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### Playing with Fire: How and Why FIFA and the IOC Embrace the World's Most Oppressive Regimes

With a billion and a half viewers, nearly twenty percent of the world population, this past edition of the World Cup Final was among the most watched sporting events of all time.

Estimates of total viewership of the entire tournament went up to at least five billion viewers (Why is the World Cup important to Qatar?). Truly global audiences—like that of the Olympic Games—are extremely difficult to come by. Consequently, the rights to broadcast, advertise, and sell tickets are incredibly lucrative. Of the 43 analyzed World Cups and Olympic Games, total revenue reached \$70 billion (Müller 1). Unsurprisingly, the World Cup and Olympic Games are generally accepted to be the two largest international sporting competitions. Given the massive revenue these competitions create and the similarly huge audience they harness, it is logical to conclude that sports are essential to the international community.

Sports represent an international sanctuary of fairness, justice, cooperation, and leadership. International competitions like the World Cup and Olympic Games further enhance these qualities as they seek to crown the best athletes in the world before a global audience. Each World Cup and Olympic Games edition is played at a unique venue worldwide—the stadiums of the 2022 and 2026 World Cup Finals are separated by more than 8,000 miles. Given the global love for sport and global audience, hosting sporting events improves a country's reputation and expands its cultural influence, thus, its soft power (Skey 9).

The soft power associated with hosting international competitions of this stature can be harnessed to celebrate sport and the principles it offers—or for nefarious purposes. Throughout the mid-20th century and increasingly as of late, international competitions have been

weaponized and perverted into tools for laundering the images of fascist and human rights-offending (F+HRO) regimes. This essay focuses on Mussolini's 1934 World Cup, Hitler's 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games, and the 2022 Qatar World Cup. These four cases represent the highest profile and most egregious examples of fascist and human rights regimes co-opting and undermining the principles of sport for political gain. Thus, how can an international sporting competition celebrate the principles of sport in a brutal, repressive host city or country?

In this essay, I establish the cause of the collaboration of fascist and human rights-offending regimes and the largest international sporting organization and argue why this collaboration is harmful. I conclude that F+HRO regimes are motivated to collaborate with FIFA and the IOC to improve their international standing and that FIFA and the IOC are motivated to collaborate with F+HRO regimes because of internal corruption. However, in some rare cases, fascist and human rights-offending regimes rose to power after their country earned the bid. Nonetheless, allowing FIFA and the IOC to play the World Cup or Olympics in a fascist or human rights-offending regime endangers the international community's ability to grow since these countries clearly do not value the lessons that sport has to offer. To help ensure this does not happen, I encourage internal reforms of FIFA and the IOC and additional fan organizing.

### *Economics of Hosting*

Rational host countries are not motivated by economic gain to host a World Cup or Olympic Games. Despite their massive audience and revenue, the World Cup and Olympic Games are loss-making ventures for nearly all host cities. This is due to these competitions' collective structural deficits (Müller et al. 16). Independent of hosting conditions and

decision-making, an inherent, persistent, systematic deficit is incurred by hosting competitions like the World Cup and the Olympics (Müller et al. 16). In the case of the World Cup, the host country is liable for almost all of the main expenses. At the same time, FIFA only covers the operational cost and pockets ticket sales, sponsorships, and broadcasting rights (Müller et al. 4). From a financial standpoint, World Cups are effective subsidies for FIFA's existence. Since the 1970 World Cup, only Russia's 2018 World Cup has been profitable—albeit by a mere 0.2% (Müller et al. 13). The Olympics face a similar parallel. Since the 1964 Tokyo Summer Games, the earliest of the analyzed data set, only five editions of the Games have been profitable of the 25 analyzed (Müller et al. 13). No budget surplus was ever greater than 1% (Müller et al. 13). Like FIFA's revenue-sharing strategy, the IOC pockets the event's two most profitable revenue streams: broadcasting and international sponsorship (Müller et al. 4). The IOC does not bear direct costs, as only the specific organizing committee is liable for the operational cost and the host for infrastructure, security, and venues. (Müller et al. 4).

#### *Motivations for Hosting the World Cup and Olympics*

Despite host countries rarely profiting from the World Cup or the Olympics, hosting an international competition of this standing benefits the host country reputationally. From the standpoint of a fascist or human rights-offending regime, hosting an event with the broadest, most global audience possible can boost its reputational capital by engaging with Western elites and consumers (Skey 4). In doing so, these regimes would engage in sportswashing—the act of laundering a state's image through sport to deflect from their human rights abuses (Skey 12). A clear example of sportswashing is the 2022 Qatar World Cup.

Qatar is a human rights-offending regime. In the 2008 edition of their annual report on human rights, Amnesty International noted Qatar's persecution of ethnic minorities, negligence

of workplace abuse by wage non-payment and police crackdowns against protests for workers' rights, and failure to adequately address discrimination and violence against women (Amnesty International 245). This list is not nearly exhaustive of the offenses that Amnesty International notes. Despite this reputation, Qatar still won the right to host. With greater international scrutiny, Qatar's human rights abuses became increasingly apparent. During the 2022 World Cup buildup, the media and the international community raised severe doubts about Qatar's horrific treatment of migrant workers and the persecution of the LGBT community (World Cup Finals: Why is Qatar 2022 controversial?). In preparing for the World Cup, 6,500 migrant workers died on the job due to Qatar's brutal work conditions (Why FIFA world cup Qatar 2022, is the latest example of 'sportswashing' ). When asked about the regime's backward stance on the LGBT community, one Qatari government official used religion as a shield against the state's human rights record: "Here we cannot change the laws. You cannot change the religion for 28 days of World Cup" (Why FIFA world cup Qatar 2022, is the latest example of 'sportswashing' ).

Given Qatar's poor human rights record and the well-documented economic damages that come with hosting the World Cup, Qatar believes that the image improvement and soft power boost incurred by hosting the World Cup outweigh the budget deficit that comes with it. By this token, the goal of Qatar hosting the World Cup is to sportswash (Bokat-Lindell) ("Why FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, Is the Latest Example of 'Sportswashing'"). Consequently, discourse around Qatar would not solely revolve around the regime's human rights abuses but also feature its contribution to sport (Skey 12). Thus, it would launder its image, improving its international standing and, therefore, its soft power. Today's Qatar and 1930s Italy are united in the effort to weaponize sport to improve their respective international standing. However, while Qatar used sport to launder its reputation, Italy used sport as a platform for furthering its ideological goals.

Promoting fascism to the world motivated fascist Italy to host the 1934 World Cup. Central to fascist propaganda is the promotion of national identity—to Mussolini, this meant co-opting football as a token of Italian superiority to reach the common person (Hart). In promoting football with national identity, during the build-up to the Cup, the Italian government drowned its citizens with over 300,000 posters and stamps depicting images of the World Cup blended with fascist imagery (Hart). This World Cup was the first ever hosted in Europe—helping to promote the Italian national identity (Hart). Additionally, this World Cup was the first major tournament broadcast on Europe’s radios (Hart).

Nonetheless, the 1934 World Cup was the first ever in Europe and the second edition ever held. Given this, the international football community still had not recognized the tournament’s legitimacy, with footballing powerhouses like England and Uruguay, the reigning champions, electing not to participate in the contest (Hart). Although the inability to secure major footballing talents may seem like a drawback in promoting Italian as an international powerhouse, the absence of two of the world’s football powerhouses meant an easier road for an Italian World Cup victory. Italy’s *Azzurri* won the World Cup, thus satisfying the goals of the fascist government, although with rumors of biased officiating (Hart). Despite this, Mussolini celebrated the victory in the government-run newspaper, plastering images from the match throughout Italy as evidence of Italian supremacy and the renewed Italian power Mussolini promised (Berlinski). Benito Mussolini’s ally and fellow fascist ideologue, Adolf Hitler, similarly weaponized his 1936 Summer Olympic Games to promote fascism.

Despite not earning the bid himself, Hitler’s 1936 Summer Olympics were used to promote Nazism and re-assert Germany into the international community. In 1931, two years before Hitler rose to power, the IOC granted Germany the right to host the 1936 Summer

Olympics to symbolize its reconciliation with the rest of the world after World War I (The 1936 Olympics). While pre-Hitler Germany did not seek the bid to promote fascism, Hitler and his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels weaponized the Games to promote the Nazi cause and showcase Aryans as the “master race” (The 1936 Olympics) (Berkes). Additionally, while Jews were barred from participating in the Games, domestic hostilities towards them were masked (Berkes). By concealing its hostilities towards Jews, Germany could better re-assert itself into the international community. This masking was so effective that writers at The New York Times came away from the Games writing that Germany was “back in the fold of nations” and that the Games “made them more human again” (Berkes).

#### *Motivations for Awarding the Hosting Bid to a Fascist or Human Rights-Offending Regime*

Both FIFA’s and the IOC’s mechanisms for deciding the host city for their tournaments are deeply flawed. FIFA contains three branches—the Congress, General Secretariat, and Executive Committee (Boudreaux et al. 2). The Executive Committee is the most influential branch of FIFA’s governance. Until the 2026 World Cup voting, only the 24 FIFA Executive Committee members voted on where to grant the hosting bid (Bestall). The Executive Committee consists of the president, eight vice presidents, and 15 members (Boudreaux et al. 2). With FIFA’s executive power concentrated among 24 voting members, corrupting actors could easily infiltrate and influence the host voting. Chuck Blazer, a former FIFA Executive Committee member, admitted to accepting bribes in exchange for votes for host country from 1998 to 2010 (Ygliseas and Stromberg). This practice is nothing new—FIFA executives have routinely demanded bribes in exchange for greater consideration of granting the bid of their home country

for almost a century now (Boudreaux et al. 7) (Hart). In 1930, a Mussolini-backed lobbying effort offered to underwrite all of FIFA's potential losses incurred by the then-nascent tournament (Hart). This swayed the FIFA committee to grant the bid to Italy over Sweden (Hart). The bid process of the 1934 World Cup is a clear and direct instance of monetary compensation in exchange for the right to host a major international tournament.

Likewise, during the voting for the 2022 World Cup, a top-ranking Qatari representative offered Fred Lunn, a voting member of the Caribbean Football Union, a brown envelope containing \$40,000 (Fifa Crisis: Claims of Brown Envelopes Stuffed with New \$100 Bills). Additionally, Lunn was among the 25 voting members to pick up this "gift," demonstrating Qatar's efforts to buy votes to host the tournament (Fifa Crisis: Claims of Brown Envelopes Stuffed with New \$100 Bills).

Similar to how FIFA operated before the 2026 voting, the IOC's Executive Board manages the institution's affairs (IOC). The Executive Board comprises the president, four vice presidents, and ten other members as chosen by secret ballot for a four-year term (IOC). As the sole governing body of the IOC, the Executive Board is responsible for all executive, legislative, and administrative work (IOC). With all the power of the IOC concentrated into one body, the Executive Board has been and remains vulnerable to bribery and corruption. Although not infiltrated by a fascist or human rights-offending regime, the IOC bidding process has been corrupted. During the 2002 Winter Olympics voting, IOC members were charged with accepting bribes presented as hundreds of thousands in cash, travel and medical expenses, college tuition, and more in exchange for the Salt Lake City bid to advance (Britannica). These efforts were successful as Salt Lake City ultimately did host the 2002 Games. As such, the IOC expelled six subcommittee members, with several others resigning to flee further investigation (Britannica).

Much like FIFA, corruption is in the walls of the IOC—Seven percent of IOC members had taken bribes from candidate host cities at the time of a 2016 report (Boudreaux et al. 8). By permitting F+HRO regimes to host the World Cup and Olympics, as well the corruption in and of itself, the two largest international sporting organizations take away from the learning opportunity of sport.

### *Sport as an Avenue for Learning Life Skills*

Sports offer the international community a unique sanctuary transcending language, religion, race, and economic standing. Life skills are a by-product of participation in sport (Bean and Forneris 1). Coaches recognize the value of intentionally teaching life skills and imparting these skills to their students (Bean and Forneris 1). Sports are a uniquely-equipped avenue for teaching life lessons, especially to children. Throughout my personal experiences in sports, I have learned countless lessons on fairness, justice, cooperation, and leadership. My personal experience is not unique: Current academic literature on acquiring life lessons in sports parallels my experience.

Sports are a great refuge of fairness and justice. This refuge is utilized for the betterment of society in how sports teach children invaluable life lessons. In a study of fair play among student-athletes and non-student athletes aged 15 to 17, student-athletes displayed a substantially higher understanding of fairness and fair play than non-student athletes (Ludwiczak and Bronikowska 1). More specifically, student-athletes cited fairness considerations as reasons to follow the rules and not show off to their friends (Ludwiczak and Bronikowska 6). This study is particularly relevant because, by ages 15 and 17, student-athletes and non-student athletes have



lived differently enough to refer to sport as a significant variable for learning fairness. This higher level of understanding of fairness comes from sport's indiscriminate nature: All players are constrained by the same rules and their equal enforcement. No football field, track, hockey rink, or basketball court can discriminate, rendering sport a true beacon of fairness. Given this, it is logical to conclude that sport is an effective teacher of fairness, especially among children.

Additionally, cooperation is a prerequisite for excellence in sport. Cooperation refers to teamwork and interpersonal and collaboration skills (Opstoel et al. 10). As such, in studies on the impact of sports among children aged six to eighteen, eight out of nine studies found a positive association with teamwork, cooperation, and working together (Opstoel et al. 10). This positive association comes from sport being a uniquely potent vehicle for teaching life lessons about the value of working and recognizing the collective: No basketball team can function without its five players on the floor. Likewise, a soccer team can only function with its full starting eleven. All players on a team are uniquely valuable and bring with them unique and diverse skill sets.

Through nonlinear improvement, sport provides opportunities to learn how to be a leader. Nonlinear improvement refers to the uneven development and regression present in all facets of life. In sport, nonlinear improvement is found in the unpredictable learning curve of acquiring new skills, the fluctuating levels of play from individual athletes and teams, and all the other highs and lows of being an athlete. The nonlinear improvement in sport mirrors the nonlinear improvement seen in all other forms of development throughout adult life. In the aforementioned study of children aged six to eighteen, researchers found that sport improved young athletes' ability to be tough, not give up, be assertive, and develop self-direction initiative (Ludwiczak and Bronikowska 10). Additionally, this study noted the highly positive impacts of sport on leadership, being a leader and role model, and taking on new roles (Ludwiczak and Bronikowska

10). A society filled with gritty, problem-solving members with leadership abilities is crucial and maintaining a growing community. By extension, these fundamental traits encourage resilience and resourcefulness, both of which are prerequisites for negotiating the challenges of a changing world. Sports, which act as a microcosm for greater societal dynamics, are crucial to developing these abilities. Sports foster a growth mentality, encouraging individuals to accept challenges, endure setbacks, and continuously improve their skills. In addition, because they promote teamwork, good communication, and strategic decision-making, sports offer plenty of opportunities for people to develop their leadership abilities. As a result, a society that values and encourages involvement in athletics is investing in its long-term success by ensuring its citizens have the skills needed to face and conquer the difficulties that lie ahead.

The story of Neymar, one of the world's top football players, is a story of grit fostered in sport. Born in Mogi das Cruzes, Neymar da Silva Santos Junior is a testament to sport's transcendent power. Raised in unforgiving poverty, Neymar sought comfort and hope on the energetic, improvised football fields that lined the streets of his impoverished community. Neymar's undeniable talent and unwavering commitment to the beautiful game earned him an escape from his scarce upbringing, joining the youth ranks of nearby club Santos FC at 11 before reaching the pinnacle of club football less than a decade later. Neymar's passion for football emerged as a ray of light for himself and his entire community amid his family's challenges. His rapid ascent to success demonstrates to millions worldwide that one can overcome even the most difficult situations by being persistent, determined, and using sport as a unifying force.

Given the clear and direct avenues for sport to spur personal development, hosting the World Cup or Olympic Games in a F+HRO regime detracts from the transferability of the life lessons that sport offers due to the F+HRO's inability to parallel these lessons. This is not to say

that host countries must exemplify the four values mentioned above but to say that the host country should not brazenly undermine fairness and justice, cooperation, and grit. The Qatar World Cup is a brazen example of fairness and justice being undermined: Amnesty International took alarm to Qatar's severe worker abuse and insufficient protection against gendered violence. By contrast, a state that exemplified fairness and justice would care for its workers and protect the oppressed. Additionally, the Sochi Olympics is a brazen example of undermining international cooperation. Russia has long ignored the international community by continuing to persecute its investigative journalists and dissidents of Vladimir Putin. This is an unmistakable example of not cooperating with the international community.

Fascist and human rights-offending regimes hosting events of this stature undercuts the lessons sport offers. Allowing these regimes to host normalizes their actions, which brazenly contradict the principles of sport—fairness, justice, cooperation, and leadership. This harms not only youth athletes but the entire sporting community. How can we say we value justice while playing in a stadium built on the bones of the workers who built it? Or cooperation in a country that persecutes political prisoners in journalists? Or fairness in a country that is intolerant of the religion of others? Given this, these offensive, backward regimes should not be allowed to host the World Cup, Olympics, or any tournament of that stature.

### *Potential Solutions*

There have been no prior formal attempts to prevent F+HRO regimes from hosting the World Cup or the Olympics. To ensure that F+HRO regimes do not host these competitions,

there must be fundamental organizational reforms within FIFA and the IOC and greater coordination of club fan clubs to lobby these organizations.

FIFA and the IOC are in immediate need of organizational reforms. The corruption currently seen within these organizations is profoundly alarming and widely recognized among the public. To combat this, FIFA and the IOC must be far more transparent in their voting procedure and extensive financial disclosures, similar to transparency measures taken by the United States Congress. This is not to say that Congress is impenetrable from corruption but that extensive financial disclosures are a prerequisite in earning the public's trust and ridding corruption. Additionally, to de-incentivize receiving gifts and other forms of bribery, FIFA and the IOC should increase the salaries of their voting members. Current academic literature argues that higher government wages reduce corruption (Le et al. 1). This is particularly true in relatively poor countries and becomes less true as the country's income per capita rises (Le et al. 1). This measure would be particularly impactful in FIFA because FIFA weighs the votes of all states equally—having representatives from poorer countries less likely to engage in corrupt practices manages the risk of internal corruption within FIFA. This solution would also be less successful in the IOC, but managing corruption risk nonetheless.

From an outside perspective, already existing fan clubs can coordinate their efforts to lobby FIFA and the IOC not to award bids to fascist and human rights-offending regimes. This is the best solution to this problem because infiltrating and encouraging meaningful change within non-democratic and corrupt organizations such as FIFA and the IOC seem nearly impossible. Additionally, this solution utilizes pre-existing lobbying infrastructure. Fan clubs today represent the fans' voices in the footballing world at a club level. These fan clubs are often highly successful in getting clubs to listen to the desires of their fans. The European Super League, an

unpopular cash-grab effort to unite the world's largest clubs, collapsed at the hands of fan clubs' simultaneous rebellion (The European Super League and the Power of Fans). Rather than celebrate the values of learning, the Super League attempted to exclude the smaller clubs of the world for financial gain. Thus, the Super League violated the longstanding ethos of the game—as prominent football journalist Alex Ward put it, “a game for anyone and everyone, where prestige is won and lost on the pitch, not bought” (Soccer Fans Destroyed the Super League). Revolting against this violation, fans and fan clubs took down banners inside their team's stadiums. The supporters replaced them with protest banners, swarmed their own team's bus carrying their players rendering the bus frozen, and chanted, “WE DO NOT WANT THE EUROPEAN SUPER LEAGUE” (How fans stopped the European Super League). While the World Cup and Olympics are not greedy cash grabs, to get FIFA and the IOC to heed the desires of fan clubs, football fan clubs and fan clubs of all sports globally should organize and coordinate a lobbying effort against these two organizations. These efforts should include visible protests in stadiums and proximity to the sporting world, catchy and shareable chants, and media advocacy, among other methods. While this demands an extremely high level of coordination and communication across numerous continents and languages, this is a logical upscale of the takedown of the European Super League.

### *Conclusions*

Given this, allowing FIFA and the IOC to play the World Cup or Olympics in a fascist or human rights-offending regime endangers the development of the international sporting community by brazenly undermining the lessons that sport has to offer. The World Cup and

Olympics provide a unique opportunity for the world to come together and learn through sport while transcending all boundaries so all can participate. Playing tournaments of this stature in countries that do not value the principles that these tournaments celebrate spoils the game and the lessons they have to offer. Additionally, allowing a fascist or human rights-offending regime to host the World Cup or Olympics legitimizes the regime and helps to improve its international standing. The World Cup and Olympics serve as a uniting stage to celebrate sport as an international community.

By playing these tournaments in a F+HRO regime, the public connects the regime to sport rather than their dangerous ideology or vicious human rights abuses. Thus, by deflecting the public perception away from the violations, the backward country legitimizes itself and whitewashes its offenses. This is extremely dangerous in sport because fascism and human rights violations contradict the above mentioned principles of sport. To combat this, FIFA and the IOC must undergo two reforms. Internally, these organizations must implement meaningful transparency and voting reforms to improve public trust. Externally, football and sporting clubs must organize and unite to lobby these organizations against corruption and collaboration with oppressive states. This would achieve the logical first goal of getting these sporting behemoths to listen to the desires of their fans. Thus, the World Cup and Olympics should no longer be played in fascist or human rights-offending regimes.

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