

“Soccer and US Immigration” by Adam Edward Rothwell, Esq.

Soccer and US Immigration are closely linked. The popularity of soccer (“futbol” overseas) dwarfs its popularity in the US, and the rise of soccer’s popularity in the US has been tied to trends in immigration.

The two top markets for US viewership of the world cup have been Washington State. The second highest viewership has been greater Washington, DC. Both of these areas have large immigration populations. Conversely, while I have not seen any documentation on World Cup ratings in either Norman, Oklahoma or the State of Mississippi, I expect these areas with relatively lower immigrant populations have not seen record rating spikes.

If foreign soccer stars want to enter the US, professional teams may consider sponsoring them for either O-1 or P-1 Visas, which are work visas available to professional athletes with international acclaim. Generally major professional league teams are likely to sponsor foreign athletes for O-1 Visas and minor league professional teams are likely to sponsor foreign athletes for P-1 Visas.

US minor league soccer clubs encounter some difficulty when it comes to immigration sponsorship though, as minor league professional soccer in the US is very different from minor league baseball for example.

To determine if a foreign citizen qualifies as having international acclaim, one factor the US Immigration Service considers is the offered salary. And internationally acclaimed professional athletes are expected to make decent incomes. All minor league baseball teams have sponsors and often draw thousands of people, so minor league players may receive good or at least decent salaries. Conversely, a minor league professional soccer team where I live in Baltimore often draws less than 300. My assumption is their players are under contract to receive money for beer and not much else, which would make sponsorship difficult. Among other reasons the immigration service is unlikely to believe a soccer star of international acclaim would be willing to accept a salary of “two pitchers of domestic.”

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