

Carol Stewart
IAS 302 R– Scott Sanders
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The World Cup: A Stage, a Mirror, and a Test of What We Value

The FIFA World Cup is easy to overlook when it becomes just another broadcast in the background: matches playing in a restaurant, a quick replay on a phone, a trophy lifted before the channel changes. But after listening to the BYU Kennedy Center panel “Fútbol Is Life: Why You Should Care About the World Cup,” it became difficult to see the tournament as simple entertainment. The panelists treated the World Cup less like a spectacle and more like a lens that brings national identity, politics, and global tension into sharper focus.

One panelist described the World Cup as “the world’s biggest stage for nations to introduce themselves to an international audience, for people to know that they exist, where they exist, and things about them.”¹ That phrasing shifted how I thought about qualification. For some countries, especially those rarely mentioned in American news, simply appearing in the tournament becomes a rare opportunity for recognition. For a moment, their anthem, flag, and name circulate across billions of screens. The stakes are not only athletic; they involve visibility itself.

The panel also challenged the assumption that sports exist outside global politics. Historian Christopher Cannon observed that “everything good and bad happening in the world is also happening in the soccer world.”² That comment reframes what is often dismissed as “off-field drama”: racist taunts, corruption scandals, or tensions between neighboring nations. Rather than distractions, these moments reveal how deeply the sport is connected to the same forces shaping global events. Stadiums become sites where political and cultural pressures surface in real time.

The discussion turned to money and diplomacy as well. Panelists referenced examples of “stadium diplomacy” and the ways governments use major sporting events to project modernity or stability. Hosting a World Cup or constructing massive arenas is rarely just enthusiasm for the sport. It is often a calculated effort to influence how the world perceives a country, sometimes obscuring internal challenges in the process. In that sense, the World Cup becomes another arena in which national narratives are crafted and contested.

Identity was another recurring theme. Modern national teams are shaped by immigration, dual citizenship, and colonial histories. Many players grow up with ties to multiple countries and must decide which one they will represent. One panelist described this complexity as “a gift,” suggesting that layered identities challenge rigid definitions of belonging.³ The World Cup brings these questions into plain view, revealing how fluid national identity has always been.

¹ BYU Kennedy Center for International Studies. (2026, February 11). Fútbol is life: Why you should care about the World Cup [Video]. Brigham Young University. <https://youtu.be/WXnksSzVXaw>

² BYU Kennedy Center for International Studies, February 11, 2026, <https://youtu.be/WXnksSzVXaw>

³ IBID

Gender shaped part of the conversation as well. The panel noted how people often default to calling the men's tournament "the World Cup," while specifying "Women's World Cup" for the women's event. That linguistic habit mirrors broader disparities in funding, visibility, and institutional support. At the same time, the sustained success of the U.S. women's national team demonstrates how investment can reshape outcomes. Trinity Rodman's significant professional contract, highlighted during the panel, illustrates how financial backing can begin to challenge long-standing assumptions about the value of women's sports.

Despite corruption, inequality, and political maneuvering, the World Cup continues to draw people in. Cannon suggested that soccer carries a "great potential to bring people together."⁴ Anyone who has watched a high-stakes match with strangers recognizes that feeling. For a brief stretch of time, people who might disagree about nearly everything else respond to the same breakaway, the same defensive stop, the same goal. That shared attention does not solve global problems, but it reveals a form of connection that remains powerful.

In the end, the World Cup is more than a tournament. It is a moment when countries perform their identities, when social pressures become visible, and when assumptions about belonging and representation surface through a game watched worldwide. Paying attention to it, rather than letting it fade into background noise, changes what appears on the screen and, in some ways, what viewers come to value.

⁴ IBID

References

BYU Kennedy Center for International Studies. (2026, February 11). Fútbol is life: Why you should care about the World Cup [Video]. Brigham Young University.
<https://youtu.be/WXnksSzVXaw>