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Natalie Fertig

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The Secessionists Played Soccer

How the world’s game is quickening the decline of nations.

By Natalie Fertig

Eleven years ago, Kosovo was in the trenches of its rebellion from Serbia. UN peacekeeping forces had been deployed to the region a few years prior, but the area was still many more years from official independence. In the midst of it all, Kosovo decided they wanted a soccer team. Because, when your children are being killed, your young men hustled off to war and your homes daily in danger, well, what is there to do?

In the academic study of social anthropology, there’s a concept called group development. This concept says that the steps followed by a group of people as they develop, no matter how small or large the group, are the same anywhere in the world. The first of these steps is loyalty.

“If the group is to remain intact, developing a sense of loyalty to the group members will be required as well,” writes anthropologist Susan A. Wheelan in her book, “The Handbook of Group Research and Practice.”

There are many ways to encourage loyalty within a group. But rather than whisk the entire population of Kosovo off to a mountain retreat to do trust-falls, their leaders picked sport.

Sports and politics have always been inseparable. From the moment that Alexander the Great’s Macedonian ancestor forced his way into the Greek Olympics, to when the USA 1980 Hockey team won the gold medal versus a cold war Soviet team, sports have been a way to politics – sometimes replacing politics, sometimes acting as a catalyst for politics.

Soccer, like sports in general, creates community. But the international popularity of soccer specifically has made it the sport of choice for communities who hope to exert their independence – or their local identity – before the world’s eyes.

Revolution is as old as history itself. Stronger people, groups, tribes and nations always exerted power over smaller or less strong peoples, leading to a point where the underdogs eventually revolted – successfully or unsuccessfully. Such groups are not only things out of history books; the world is littered with revolutionary groups. Scotland, Catalonia, Kurdistan – their names headline our newspapers.

But in 2014, from Quebec to Lapland, instead of revolution and referendum, the answer, increasingly, is soccer.
Manx and Nissa forces met on the field of battle in Ostersund on a sunny summer morning. Muscles tense, eyes alert, the young men faced off beneath the flying Nissan phoenix and the tri-legged triskellion, red banners furling against the green grass like waves of blood.

The final of the 2014 ConIFA World Football Cup had begun. Kosovo wasn’t playing – they recently moved on to FIFA. It was the Isle of Man, an island in the midst of the Irish Sea that enjoys relative autonomy from ruling Britain, and the County of Nice, a region of southern France with a long fraught history of independence and foreign rule.

Under the gold and red Manx flag stood Malcolm Blackburn in his gold and red tie. Chief executive of the Manx International Football Association on the Isle of Man, Blackburn was the general who had marshaled these young, jersey-clad troops to battle.

In the weeks prior to leaving the Isle of Man, Blackburn had tested the Manx players on Manx history. It was important to him that the team was representative of the Manx culture, because it is a culture in jeopardy. The last native speaker of Manx Gaelic, the Isle of Man’s official language, died in the 1970s, and youth growing up

“I prepared 40 questions for them,” Blackburn explained. “And they would not get on the plane to Sweden unless they could get 80 percent of their questions right.” He chuckled. “We’re using Ellan Vannin to educate them and give them their national identity.”

And now, the amateur-heavy Isle of Man team “Ellan Vannin” had reached the final, overcoming the 250-1 odds stacked against them a week before.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, at the same time, another World Cup was gearing up. While the Isle of Man, Nice, and Kurdistan were facing off in the small lakeside town of Ostersund, England, France and Iran were battling it out in stadiums from Rio to Natal. The teams in Ostersund had gathered on soccer pitches beneath the high Swedish sun to participate in what FIFA had denied them: a World Cup soccer competition.

Around the world, regions are exerting their national identities. There are currently 22 separatist movements in North America, for example, including Quebec, Cascadia, and multiple indigenous groups. Africa, a land traditionally comprised of thousands of small tribes, has 57 active separatist movements, ranging from the high-profile (Darfur) to militants (Boko Haram).

Europe, though, tops the list with a whopping 102 separatist movements. Scotland’s “no” vote did little to diminish the growing movements, its mere existence invigorating regions like Catalonia, Venice, and Flanders in their own autonomy or
independence movements. A large portion of Venice, Italy’s secessionists traveled to Scotland to support the vote there, and a recent poll in that city showed that approximately 60 percent of the population was pro-secession from Italy. Catalonia, as well, recently took an unofficial referendum vote of its population, which voted an overwhelming 80 percent in favor of secession from Spain, with another 10 percent supporting increased autonomy though not actual secession. Even Scotland’s no vote was achieved with promises of greater autonomy – or self-rule - from the British government.

The majority of European countries have multiple separatist movements, many of which came together to form the European Free Alliance over 30 years ago. As separatist movements gained momentum, so did the EFA. In 2004, the EFA became a recognized party in the European Union, with delegates elected to the EU as well as national parliaments. All of Catalonia’s delegates in the Spanish government, for example, are from the EFA-recognized secessionist party in that region.

France, however, is the European nation outside of Russia with the most active separatist movements or regions. Many of these regions are shared with neighboring Spain, Germany and Italy, as national lines drawn up in the last few centuries divided historically ethnic groups like Catalans and Bavarians. Of France’s 14 separatist regions, four of the largest – Catalonia, the Basque Country, Occitania, and the County of Nice – are also members of ConIFA.

It was in the group stage that the County of Nice met the Isle of Man for the first time. A French region best known for its famous film festival in Cannes and beautiful white beaches, it also harbors a mediocre independence movement and a well-developed regional identity stemming from centuries of sporadic periods of self-determination in between Roman and Franco City-state domination. The Nissan side employed semi-pro and professional footballers. Ellan Vannin were amateurs. The Manx won the match, 4-2.

Then came the quarterfinal, where most of Iraq’s top professional players lined up for Kurdistan, a region long in conflict with its more famous parent.

And finally, the little team that could was playing in the final.

The stands at the Ostersund stadium were almost empty, save for a couple television cameras and a pair of fans unfurling a large homemade poster. “Three legs, not three lions,” it read in black on white, referencing the ancient English coat of arms that was flown in the early days of England’s dominion over the Isle of Man. The three legs, in contrast, are the Manx coat of arms: a three-legged triskellion, an ancient Celt and Viking symbol.

Beneath the legs and lions, the poster added “Manx and Proud.”
From Crimea to Cascadia, nationalistic movements around the world are coping with the old world order, sometimes successfully and sometimes to their detriment. The independence movements of Kurdistan and Kosovo have been long and bloody, as has Darfur. Others, like Scotland and Quebec, have managed to raise enough official support that their ruling nation approved a vote on secession. More, like Catalonia and Venice, are voting without permission of their top governing body, and still others – like Cascadia - have only begun their march to recognition and a vote.

On the field in Ostersund, the ball was kicked off, for the first and only time in the game. 90 minutes of play later, plus stoppage time, the score was still 0 – 0. While Blackburn looked on, the teams cleared the field and penalty shooters took their places. Goalies squared up before their nets, knees bent and hands splayed.

In 2003, Kosovo had split from Serbia, elected its own president and prime minister, and was in talks to gain official status with two international bodies – the U.N. and FIFA. FIFA promptly said no.

In return, Tibet promptly joined with Kosovo, a Belgian lawyer took up the cause, and the New Football Federations Board, or N.F.-Board, was founded. Eventually renamed “ConIFA,” the original design of the organization was to be a waiting room for teams hoping to be accepted into FIFA, but eventually it took on a new nickname: the “non-FIFA Board.”

Paragraph six of article 10 of the 2014 FIFA Statutes states, “An Association in a region which has not yet gained independence may, with the authorisation of the Association in the Country on which it is dependent, also apply for admission to FIFA.”

Tibet, in 2003, was denied entry into FIFA because they did not have permission from China to do so. Catalonia still does not have its own team because Spain would be required to give up many of her best players, and why would a nation agree to such a thing?

ConIFA’s rules are very different. Paragraph one of article 12 of the ConIFA Constitution states, “Any Football Association, Club, Player or Individual which represents a Nation, a Minority or a geographically or sportingly isolated territory population may become an Effective member of CONIFA.”

Since 2003, the Non-FIFA Board – which was replaced by ConIFA in 2013 - has successfully organized non-FIFA soccer events around Europe and Asia.

Today, the list of alterna-FIFA member regions reads like a who’s-who of national wannabes: Darfur, Quebec, Cascadia, Kurdistan and more.
“The world is becoming fragmented,” said Blackburn. “A lot of these larger countries are breaking up. We saw it in Russia... the areas in those countries want their original identities.”

Blackburn’s Isle of Man, with its 1,000-year-old Tynwald parliament and its Norse street signs, has a deep identity, sprinkled with elements of the Irish, Scottish, Viking, and English rulers it has lived under on its small windswept speck of land between England and Ireland. In 2014, it enjoys an incredible level of autonomy from England.

The Isle of Man is just one of 15 conIFa teams from Europe.

Hailing from an even more remote area of the continent are the Sami people, an ancient ethnic group of Reindeer-herders whose homeland of Lapland is divided across the northern reaches of Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia. Throughout history, when war raged in Scandinavia, the Sami were told to fight against each other. And now as part of their national FIFA teams, they are still required to face up against each other. But with ConIFa, they have a chance to come together and play as an ethnic group.

Then there are Les Quebecois, from “Quebec first, Canada second” – as any Quebecois on the street will tell you, quickly, in French. And if you keep going, over the plains and the Rocky Mountains to the valleys and hills that lay between the Cascades and the Pacific Ocean, “Cascadia FC” waits to represent Cascadia in its first ConIFa game.

At the same time, Kurdistan FC waits with the 35-40 million ethnic Kurds its represents for autonomy from Iraq. All around the world, these teams are being used to grow the loyalty and identity of their region.

Politics is all about power and war, and so were early sports. Ancient Greeks first started competing in running, javelin, chariot racing, and a few other sports – all of which were skills important for both the gymnasium and the battlefield. In this model, the warrior class was both athlete and soldier. It wasn’t until the Roman Empire that this combination fractured.

When gladiators walked onto the field of battle in the Coliseum, they were revered and idolized just as warriors always had been. But unlike soldiers and generals on a battlefield, the gladiators were not actually making decisions that would affect the rest of the population. Their craft had become battle for entertainment. Posters of gladiators adorned Rome’s walls and streets, and the best gladiators lived like kings. Part of this replacement – of real battle with entertainment – was due to Rome’s wars being fought farther and farther from the sight of its citizens, and their intrinsic societal need for warriors – for someone to idolize, to rally behind, or to
promote loyalty to an identity. Gladiators solved that societal need, while the generals continued to push the empire’s borders outward.

By the 1900s, civilizations became more and more removed from the wars they fought, and the role of sports in society continued to grow.

Sports teams began taking cues from warriors, past and present. “The Vikings,” “the Celtics,” “the Trojans” – teams donned these warrior titles all through the 1900s. In New Zealand, the local rugby team even adopted the native Maori war cry as their pre-game chant. No longer used in war, the cry became the rallying song of the All Blacks, reminding New Zealanders of their loyalty to their team and their country.

When the 1980 USA Hockey team beat the Soviets in Lake Placid, it was written into athletic history as one of the greatest sports moments of all time. The young American team was the overwhelming underdog, not just in that match but in the entire competition. But all eyes turned to the game not because the public loves an underdog story but because of the political capital riding on who won the match.

In the 1950s, the USSR had begun to see the political importance of athletics. The Olympics, for them, became a way to show their supremacy and the supremacy of the socialist model. After World War II, when Cold War set in between the West and the Soviets, the Olympics became a way for pent-up aggression to play out without nuclear holocaust consuming the globe.

“During the Cold war,” writes political scientist Dr. Donald Abelson in the Canadian Review of American Studies, “any major event that involved a matchup between the Soviets and Americans... was bound to be viewed as not only a confrontation between the world’s two superpowers, but as a competition between two very different political systems and sets of ideological beliefs.”

Coach Herb Brooks’ boys swept in, drawing against Sweden and smashing Czechoslovakia 7-3. In the medal round, they faced the USSR. In a sold-out game broadcast around the world, the Americans defeated the Soviets 4-3. Decades later, Sports Illustrated would deem it “The Greatest Sports Moment of the 20th Century.”

“Winning the gold medal didn’t solve the Iranian crisis, it didn’t pull the Soviets out of Afghanistan,” Team Captain Mike Eruzione later explained in an HBO documentary. "But people felt better. People were proud. People felt good about being Americans.”

Les Quebecois manager Patrick Leduc cut a dashing figure. The former semi-pro footballer from Montreal stood at the entrance to the screening room in a tight baby blue blazer.

As they entered, each guest greeted Leduc warmly in French on this chilly Canadian night. It was October, and Leduc was preparing to screen a documentary about Les Quebecois – the Quebec “national” football team. The documentary followed the Les
Quebecois soccer team as they represented Quebec at an international competition in Marseilles.

The screening was a headlining event at the Montreal Soccer Expo, and Leduc had invited viewers to a discussion afterward. It was an important event for Les Quebecois.

“The term ‘national team’ is the debate right now,” said Leduc, watching as guests meandered in. Quebec is officially considered a “nation” by Canada, but is not fully autonomous. Since its inception, Les Quebecois has been trying to walk the fine line between building national pride and not inciting revolution.

To do this, Leduc tries to keep himself and the players more concerned with cleats and soccer balls than ballots and secession.

“I tell the players,” he said, “don’t worry about anything political.”

But for someone trying to drive the politics out of the game, Leduc is quite fond of the words ‘nation’ and ‘country.’

“We don’t speak the same language,” Leduc continued, describing his home province. “And that makes us culturally different from the rest of Canada. The team is really a statement – it gives local players the ability to play for their nation.”

Andre Gagnon, former pro player and father of Jérémy Gagnon-Laparé, a player on the Canadian National Team, came over to talk with Leduc. Conversation turned to Quebec nationalism.

“We’re talking about something politically different,” said Gagnon. According to Gagnon, players may want soccer to be devoid of politics, but there’s no way Quebec – or the rest of Canada – will let it go.

“We said the same thing as Scotland, TWICE,” he explained.

Long before Scotland’s 2014 referendum, the Quebec government held their own referendums - in 1980 and 1995 - asking citizens if Quebec should be separate from Canada. The idea was defeated both times, and in recent years the desire for secession has lessened, especially in the younger generation. But it is still a contentious issue, one that the Les Quebecois team resurrects everywhere they go.

“The line between being proud of your national team and being political is close,” another Quebecois pointed out.

As the guests drifted to their seats, Leduc surveyed the room.

I think it’s a sporting right,” he said, “to have a national team that will play in national competitions.”

Arms crossed across his chest, staring toward the crowd, he smiled.
“I want young players to dream of playing for Quebec.”

In a world that is increasingly interconnected through travel and technology, identities are becoming more and more precious. We can travel around the world in a day, while our emails travel in mere seconds. Friends in Australia and Andalusia can have a face-to-face conversation through Skype. Businessmen can call in from New York to their Hong Kong office, doing work over Google chat. Professors like R. Andreas Kraemer of the Ecologic Institute in Berlin teach courses at Duke without ever leaving Germany.

But for all its international connecting, technology is also isolating and dividing people. Recent studies by the American Automobiles Association and the University of Michigan point out that the number of 16-year-olds getting drivers licenses in America is decreasing.

In 2009, according to a report by the Center for Disease Control, only 1.3 million of 4.2 million 16-year-olds in the United States possessed drivers’ licenses.

Some theorists suggest that this is due to the ability to hang out with friends over the Internet and the phone, deemphasizing the need for in-person contact outside of school hours.

In November of 2014, the New York Times published a series of data interactives showing how many people in each state were originally from that state, and what part of America all the others came from. While it was least common for people born on the West Coast to them live in New York City, only half of the inhabitants of America’s largest metropolis were native New Yorkers, this survey found.

Young professionals move to Los Angeles or New York, knowing they can easily jet home on a moment’s notice for holidays, weddings and babies. When young families left Saint Louis, Missouri in 1842 for Oregon, they did so with the belief that they would never come back, never again see their family and friends left behind. They left not just their region, but their identity behind.

Now, identities are taken along when people move. Every Sunday, sports bars around New York City are filled to watch NFL – and everyone knows where to go to find their team. Walk into Carlow East, a bar on Lexington Avenue in the Upper East Side and you’ll be met by blue, green and silver – the far-flung transplants from the Pacific Northwest, cheering on their Seahawks in North Face jackets. Across town, their arch rivals the 49ers are playing on the screen in Finnerty’s, where escapees from Silicon Valley come together to discuss the beauty of Big Sur and how terrible the weather is in New York.

Anderson, a Cornell professor famous for his work on nationalism, said in his book “Imagined Communities,” written long before the Internet, that nationalism was tied to print.
As the Internet has brought people closer and spread information that has defined culture from Philadelphia to Phnom Penh, people become simultaneously more alike and more aware of their minute differences. If an Oregonian can suddenly talk to someone in Mississippi, they may realize that despite both being American, they have distinct philosophies, accents, even foods. This phenomenon is happening around the world.

This incredible access to everyone in the world, all the time, has created an underlying yearning for identity. As people are more transient, everyone searches for a group – something they can identify with and cling to, the way a small child hugs a stuffed animal or a blanket for security.

Doctor Who weddings, Burning man, religious cults, co-ops and “alternative communities,” and even the entire existence of Comic-Con can all be attributed to the modern search for an identity and a community.

“Despite the fact that we're more globally connected and we're more aware of each other than ever, there's a real importance to clinging to ethnic identities,” said Thomas Scanlon, a professor of Classics at University of California, Riverside. “That's one of the most interesting parts of our age.”

Scanlon, an authority on the Olympic games, added that sports are an incredible way to express and encourage identities.

“Sports can be political,” he said, “it can be a unifying and democratizing event, and it can sort of be a mass entertainment. The ancients have all three of those dimensions, and we do too.”

Sport has inadvertently replaced the warrior class. A nation's fastest and strongest now become athletes, rather than knights or samurai. Children grow up wanting to be them, and whether they deserve it or not they often become listened-to-voices within their community. More than anything, sport gives a culture on the brink of losing its identity something to rally behind.

Sport can replace revolution because it fulfills many of the same societal needs that revolution does, without the loss of life, the destruction of property or the economic turmoil of a physical revolt. Sport gives a group of people designated heroes and enemies, with potential for emotional payout when the heroes beat the enemies in an athletic competition.

As Swedish clouds glided overhead, the first Manx and Nissan strikers took their shots. Muscles tense, eyes betraying their true intentions, each striker let fly in turn. Both goalies missed. The score was 1-1.

Back on the Isle of Man, pubs across the island were packed, silent, waiting. The final of the 2014 ConIFA World Cup had played out its 90 minutes of play, plus stoppage time, and now the five best strikers on each team were waiting for their turn to take
a shot on the opposing team’s goalie. At the end of overtime, the team with more goals would be declared winner.

Malcolm Blackburn still stood on the sidelines, dark gray leather jacket pulled around him as the goalies shifted in their nets. “People are looking for their identities,” said Blackburn. Another of Ellan Vannin’s gold-shirted players slowly advanced to the line. Blackburn continued.

“People want to go back to the way they used to be. I don’t know, it may be the way the world has become, maybe the economy.”

Blackburn sounded a bit like Andre Gagnon, the retired Quebec footballer back in Montreal.

“Everybody’s mainly the same culture,” Gagnon said after the documentary screening with Patrick Leduc.

“But because of that, every culture wants to say “hey! I’m different!”

The ref blew a whistle, motioning to the striker and the goalie to begin the shoot-out round. “We don’t know who we exactly are,” said Blackburn. “Are we Manx? Are we English? What are we?”