**It’s Called Soccer: A Rhetorical Analysis of United States Soccer**

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**Abstract**

Throughout the world, differing sports are popular based on culture and location. The United States is one of those where soccer has not always been the most popular sport. However, that has been changing with time and so has the outside worlds opinions about the sport in America. This paper aims to present how soccer is viewed as a result of popularity, revenue, and ability level through a rhetorical analysis of the broader scope surrounding American soccer. It can be demonstrated that there have been massive advancements in rhetoric surrounding American soccer over the last 28 years, and data trends show that there are still many to be made in the near future.

**Keywords:** Major League Soccer (MLS), transfers, Seattle Sounders, revenue, popularity, rhetoric

When I was nine years old, I was granted with the opportunity of a lifetime and every young soccer supporter dream. It was the summer of 2009 and I was playing for a local soccer team called Crossfire Premier. One day my coach called me over and asked who my favorite player was on FC Barcelona. To which I answered, as about 99 percent of the population would’ve, that my favorite player was Lionel Messi. This same summer was not long after the Seattle Sounders had joined Major League soccer and it was time for European teams to come to America for their preseason training camps. FC Barcelona was coming to town and they were going to play against the Sounders here in Seattle. Just the thought of going to that game was magnificent. But it got even better. The reason my coach asked me that question was not pure curiosity. This local club that I played for had a sponsorship deal with Nike, as did FC Barcelona. Because of this, my coach was able to pick the kids who got to walk out hand in hand with the players from FC Barcelona. When I got the news that I could be one of the kids, I was in disbelief.

Fast forward to the day of the game, I arrived at what was called Qwest Field at the time, shaking from excitement. The others kids and I were escorted to the locker room designated for us, and waiting there were full FC Barcelona kits, salmon colored, as that was one of their jersey colors that year. We were told that we would be able to meet the FC Barcelona players, who was a team loaded with superstars, but they arrived late to the stadium so that never came to fruition. Instead, we waited for them in the tunnel to walk out to the game. I was already designated to be one of the two kids to walk out with Lionel Messi, so I was standing in the front of the tunnel, as we were told he was going to be the first one. Once the players came out, I was in the front standing next to their team captain Carles Puyol. Don’t get me wrong, I was ecstatic to be standing next to him as he was also a superstar, he just wasn’t Messi. As we were waiting, one of the employees organizing the event came up to the front and switched me from the front to the tenth in line. After moving back there, I looked up and standing next to me was the greatest player in the world, Lionel Messi. Him and another global superstar, his teammate Dani Alves were talking to each other in Spanish about me and the girl who was also walking out Messi. To this day I can remember every single detail surrounding that magical moment, from the first time standing next to him, to walking with him hand in hand towards the middle of the field.

Now the reason for telling this story was not solely to point out that I’ve met Messi, although that is a part of it. The next part of the story is less magical than the beginning, as Barcelona smacked the Sounders 4-0, and it could have been much worse. It was a delight to watch them do their thing, but this is my first remembrance of actually questioning if American soccer will ever be on a level playing field and whether or not it will be very plausible for the Sounders to ever be able to compete with teams like this. After all, it would be fun to have a Messi level player wearing the Seattle Sounders rave green. Not that there are any Messi level players out there.

Growing up in a soccer-centered household I was always surrounded by the sport. This has continued to develop throughout my life in the form of my early years, watching the United States national team and the stars that comprised it at the time such as Landon Donovan and Clint Dempsey, as well as watching the professional soccer league here, Major League Soccer (MLS) grow and expand from a handful of teams to the twenty-nine that there is today. The most impactful addition being the Seattle Sounders joining the league when I was nine years old. Then, watching them go from a brand-new franchise to winning the cup while I was in high school. While I always liked the Sounders and enjoyed attending matches, them and the rest of the MLS were not the professionals that my friends and I looked up to and admired. Personally, I always wanted the jerseys of players from the English Premier league and Serie A, Italy’s league. Or, in my backyard I pretended that I was playing with Brazil’s 2002 world cup team as opposed to the United States national team or any player within Major League Soccer.

This would continue on to playground conversations, where I eventually grew into the role defending these domestic players and league to my lesser soccer-educated classmates, claiming that the league was on the “up and coming” and that my United States national team heroes were on par with any of the uber famous European superstars. I also remember what was called the “American header” being referenced by coaches. This was essentially a mockery of US soccer, with it being a silly looking headed action that was performed with the top of the head as opposed to the proper upper-forehead area. In moments like these is where I first noticed the rhetoric surrounding soccer in the United States and how the casual fan or player views it. This was something that I always looked at as beginning to change, and begin to change it has. Even looking at it from my lifetime of worship towards the soccer world in the last fifteen years. It has come a long way from the Sounders just joining the league all the way up to current day, the US men’s national team tying England at this year’s world cup and the sheer amount of media spotlight that they have gotten.

**History of American Soccer Leagues**

While countries that we are now competing with such as England have always had extremely successful leagues in all facets such as revenue, viewership, and quality, the United States has always struggled to replicate such successes. To provide some background on the Major League Soccer here, professional sports are looked at rather differently in Europe, as they are more of strictly a business than a cultural aspect. Revenue and funding are the only real driver behind teams and leagues in any sport, and without this, well there is nothing. The MLS was started in 1996 and any previous attempts at creating a league similar to the European model had failed, such as the Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL) and the National American Soccer League (NASL). The modern MLS started two years after the United States hosted the World Cup, which is the biggest soccer and sporting event in the world, in 1994. They rode the popularity gain from this in order to create the league that exists today.[[1]](#endnote-1) After analyzing the growth of soccer after the hosting of the 1994 world cup, I believe that hosting the 2026 World Cup in the United States and the arrival of superstars such as Riqui Puig to the MLS could be the driving force in tipping the MLS and United States soccer as a whole into the direction of being viewed as level and discussed similarly to major world soccer powerhouses. Therefore, for my paper I am going to be looking at and analyzing how exactly the Major League Soccer system as a whole and popularity of soccer within the United States has grown or at times, diminished, between the World Cup in 1994, leading up to the eventual hosting of the 2026 World cup, the first time since then that it will take place in the United States. This has prompted my central research question of How does rhetorical analysis help us understand the changing perception of United States soccer?

In this paper, I will explore the impact that rhetoric has on the bigger picture surrounding United States soccer. I will do this through deep analysis of all factors relating to the outside view of American soccer. This includes the hosting of World cups, domestic and overseas success, and casual conversation that could be either negative or positive. Because of the length of time between many events, such as the United States hosting the World Cup, this will give a clear image of how the discussion surrounding soccer here in America has evolved.

In order to better explain my aim here, I must acknowledge that there is indeed still a gap in ability between Americans and different historically great soccer nations. A gap that is closing however. With that being said, the verbiage used to describe soccer is the main focus and can be reflected upon by analyzing why exactly that is, in *On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic*, R.L Scott states, “The art of persuasion is granted sufferance only on the grounds that men are not as they ought to be. Were all men able as some men are to reason soundly from true premises, then rhetoric would be superfluous” (Scott, 308)[[2]](#endnote-2). In my understanding, what he saying here is that rhetoric used would potentially be obsolete in the case that everyone was equally knowledgeable on a particular matter and able to draw similar conclusions. In this case, it can be translated directly towards rhetoric surrounding United States soccer in being that the majority of people who are pushing into this rhetoric are in different states of mind and understanding, and therefore not able to reason from the truth. In this case the truth being that it is changing as a result of past, present, and future events. In this paper, I make the argument that the rhetoric surrounding soccer in the United States is changing in direct correlation with the rising popularity of the sport, the national teams growing success, and the stars associated with both Major League Soccer and the United States team.

**World Cups and the US Men’s National team**

In this paper, I began my research with the FIFA World Cup that was hosted in the United States in 1994 and how that first impacted the sport in America. I then lead all the way up to the 2026 World Cup, which is set to also be hosted in America. This allowed me to determine the difference in soccer from the initial starting point of 1994, leading all the way up to the future event.

In terms of success, 1994 was a great one for the sport stateside. While it was not immensely popular among Americans, a result of the economy, tourist destinations, and other factors, the 1994 World Cup was the most financially successful tournament yet.[[3]](#endnote-3) As for the success of the United States team, they were eliminated by eventual champion Brazil in the round of 16 after placing 3rd in their group and going through on a wildcard after a 1-1-1 record through group play. In the new format of the World Cup, they would not have advanced through group. Fast forward to 2002, the United States were eliminated in the quarter finals, their best ever finish in a World Cup.[[4]](#endnote-4) Was this a sign of hope for future success? Kind of, but not really. In the ensuing cups, they were eliminated in the group stage and round of 16. In 2018, they failed to qualify for the cup with quite possibly the most talented roster they had to date. Nothing was changing except for the hope of the growing contingent of American soccer fans. In 2022, the United States fielded the second youngest team at the tournament, with Tyler Adams being the youngest captain at the tournament.[[5]](#endnote-5) They were again, eliminated in the round of 16 after an impressive group stage tie against England. It appears as if there is a pattern here of round of 16 knockouts. Therefore, if you analyze the team based off strictly these World Cup results, it appears as if nothing is set to change. However, with the skyrocketed popularity of the sport among Americans, the team could have been just one more World Cup win away from blowing the lid off the narrative of American soccer and announcing themselves as a legitimate contender in worldwide soccer. Because of this, I believe that in 2026, it is entirely possible that the combination of the tournament being played on home soil and the American team making a historic run could do just that.

**Method**

The subjects of this study are the casual conversations, impactful transfers, popularity, and revenue. I chose these four aspects of the sport because they have the most direct link in analyzing the success of the sport. Additionally, when placed alone, they would not be able to successfully tell whether or not soccer is successful. For example, if an entertainment business generates a lot of revenue, that doesn’t necessarily mean that it is of high quality, it just means that it puts people in seats one way or another. A good example of this would be popular YouTube stars hosting boxing matches that generate millions of dollars. These people are not high-quality boxers, they’re entertainers. The same would go for the MLS, if every game sold out the league would make a lot of money, but if the level stayed the same, the people talking about the league would withstand their narrative about the level of it. Additionally, there can be stand-alone events in casual conversation that have a differing impact. The average casual fan in the United States is usually much less knowledgeable than the casual fan in places like England. This is because soccer is their main sport growing up so there is no combining of terms when talking about different sports, whereas in the United States sports fans have a broad range of sports and terminology. Therefore, I am not only able to focus on just one aspect and analyze its improvement, I have to combine these together in order to completely analyze whether the rhetoric surrounding the perception of soccer in the United States is changing.

**Online Rhetoric and Casual Conversations**

Quite possibly one of the biggest factors of this continued rhetoric is casual conversations from fans, both in the United States and in countries where soccer is more popular. These occur most commonly in and most impactfully in places such as online comment sections, because of the ease of commenting, the reach of social media, and the frequency of use. Therefore, these comments are seen by millions of people every day. This causes monotonous jokes such as “farmers” or “retirement” league to be overplayed and become known to many, as a kind of identity of Major League Soccer as whole. Again, the majority of these comments are performed by people such as teenager in places such as England, where the league pales in comparison to their domestic league. However, it particularly purports this narrative that negatively influences soccer here and gives others the ability to latch on to these internet jokes and memes and display them as their own unique form of opinion, which just continues to expand this joke, causing it to enter into the realm of mainstream thought. To make matters worse, the majority of those influenced don’t watch either the US men’s national team or Major League Soccer. The end product of more success against these big countries will continue to change this perception of soccer within internet communities, as those have a substantial impact on the narratives being drawn.

One particularly harmful conversation between casual fans came in the form of an episode of *Pawn Stars*.[[6]](#endnote-6) This went viral for the wrong reasons, causing an ongoing internet joke that harms the initial thought of American soccer. In the episode, a man goes in to sell a signed jersey by Christian Pulisic, an American that plays for Chelsea in the English Premier League. Without knowing much about the soccer world at all, the way that they described him in this show was that Christian Pulisic was the “Lebron James of soccer.” While that is comedic, it has created a harmful internet joke that reinforces the narrative surrounding American soccer fans. While Pulisic is a good player, he is nowhere near drawing Lebron James comparisons. This appears to also reinforce a cultural stereotype that Americans only think about themselves, with comparing their best soccer player to their best basketball player with no reference to any foreign athletes.

Thus, with worldwide viewership of these MLS teams so low, the best way to display the progress of American soccer is in the FIFA World Cup, which only takes place every four years, and brings billions of people into the fold of viewership and acknowledgement.[[7]](#endnote-7) This will have the biggest potential impact on rhetoric surrounding soccer, either negatively or in a positive matter, depending the success of the United States team. This is in complete relevance right now because the narrative has shifted in the last few weeks even with the 2022 World Cup ongoing in Qatar. The USA team tied England, who is one of the tournament favorites 0-0, which has sparked complete comical patriotism towards the American team on social media, largely with people who originally have paid little to zero attention to soccer. The most notable of these, is between the United States fans and England supporters. The ongoing joke has been that if the United States win, it is called soccer from now on, rather than football. This spurs pushback from England fans, mocking the level of soccer that the Americans play. After the result of the game, the tide turned and instead it was the American fans mocking the English over the result of the game, where the United States dominated most of the field in the tie. If this can all happen in one game against a top tier opponent in a game being played on the other side of the world, imagine the recognition and verbiage used when the team is one, consistently competing against high level opposition, and two, hosting the tournament in their own backyard and in the backyard of all of these fans. The shift in conversation and rhetoric regarding the team during the 2022 World Cup is likely to be miniscule compared to how soccer will be viewed in 2026 when the team is hosting and playing the cup for the entire world to see.

**Impactful Transfers**

From strictly a business standpoint, Major League Soccer has made some major moves during periods of declining popularity and revenue for the league. One of most common impactful drivers of revenue for the league is the signings of outside superstars, which there have been many throughout the years. The arrival of these superstars stateside assists in changing the views of the league around the globe and begins to alter the rhetoric surrounding soccer here. One example of these was in Seattle, when they signed superstar Clint Dempsey.[[8]](#endnote-8) While he is American, his signing was a huge leap for the league because they were bringing back home, perhaps the greatest American player ever. This was someone who was not just coming from the best league in the world in the English Premier League, but excelling in it and finishing as one of the top scorers there just a couple of years prior to his move to Seattle. In fact, he was voted the fourth best player in the English Premier League less than two years before the move (Goff, 2013).[[9]](#endnote-9) This was seen as a combo move to strengthen the league as well as cohesiveness within the national team, which both play a role in success.

Another impactful and more well-known arrival, and easily the biggest move in MLS history was the signing of David Beckham to La Galaxy in 2007. This was an extremely attention-grabbing event because he was not only one of the best players in the world, but he was a worldwide icon as well. However, looking back on his stint in Los Angeles, he only played in a total of 63 games for them and won a very limited number of accolades for a player of his ability. Despite this, his impact went well past the field. Looking back on his career there, the commissioner of the MLS, Don Garber stated his arrival as historic because of the “anticipation and excitement around the league, the media attention, it all escalated” then stated “it’s hard for anybody to argue that it wasn’t a good signing and an important thing for the development of the league” (Straus, 2011).[[10]](#endnote-10) And develop the league it did, since his arrival there has been superstar after superstar to follow in his path; Steven Gerrard, Robbie Keane, Kaka, and Thierry Henry just to name a few. These further displays that the business side is almost as important as the quality of play.

This summer, the 2022 transfer window welcomed a few newer global superstars to the league, such as Gareth Bale, Insigne, and Bernadeschi. Despite this, a much different signing is grabbing headlines. While it is nothing similar to David Beckham status, it is perhaps the one signing that has the potential to be even more impactful for the league in the long term. This was the arrival of Riqui Puig from FC Barcelona this summer. He does not hold the image of Beckham, but he is yet to achieve his prime, being only 23. This shows a turn in the view of the MLS, as it begins to grow away from the retirement league image and into a more exciting, developmental one.[[11]](#endnote-11) This caused a strange reaction from fans of the soccer world, because he was still a young up and coming star at one of the biggest clubs, Barcelona. While he fell out of favor there, the move to LA Galaxy stirred fans because it is a major step down from an ability perspective. He would be expected to move to a lesser team within Spain or Europe. The reason this could be impactful for years to come in the MLS is because he is a global name who moved to the league before entering his prime.[[12]](#endnote-12) Could this be a stupid move on his part? Or perhaps it is a sign that is MLS is just about on the verge of tipping in to becoming one of the most attractive leagues for young superstars.

When analyzing the reverse end of events like the David Beckham transfer, it must be conceded that the arrival of superstars at the end of their career begins to develop this negatively framed ongoing narrative of the league as a ‘retirement’ league, because the players are all well past their prime. Therefore, while it is important for these signings in terms of media attention, many write off the competitiveness due to the hunt for media and monetary glory. With the recent uprise in ability of the MLS, the argument can be easily made that they are slowly drifting away from the branding of ‘retirement’ league, to a more credible, competitive league. This can be shown in instances such as the arrival of Puig, but also the departure of young American players to big clubs. This shows that there is a growing give and take between the MLS and the biggest leagues in the world.

This is somewhat of a paradox, as it should be thought that in order for the league to be successful, you must hold on to your best players. However, if the rhetoric is due to change, it is imperative that these younger players leave the MLS in order to succeed in other leagues. If these players succeed, this proves a more level playing field than previously thought, thus supplying an argument as to why the soccer world is beginning to talk about American soccer in a different light. A great example of a player like this is Tyler Adams, who came through the academy of New York Red Bulls. He then made an early jump to Europe, playing in Germany and now the English Premier League. He has joined up with an American coach and fellow US national team member Brenden Aaronson at Leeds United.[[13]](#endnote-13) Aaronson has also had a similar path from MLS to Europe.[[14]](#endnote-14) This contingent of three Americans have become the representation of the United States in England, and their performances are direct links to how soccer is talked about in England. While their team is not exactly winning trophies, they have cemented their place in the roster and proved that they can compete with the world’s premier competition. One specific example of this is when Leeds United beat Chelsea, partly because of stellar performances from both Adams and Aaronson. There are, however, still jokes coming about Leeds United these days, for example comparing them to the team from the popular television show, Ted Lasso. In fact, an article in The Washington Post described this perfectly. After stating that Brenden Aaronson was playing in Philadelphia’s youth teams just three years earlier, the author then went on to describe the Leeds United manager by saying that, “Aaronson will reunite with Leeds Manager Jesse Marsch, a Wisconsin-born, Princeton-educated former MLS midfielder hired by the club in February to skirt relegation” (Goff, 2022).[[15]](#endnote-15) This appears to be a fairly comical description of a Premier league soccer coach, given that there has never been a coach in the English league with even a remotely similar rise to elite level coaching. Much less been one hired at a time of need for a club. Despite this, the success of Leeds United under Jesse Marsch as a manager is a hint at the shift in rhetoric surrounding American soccer.

**Popularity and Viewership**

The MLS league as a whole and the popularity of soccer in the United States has fluctuated throughout the years. Major League Soccer was first started in 1996, riding on the back of the wave created by the World Cup being hosted in the United States in 1994. The new league garnered lots of attention from the new soccer fans here and in the first eight seasons of its existence, around a combined 22 million fans attended the games (Collins, 2006).[[16]](#endnote-16) This would drop off in the years to come, between 2005-2010. Additionally, in 2014 the Seattle Sounders beat out the average attendance of every single MLB side, except for the LA Dodgers. The Sounders sitting at an average of 44 thousand, with the Dodgers narrowly winning with 46 thousand.[[17]](#endnote-17) To top that, they also doubled the Seattle Mariners average attendance of 21 (Crupi, 2014).[[18]](#endnote-18) Granted, 2014 was a World Cup year which always enhances the casual spectator’s attention. Additionally, argument that the Sounders are an outlier because they are consistently one of the most attended team in the MLS is irrelevant because there was only one baseball team who had superior attendance. The league average attendance was also higher than Major League Baseball that year. This has continued to grow as well, with the addition of a new team every year since then, widening the range of soccer fans throughout the country.

More recently, the United States involvement in the 2022 edition of the World Cup has drastically increased the popularity of the game in the United States, foreshadowing what is possible when the World Cup comes over to home turf in 2026. One of the biggest factors in this was the coverage from multiple networks, most notably fox, who had an all-star cast of former players, as well as Chad Ochocinco, former wide receiver in the NFL, who brings a completely different crowd to the table. The broadcasts held by Fox and Telemundo for the USA vs. England group stage game alone attracted 20 million viewers in the United States alone, per data from Fox and FIFA This also doesn’t account for the number of joint watch-parties that took place, which when conservatively estimated, would double that number.[[19]](#endnote-19) Team USA’s ensuing knockout loss to the Netherlands also attracted over 16 million viewers.[[20]](#endnote-20) The sheer amount of people viewing this game was also directly associated in the social media twist of people beginning to talk about the United States team in a different manner.

**Revenue**

As with all professional sports, revenue is the only reason for their existence is because they are just businesses after all. They make money, which happens to be the exact thing that has historically plagued American soccer and been the reason that soccer leagues in the US aren’t successful. However, that is shifting in direct relation to every other aspect funneling into the rhetoric surrounding soccer here. In fact, in 2022, the MLS has drawn in an average of over 21,000 spectators attending each match.[[21]](#endnote-21) In comparison to in 2010, where that number would rank second highest out of all teams.[[22]](#endnote-22) This shows that nationwide attendance has continued to rise, even with more teams added. Thus, helping to bring in substantially more revenue for the league. In relationship with the impactful transfers of stars coming over to the United States, they are the biggest reason for the increase in revenue due to jersey and ticket sales that are brought upon from foreign players. These are not even comparatively matched by even the top domestic players in the league. Additional projections say that this is just going to continue to grow with each year that passes. Although increased revenue is not a direct inclination of increased quality, which is the biggest factor in the change in perception of American soccer, there is something to be said for steady and even explosive increases in revenue as a means of attention being drawn to the league. This could mean that soccer fans that have historically not been interested in Major League soccer are starting to take note of the increased quality, thus aiding in the shift of conversation around the league. As previously mentioned, revenue is just one factor in the paradigm around the American soccer system.

**Conclusion**

In reflecting upon all of these aspects of American soccer as a whole, each one plays a unique part in shifting the rhetoric surrounding American soccer. Viewing and combining these together, the argument begins to shape that the narrative is changing, and within the next four years, we could see the United States soccer team be looked upon as equal with the historically successful countries from Europe and South America. Additionally, relating back to my initial point of the rhetoric being erroneous if everyone had an equal accessibility and understanding of the situation. As David Zarefsky states in *Knowledge Claims in Rhetorical Criticism*, “If criticism is epistemic, however, it certainly seems so in ways different from the methods of science. It is often preoccupied with specific, perhaps unique, cases of communication” (Zarefsky, 2008).[[23]](#endnote-23) It is displayed as such that the perception of United States soccer is portrayed in ways other than legitimate analysis and fact, but rather past downfalls and overplayed false narratives surrounding ability level. After analyzing the quickly changing aspects of the sport’s popularity in the United States, the national teams growing success, and the stars associated with both the men’s national team and MLS, the conclusion can be drawn that the hosting of the 2026 World Cup will be the tipping point in the legitimization of American soccer in terms of how it is perceived.

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