

# The View From Afar

*Fans in the United States may be more engaged in international sports, but the interest goes both ways*



BOB LATHAM

**A**nother soccer World Cup has come and gone, and the event again demonstrated the increasing willingness of American sports fans to be drawn into what the rest of the world was watching. But Americans may not be as keenly aware that the inverse is also occurring: The global sports community has a growing appetite for our professional sports competitions. As I

have watched some of our domestic championship events (in which we dumbfound the rest of the world by crowning a “world” champion) from various parts of the globe over the last few years, the perspective has been interesting.

I watched Game 7 of the 2011 “World” Series from the site of the Pan Am Games in Guadalajara, Mexico, and Game 5 that year in a hotel bar in Auckland, New Zealand. I watched the 2011 NBA Finals in the wee hours of the morning from Istanbul, a place with a significant basketball fan base. And I watched the NHL Stanley Cup finals in 2013 from a sports bar in Port of Spain, Trinidad, not a place known for its ice rinks. At each venue, I was not only pleasantly surprised to see that these events were available on television, but that they were followed by a healthy local fan base with substantial knowledge of the games, teams and competitions. (And this, of course, is leaving aside online live streaming and other outlets for those games.) Thus, I am pleased to report from my very informal survey that the United States does not appear to have a trade deficit when it comes to sports. The level of global interest in our sports is at least as high as our current—and certainly better than our historical—engagement in global sports.

Former NBA Commissioner David Stern has been appropriately lauded for his foresight in creating a global fan base for the NBA. Major League Baseball made efforts to do the same thing by opening this season with regular-season games in Australia. The NFL will play three regular season games in London this year. The NHL has wisely made its players available for the Olympic Winter Games in past years and should continue to do so. Any sports league that is not trying to open up new markets in places around the globe is missing a massive opportunity.

The Dallas Cowboys will be playing one of the London NFL games this year, and I have heard a number of voices

of dissent claiming that such a game is a strain on the athletes, or not worth the effort or disruptive to the regular season. (Disruptive? Really? They already have Dez Bryant on the roster.) These are the same types of voices that would have advised Columbus not to sail west. Plus, I don’t know what era of travel such myopic pundits are living in. It’s a shorter flight from Chicago to London than it is from Chicago to Hawaii, and you don’t hear complaints from NFL players about going to play patty-cake with each other in the Pro Bowl every year.

**Athletes in global sports cross oceans all the time.** The pro tennis tour this year had events in three consecutive weeks in Rio, Dubai and Southern California. Last year, Jordan Spieth qualified for the British Open by winning the John Deere Classic in Illinois on July 14 and had to make his way to Scotland to tee off on July 18. And speaking of Scotland, the Scottish rugby team this year played three successive weekend matches in Canada, Argentina and South Africa before heading back to Scotland. That’s four continents in four weeks, for those of you keeping score.

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This is the new reality, and it should not be hard to grasp since it has a historical domestic analog. Before 1958, there was no MLB team west of Kansas City. Before 1960, there was no NBA team west of St. Louis. Before 1967, there was no NHL team west or south of Chicago. Fans in the western United States were fans from afar, even in their own country. But there is a certain beauty to that. Just as MLB fans west of Missouri could choose their favorite team before westward expansion, potential MLB, NFL or NBA fans around the globe can do the same thing today. Similarly, American fans can choose their soccer team in the English Premier League, which NBC now broadcasts in real time. The world is full of fan free agents, waiting to be signed—and waiting to buy replica jerseys. In fact, there is probably now a much larger market for LeBron James Heat jerseys in Istanbul than there is in Miami. ■

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