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— and
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*Culture, Politics, and Spectacle
in the Olympics and the
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Chapter 3

Italy 1934

Football and Fascism

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INTRODUCTION: A DECADE OF SPORTING GLORY

The second football World Cup took place in Italy between May 27 and June 10, 1934. Thirty-two teams, including Italy, entered the qualifiers. For the tournament proper, sixteen teams took part, playing seventeen matches (the odd number caused by a replay of the quarter-final between Italy and Spain) in eight different venues (Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, Rome, Trieste, and Turin). Nearly 400,000 tickets were sold, making for a respectable, but not massive, average attendance of over 23,000 per match. The final, between Italy and Czechoslovakia, was held in the Stadio Flaminio or Fascist National Party Stadium in Rome on June 10. Italy won by two goals to one, after extra time (Inglis 1990, 9; Glanville 1980, 23–42).

The 1934 home victory was one of the high points in an astonishing sequence of successes for Italian football in the 1930s, only challenged in the history of the game by the modern Brazilian teams. Italy won a European football tournament played over the three-year period, 1927–1930. After 1934, it went on to win the Olympic football title in Berlin in 1936 (with a team of student amateurs) and then, against the odds and hostile crowds, to retain its World Cup title in France in 1938. Italy also fought the aloof masters of the game, England, in three highly symbolic friendlies in 1933, 1934, and 1939. The middle of these, the “Battle of Highbury” of November 1934, took on near mythic status in Italian collective memory, as the Italians, playing with ten men for eighty minutes, fought back heroically from 3–0 down to 3–2, with only a whisker denying them an equalizer at the death (Beck 2001). For this entire period, the national team was coached by the extraordinary figure of Vittorio Pozzo, former crack *ardito* soldier in the Great War, father figure, and authoritarian: in nearly a

Great importance was attached to the sporting aspects of the immense youth and after-work organizations, the Balilla (or ONB, Opera Nazionale Balilla) and the Dopolavoro (or OND, Opera nazionale Dopolavoro), launched in 1925 and 1926, respectively (De Grazia 1981). Around the OND and ONB, local, regional, and national competitive and collective display games were set in place in the 1930s (such as the *littoriali*), and, at ground level, most sections included some form of sporting activity and/or spectatorship as part of a wide range of programs offered. By 1936, the ONB had 5,500,000 members; by 1937, the OND had almost 20,000 local sporting associations and organized 130,000 tournaments or meets (although over half of these were bowls matches), involving tens of millions of players and spectators (Pivato 1994, 101). A mass culture of sport was, then, truly established and rooted in Italy, even if concentrated in the center and north of the country and among men rather than women (Dogliani 2000).

From the lowest to the highest levels, the Fascist regime also invested heavily—using tax breaks, subsidies, programs of public construction, and the input of local figures of influence—in sporting infrastructure. By 1930, over 2,000 new local stadia or tracks had been built (500 new stadia were inaugurated simultaneously on one day in 1929), and eighty-three out of a total of ninety-four official provincial centers in Italy had their own regional sports grounds (Pennacchia 1999, vol. 1, 160; Martin 2004, 79–171; Rossi 2002). This capillary infrastructural program had a direct impact on the 1934 World Cup: a series of major architectural projects between 1926 and 1933 led to the construction or modernization of all the stadia used as venues in the tournament (1926, Stadio San Siro, Milan; 1927, Stadio Littoriale, Bologna; 1928, Stadio Flaminio/PNF, Rome; 1930, Stadio Ascarelli, Naples; 1932, Stadio Littorio, Trieste; 1932, Stadio G. Berta, Florence; 1933, Stadio L. Ferraris, Genoa; 1933, Stadio B. Mussolini, Turin). The Bologna and the Florence stadia are commonly taken as the most interesting and telling as innovative Fascist architecture, employing styles both modern (concrete and glass materials in nontraditional forms) and neo-classical (Marathon Towers, porticos, friezes, and sculptures) (Inglis 1990, 10–57).

Much of the mass participation in sporting activity mentioned was low level, often non-competitive, and formed by an aesthetics of display as much as by the virtues of physical exertion (e.g., gymnastics); and for this reason it was able to perform a second, perhaps more immediately effective function beyond its long-term prospect as a primary trainer for the military. Sport also became a form of mass leisure and thus a manufacturer of consent (Cannistraro 1975), although there was an inevitable conceptual tension between the active participant and the passive spectator. Furthermore, the idea of mass leisure was at odds with the notion of an individual sporting hero. Two contrasting and even contradictory principles underlay the nationalist and militarist impulses within Fascist

sport: the harmonized, non-competitive, and homogenizing principle symbolized by mass gymnastics, and the competitive, aggressive heroism epitomized in sportsmen such as Carnera or Pozzo's star player, Giuseppe Meazza. Within the Fascist conception of the body and the individual there was a possible way out of this contradiction: even the gymnasts were ultimately intended as sub-units of mass aggression in war, and the sporting heroes were not so much heroes qua individuals as embodiments of a core Fascist myth, that of the "New Man," the perfected Fascist individual wholly imbued, in body and in spirit, with a near-mystical devotion to the state. Of course, the highest exemplar of the Fascist New Man was Mussolini himself, who literally embodied the state and was ever depicted as the fighting and sporting hero in his own right, his body frequently on display as physical worker, soldier, pilot, rider, skier, fencer, runner, and swimmer (although rarely, if ever as footballer) (Gori 2000; Mosse 1996).

Several key characteristics of the New Man were echoed in the so-called "metodo" of Pozzo's team: youth (Malvano 1984), love of risk and danger, sacrifice to the nation's cause, and pride in the nation (and, increasingly, in the race). Football's individual heroism in a collective, team cause was in harmony with such forces; and even the crowd attending matches could be seen to represent an ideal, choral collectivity coming together in a single, viscerally felt, faith and cause, much like Fascism itself (Fabrizio 1976, 52). As a radio broadcast just before the start of the 1934 World Cup put it: "Italian crowds will certainly recognize in each athlete the representative of that virtue that twelve years of Fascism have distilled in the collective soul and which is called 'self-esteem' or 'being aware of one's own worth'" (CONI 1936, 49).

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The press was the first medium to exploit sport to the full and the first to exploit the new category (and spending power) of the fan (Panico and Papa 1993, 121–32). *Gazzetta dello Sport*, founded in 1896, came out daily from 1913 and *Il Guerin Sportivo* weekly from 1912. Newspapers began offering daily sports coverage in the 1920s (*Il Popolo d'Italia* from 1923; *Corriere della Sera* from 1927), a crucial stage in sport's infiltration of daily life outside sport (Lanfranchi 1991, 340). Magazines proliferated, including several illustrated ones, such as *Calcio Illustrato*, and Fascist titles such as *Il Littoriale* (from 1927) or *Lo Sport Fascista* (from 1928). To a greater or lesser extent, all adopted the rhetorical, epic style in tune with Fascist public pronouncements (Brera 1975, 77–83; Fabrizio 1976, 149–65). The national press also made efforts to use printed images to enhance its coverage. For the World Cup, between 275 and 400 foreign journalists from twenty-nine countries (the sources disagree) were accredited at

Take the promotion of the tournament through visual material. In all, 100,000 posters, 300,000 postcards, and 1 million stamps were put into circulation to commemorate the occasion. There was even a new cigarette brand called "Campionato del mondo" (World Championship) (Valentini 2002, 36). As part of the open collectivity, national competitions had been launched, such as that for the design of the tournament posters and other publicity material. It could be argued that designs of a typically Fascist-modernist style were chosen as winners (Vigarelli 1990, 9–10; Ormezzano and Colombero, 1978, 170–71; Pinkus 1995). However, the use of the winning entries is telling (Figure 3.1). Luigi Martinati's image of the football with the world in the background seems to emanate from an abstracted form of the *fascio littorio* in the bottom left-hand corner, the rods tied to an axe that was at the heart of the etymology of Fascism and had, in 1926, been officially adopted as the symbol of the Fascist state (Falasca-Zamponi 1997, 95–99). Mario Gros's footballer is giving the Fascist salute. In contrast, Gino Boccasile's player is about to kick a ball, and while the image shares the modernist sans-serif lettering of the other winners, the flags convey the international nature of the competition. Although Martinati's design won first prize, it was Boccasile's design, the one with no overt Fascist symbolism, that became the most familiar and lasting image of the competition, since it was used on the cover of the official tournament program. Moreover, even Boccasile's image had been transformed: in the original, published in 1933, a small *fascio littorio* had been present in the bottom right-hand corner, there had been no translations—eventually, on the left-hand side—and "Italia" had followed the main lettering indicating the world championship (Pennacchia 1999, vol. 1, 168). In this sense, extreme nationalism was visually subsumed into an internationalist stance.



FIGURE 3.1 The final form of three of the winning entries in the design competition for the 1934 World Cup. The artists, from left to right, are Gino Boccasile, Mario Gros, and Luigi Martinati. Source: Private collection.

A similar lack of uniformity can be observed when the rhetoric of the reporting is compared to what was happening during the matches. It is not difficult to find examples of propagandists wanting to connect the victory of the team to the glory of the nation:

It is an event which acquires greater importance if it is considered as one of so many expressions of national will set on securing for our Country a position of supremacy in each field of human activity, especially in those chiefly dominated by effort and individual risk and the spirit of organization and collective discipline. (Volontà di primato 1934, 1)

The national glory was in turn related to Mussolini's role. "The Duce's congratulations for the great success of the Italian players" ran one headline to an article assessing the competition (De Martino 1934e, 4). The newspaper founded by Mussolini, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, proudly declared in its headline: "In the name and in the presence of the Duce, the *azzurri* [as the national team was known] win a new world title." The same journalist, Luigi Freddi—a veteran Fascist and a key figure in the press and cinema of the regime—went on to reinforce the link by quoting his master: "We have seen the *azzurri* continuously apply the teaching of the Duce, who wants to make out of our people a 'methodical, tenacious, and persevering' race (*razza*)" (Freddi 1934f, 8).

In practice, the Duce's presence at the games did not imply consistent support. He attended a qualifying match between the United States and Mexico (4–2) and the first game played by Italy in the competition in which it thrashed the United States 7–1 in Rome. He was present to receive personal applause at the final, yet he had sent his sons to the replay between Italy and Spain in Florence (1–0) and did not attend the Italy versus Austria semi-final (1–0), preferring to stay in Rome to see the other semi-final in which Czechoslovakia beat Germany 3–1. Despite accusations of match fixing that favored Italy, one can but wonder how the regime would have dealt with the leader's absence at what could have been the national team's last match. An inkling is given by what actually occurred during the Czech-German semi-final: before the end of the match, news of Italy's victory against Austria was announced through loudspeakers to the spectators of the Stadio Flaminio in Rome. The result was to focus the Roman crowd on events in Milan: having heard the announcement, they stood up and turned toward where Mussolini was sitting, all the time applauding (Freddi 1934e, 8).

In order to highlight the intimate connection between the totalitarian state and sporting success, statements about control and discipline had to be transferred from their civil, pedagogical context to an international sporting event. A radio preview of the competition therefore stressed that the training of the *azzurri* had been "meticulously controlled by the hierarchs of the Italian Football

go, but I want in some way to be represented. So I ask you to buy a ticket and send a worker in my place" (De Martino 1934e, 4). The request was apparently fulfilled, and whatever the veracity of the incident, it painted a picture of nationwide, cross-class support, especially necessary for this event, since the center for the sport was still perceived as being in the north of the country, and the national team had played in Rome for the first time only six years before the World Cup, in 1928.

A more blatant problem was the discrepancy between expectations and outcome with regard to attendance at matches. Few of the games reached capacity figures, but hopes were high for the final. On the day before the match, June 9, Italian radio confidently announced that 70,000 people would go (CONI 1936, 62). *Il Giornale d'Italia* anticipated a crowd of over 60,000 (Lazotti 1934b, 1), but the headline in the same newspaper introducing the report about the match explained how "fifty thousand people applaud the Duce in the Stadium of the Party" (50,000 persone 1934, 1). Another Roman daily, *La Tribuna*, gave a detailed description of the stadium, pointing out how empty spaces could be seen. (In fact, the Milan semi-final, in which Italy defeated Austria, was more intensely followed and better attended; see Cante 1996). Anybody present at the final could have seen the gaps, many of which were at the curved end of the pitch, near the goal, on the side of the Viale Tiziano (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3). *La Tribuna* argued that the sun and ticket prices had been responsible (Giottoli 1934d, 9), thereby raising, right at the end of the competition, a controversial point: to some degree, ticket prices were aimed as much at the relatively wealthy and the traveling fans as at home crowds, for whom the price in the "popular" terraces was a relatively expensive six lire, while the covered stands went up to sixty lire (Mannucci 2002, 38). An Italian factory worker could expect to earn between 300 and 400 lire per month in the 1930s (Milza 1999, 606). Perhaps it was the socio-political sensitivity to such causes that forced *Il Popolo d'Italia* into denying the truth: its report of the match boasted that an "immense crowd" had submerged every structure of the "immense stadium," so that the pitch was the only unoccupied area (Freddi 1934f, 8). This was mendacious on another account: as international observers were keenly aware, the Stadio Flaminio could hardly be called "immense," since it did not conform to international standards of size (Inglis 1990, 50).

Spectators were, however, measured not just by numbers. As a reflection of the regime's concern about the potential ideological contradiction between passive spectators and active participants, the two categories were consciously blurred. Spectators became active participants in the sporting struggle. Before the semi-finals, the radio was proclaiming that, in supporting the Italian players, spurring them on and making them proud, the public would be the "leading actor in tomorrow's encounter" (CONI 1936, 59). Italian fans were engaged in the same militaristic activity as their team, so they played their part

in the first battle against Spain: "The shouting of twenty thousand people hurls the *azzurri* into the attack" (Freddi 1934c, 8). By the end of the whole competition, congratulations were in order for Italian crowds who had participated "more often as actors than as spectators" and had shown through their behavior "a demonstration of ethical maturity second to none" (Freddi 1934f, 8). Their role was not simply to be active in relation to the players on the field, but to take part in something beyond the realm of sport. A radio broadcast on the day before the first games of the competition made this clear by pointing out that what was going to take place on the following day, "more than a spectacle of great proportions, is a ceremony of profound significance" (CONI 1936, 54). The journalistic depiction of the events just after the final elevated the experience to new heights: the joyful applause and the austere music of the Royal March "gave the characteristics of a religious rite to the consecratory ceremony of the success" (Giottoli 1934c, 1). Of course, this can simply be viewed as relabeling existing actions, and one can be cynical as to how many fans felt they were either actively or ritualistically involved. Nevertheless, it is relevant that such vocabulary should have been used in 1934, precisely the year in which fascist public ceremonies and rituals took on a more aggressive, militaristic cast (Berezin 1997, 116–19).

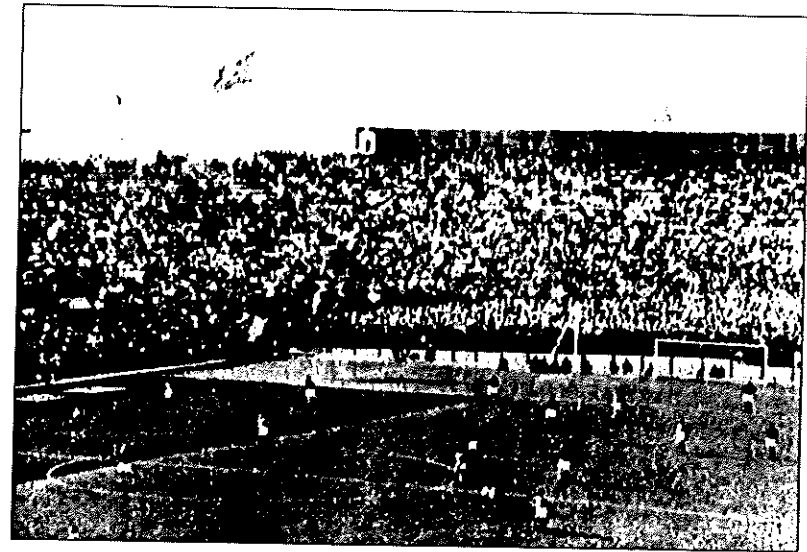


FIGURE 3.3 The final of the 1934 World Cup, played between Italy and Czechoslovakia. Clearly visible at this, the curved end of the stadium, are significant gaps in the crowd.
Source: Private collection.

Whereas these arguments drew attention to a significant absentee, in Britain the splendid isolation was genuine. None of the British newsreel companies appear to have bought footage of the competition, and no journalists from the major newspapers were sent to cover the event. In *The Times*, the only information about the World Cup was the reproduction of an Italian postage stamp issued to commemorate the tournament (June 5, 1934, 18). Despite considerable interest in Italian politics, newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* (June 11, 1934, 18) and the *Daily Express* (June 11, 1934, 21) gave just the result of the final, in tiny notices copied from a news agency release. Although there was interest in countries such as Germany (whose team reached the semi-finals), in France the general coverage was patchy and inaccurate, especially since the national team was eliminated in the first round. (*Le Figaro* [June 11, 1934, 8], for example, limited itself to an undetailed report of the final in little over 100 words.) The propaganda value of the Italian World Cup was thus considerably reduced outside Italy.

The teams that made it through to the later stages deserved more nuanced consideration. This was necessary above all for the Spaniards, who forced Italy into a replay after a 1–1 draw in the quarter-finals. The representational strategy here was twofold: on the one hand, the Italian players were viewed as not being in top form, while on the other, Spain became a heroic combatant, a worthy adversary (e.g., Giottoli 1934a, 2). The comments after the match of the Spanish captain, Ricardo Zamora, were extensively quoted. According to Zamora, the legendary goalkeeper, nicknamed *El Divino*, “The battle in Florence was one of the most exciting sporting battles at which I have ever been present. We should have met for the final. The final in Rome will certainly not be so fine, so interesting, or so well fought” (Lomaggió 1934, 2). It also was a rather violent game, and it is relevant that Zamora, after what some consider a foul against him that led to the Italian goal (Ghirelli 1990, 136), could not return for the replay the following day, won by Italy 1–0. Even after their defeat (in another violent encounter), the Spaniards still apparently considered their foes in a fraternal light: at the train station in Florence, a fond farewell took place between Zamora and the Italian captain-goalkeeper, Giampiero Combi, who shook hands, the Spaniard declaring that his team would go and support Italy in its next match against Austria (De Martino 1934d, 6). Considering the violent nature of the two games—the first was apparently among the most savage in the history of the tournament (Martin 2004, 162)—it is difficult to believe in the authenticity of these sentiments. By the time the final was over, the “extremely fierce contest” between Italy and Spain was still being evoked (De Martino 1934e, 4).

Treatment of the Czechs followed the ploy of lauding an opposing team to enhance Italian prestige, but there also were signs of a more denigratory approach. (This was perhaps stimulated by the infamously violent encounters between Juventus and Slavia Prague in 1932 [Martin 2004, 177–79]). The free kick that resulted in the goal putting Czechoslovakia into a 2–1 lead against

Germany in the semi-final was seen as uncertain, and at least one report actually claimed that it was a mistaken decision made by the Italian referee, Rinaldo Barlassina (Giottoli 1934b, 9). The Czechs moved ahead to win by 3–1, but maybe Barlassina, one of the best-known referees in Italian history, was helping to force the weaker squad into the final against Italy (where a non-Italian referee would have to preside). Off the field, there were other insinuations about a country whose politics can hardly have been seen as sympathetic to the Fascist cause. A rather cruel caricature of the Czech president, Tomáš Masaryk, appeared on the front page of *Il Popolo d'Italia* two days before the final (June 8, 1934) and on the day of the match itself came the prominent news that Czechoslovakia was resuming “diplomatic relations with Moscow” (Praga 1934, 10). It was just as well that an adversary with such communist connections was defeated (although it was at this juncture convenient to forget the pact of friendship Mussolini had signed with the Soviet Union one year earlier).

The presentation of Nazi Germany, in contrast, involved no such problems. After the semi-final against the Czechs, Germany beat Austria 3–2 in the play-off to win third place, which granted the Germans a prominent position along with the Czechs and Italians in the closing ceremony just after the final. Their flag was one of the three flying in the stadium, and the German national anthem was heard third after that of the others. Germans in the crowd sang along and raised their arm in the Nazi salute. The German captain went up to the VIP stand to receive the corresponding prize for his team, given by Mussolini himself (Lazotti 1934c, 7; Giottoli 1934d, 9). The diplomatic approximation between Germany and Italy would be magnified four days later, when Hitler came to meet the Duce for the first time, near Venice.

The ceremonies following the Italian victory possessed other features that mixed Fascist appropriation with the veneer of international approval. When the captains of the three teams went down onto the playing field to join their fellow players, the Fascist anthem, “Giovinezza,” was played, and the crowd stood up and faced Mussolini, who acknowledged the gesture and smiled. This personal touch was continued in the reward for Combi’s squad: as well as the Jules Rimet trophy of FIFA, the winning team received a specially designed Duce cup six times the size of the FIFA trophy, a signed photograph of Mussolini and a gold medal in recognition of their conquest of the football world in the name of Mussolini and Fascism (Martin 2004, 189). Advantage was taken of a good photo opportunity in Mussolini’s personal headquarters, the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, where he posed with the team just after the match, the presence of the Swedish referee for the game—Ivan Ekland—seemingly objectifying the sporting achievement (Cascioli 1982, 112).¹ No wonder *Il Popolo d'Italia* confidently heralded the excellent impression that had been made on foreign visitors by Fascist efficiency, which would all serve for the foreigners who would come to Italy for the 1940 Olympics (Freddi 1934f, 8). (This proved over-optimistic, although Italy was later promised the 1944 games.)

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