of Zapatista territory, we played football between two long, wood-plank dormitories, aiming for netless goals with sagging crossbars. The ball would often fly onto the buildings' roofs. This would not take it out of play, but instead lead to a brief struggle underneath the eaves to capture the ball as it rolled down. Those were crazy moments, charged with unreality because we played all out in the middle of a poverty alien to visitors like me, and even as military planes made their regular flyovers. On that field of strangeness in Mexico, some of us, visitors and hosts, came to know each other—if only slightly, at least sincerely. Football, played to fit the circumstances, opened connections between us, across barriers of languages, values, and even fitness. I was having a hard time with the altitude.

There are certain powerful ways in which the football field, or pitch, duplicates the social field. First, as history; it is a location of social activity. Nationalities, classes, and smaller social identities act out passionately on and around the pitch. Next, as collective formation; groups assemble into myriad shapes on and off the pitch, as elsewhere in societies. Football can touch off the powerful emotions that drive affiliations like teams, fan clubs, hooligan gangs, and beyond. Third, as style, the ways individuals and their communities or societies state their uniqueness; in football, this occurs mostly in the styles of play. Maybe most famously, Brazil produced a fluid kind of game obviously developed from capoeira, the Afro-Brazilian martial art. Fourth and most importantly, the football field reproduces the interdependence that characterizes the social; when people enthusiastically participate in the sport, they redefine it and themselves.

I do not seek to romanticize or intellectualize play here. I hope to inspire a way of looking at football (or any game) as a very real elaboration of people's philosophies, politics, and hopes. This makes it an important site of production of power relations. On the pitch, power is named, shared, contested, and felt. Its distribution never settles until the whistle blows. We need an anarchist attack on the sport's wider fields of form and organization. Kicking a ball around can be made as anarchist as barricading a street or forming a co-op.

HOW CAN FOOTBALL BE ANARCHIST?

To begin, we can be sure that anarchists have played football as long as either has been around. The relationship is often explicit, as in the early 20th century, when the club now known as Argentinos Juniors was called the Chicago Martyrs and another club was begun in a Buenos Aires anarchist library. We can also confidently guess that some of the Barcelona team that toured North America in 1937, raising money for the Republic, would identify themselves with their city's anarchists. And, one should question, were the striking professional players in Paris of May 1968 very different from the students or workers when they demanded their own part of freedom? Could the anti-authoritarian fans of St. Pauli leave their politics at the stadium gates or forget football before a meeting or protest? If many spaces and actions are often anarchist primarily by association, then football has an old anarchist face.

Also, people's love for the game has translated into their love for freedom and justice, as in the case of the '42 Dynamo Kiev team, the Algerians who quit French teams as their country fought for independence, or non-white European professionals like Ruud Gullit, who've taken stands against racism, greed, and fascism. As people have reproduced their values, identities, and desires within the game, they've stretched football into something more. Telling from their website www.chumba.com/_footie.html, Chumbawamba sponsors the Wetherby Athletic, a youth team, out of their passion for the game. Yet, their politics come out right on the kids' jerseys, emblazoned with the word "anarchy."

Politics do not appear as aberrations or accidents in football. They are part of people's interaction with the game. The sport retains its shape as a game from the heights of a World Cup final to games played on uneven fields in rebel Mexico. Its players, basic rules, and objectives remain the same. The sport changes in how people come together around its fundamental elements. The Barras Bravas of South America; the hooligans, ultras, and carnival fans of Europe—these provocative fringes of fandom suggest that new, energetic cultural forms can emerge from the football field. Although we won't fill stadiums very soon, the same is happening today among anarchists. Anarchist football appeared in the last few years with, unsurprisingly, no single name, style, or organization. In the US mid-Atlantic region, people play as the Anarchist Soccer League. On the west coast, anarchists and others play without names.

In the Midwest, the Arsenal, Riot, and Swarm play as the Anarchist Football Association. The last is an association or federation or network only by the minimum definitions of the terms. Some meet weekly, some yearly. The games last one or two hours. What happens before, during, or after follows no set outline. In a peculiar anarchist way, this new face of football repeats the history of the sport, the way collective politics and passion fuse on the pitch.

The Anarchist Football Association, as an example, can be considered a hypothetical, proposed, or working form for anarchist community. It might be nothing more than an

anagram on patches worn by a bunch of people or it might be a real, large, but latent anarchist constituency. Its Chicago affiliate, ostensibly the most organized one (with a phone list, uniforms, schedule, etc.), includes individuals whose frequency of play, degrees of friendship, and political beliefs all vary widely. Outside the Association, an assortment of very non-regulation games are played in cities such as Portland, Berkeley, and San Francisco. This range of incidence points to a mutual redefinition of anarchism and football. Each one is transformed by joining the other. Anarchist games cleave football away from the commodification pushed by Nike, Major League Soccer, and [the] Federation of International Football Associations. And they give anarchism another rejuvenated cultural formation, a new shape for its expression.

What is a cultural formation? Fantasy might be an unavoidable term for what I'm trying to describe. And it's not one that I would immediately throw out. When I discovered Profane Existence in high school and saw the photos of huge European black blocs, I imagined that it would feel incredible to participate in such a collective action. A couple of years later, I unexpectedly joined the black bloc in a march against the Gulf War. I was hooked. Ever since, my ties to and identification with anarchists have wavered, but every upswing has hinged on such ambiguous images and fleeting moments of community. All the exchange, cooperation, and affinity that occur on the football field can serve the same functions of identification and loyalty.

Anarchist football can express collective identities through teams, specifically in how they practice anarchist ideals and build collective skills. Deciding on positions and strategies without a coach, training without pressure, using players of all skill-levels; who could accomplish these beside anarchists? And couldn't we use the communication skills and other cooperative skills in football in our direct actions? One skill that experienced football players often know is support. On the field, a player supports others by putting herself where her teammates can pass to her in order to keep the ball away from defenders or to advance it up the field. This technique involves awareness of where your comrades are and what they might do. During extra-legal work, such skills make actions faster, tighter and safer. Many other parts of playing football can feed into our tactics, and the reverse can also be true. A teammate of mine alludes to this mutual relationship in her declaration, "We kick. We run. We kick ass. We run away."

Non-technical aspects of football can also reinforce our collective political efforts, especially on a long term basis. For example, the idea of affinity as a strategic organizing principle—people taking political action in small groups based on mutual trust—is an anarchist innovation, but one which can be hard to realize. Playing football together regularly can provide a concrete sense of affinity. All the communication and cooperation that make up the game congeal into a feeling of mutual trust and understanding, a feeling that, once known, can be more easily achieved in other contexts. It's a beautiful thing when a few people together make an impact greater than the sum of their parts. If we don't see it enough in politics, we can at least find it in the best examples of football.