

4.3 Origin and Diffusion of Folk & Popular Sports

Key Issue 1

How are folk and popular leisure activities distributed?

- Modern spectator sports are good examples of popular culture.
- Some sports retain their folk custom roots.

Many sports originated as isolated folk customs and were diffused like other folk culture, through the migration of individuals. The contemporary diffusion of organized sports, however, displays the characteristics of popular culture.

Soccer's Folk Culture Origins

Soccer, the world's most popular sport—known in most of the world as football—originated as a folk custom in England during the eleventh century. It was transformed into a part of global popular culture beginning in the nineteenth century.

As with other folk customs, soccer's origin is obscure. The earliest documented contest took place in England in the eleventh century. Early football games resembled mob scenes. A large number of people from two villages would gather to kick the ball. The winning side was the one that kicked the ball into the center of the rival village. Because football disrupted village life, King Henry II banned the game from England in the late twelfth century. It was not legalized again until 1603, by King James I. At that point, football was an English folk custom rather than a global popular custom (Figure 4.3.1).

Figure 4.3.1 Early Soccer Match

Painted in 1890



Soccer as Popular Culture

The transformation of football from an English folk custom to global popular culture began in the 1800s. Football and other recreation clubs were founded in the United Kingdom to provide factory workers with organized recreation during leisure hours. Sport became a subject that was taught in school.

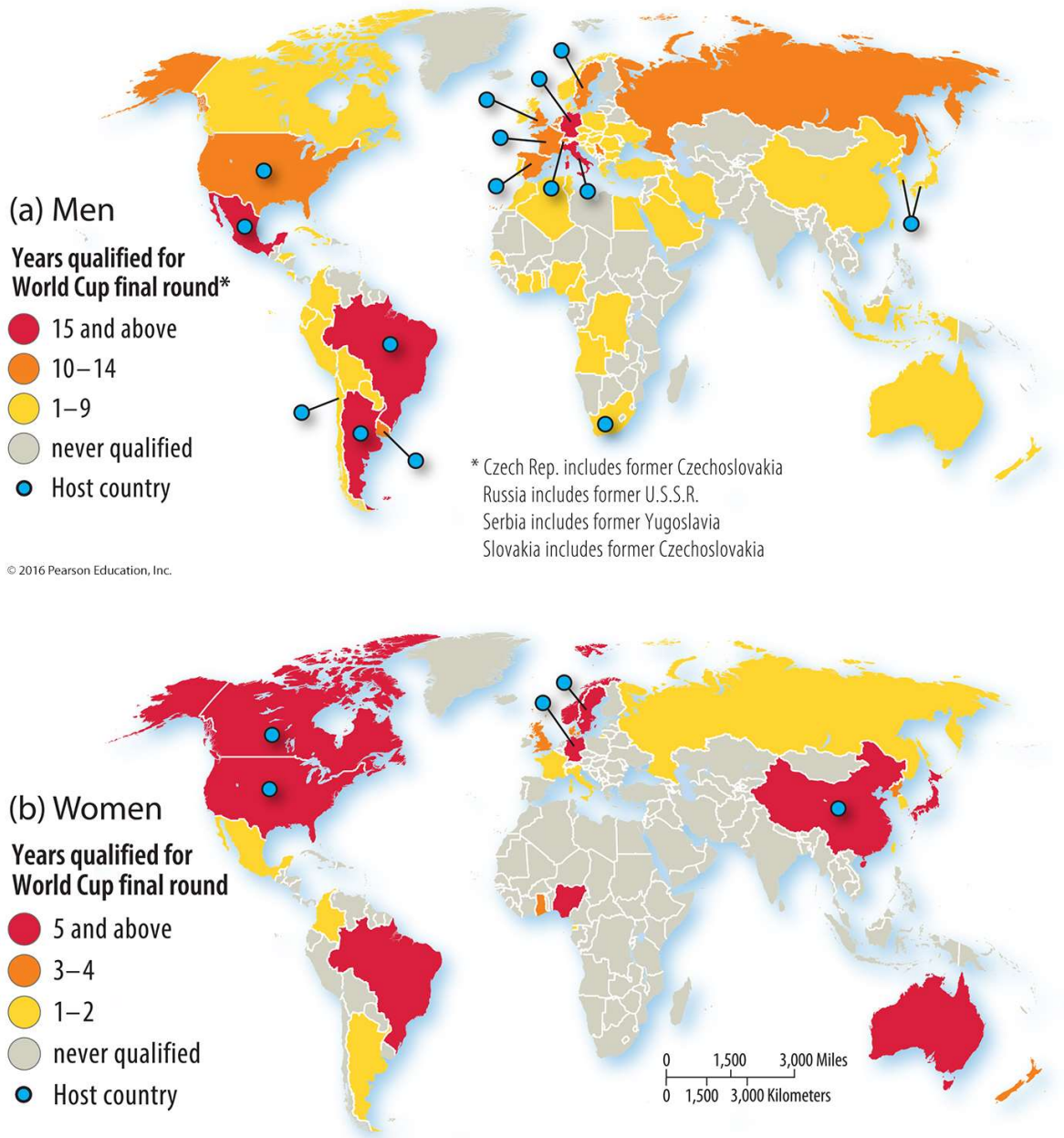
Increasing leisure time permitted people not only to participate in sporting events but also to view them. Several British football clubs formed an association in 1863 to standardize the rules and to organize professional leagues. Organization of the sport into a formal structure in the United Kingdom marks the transition of football from folk to popular culture.

The word *soccer* originated after 1863, when supporters of the game formed the Football Association. Association was shortened to *assoc*, which ultimately became twisted around into the word soccer. Beginning in the late 1800s, the British exported association football around the world, first to continental Europe and then to other countries. In the twentieth century, soccer, like other sports, was further diffused by new communication systems, especially radio and TV.

The global popularity of soccer is seen in the World Cup, in which national soccer teams compete every four years, including in Brazil in 2014 for men and Canada in 2015 for women (Figure 4.3.2). Thanks to TV, each men's final breaks the record for the most spectators of any event in world history.

Figure 4.3.2 Popular Sports: World Cup Soccer

Participating countries and hosts for (a) men and (b) women



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Olympic Sports

To be included in the Summer Olympics, a sport must be widely practiced in at least 75 countries and on four continents (50 countries for women's sports). The 2016 Summer Olympics features competition in 28 sports: archery, aquatics, athletics, badminton, basketball, boxing, canoeing/kayaking, cycling, equestrian, fencing, field hockey, football (soccer), golf, gymnastics, handball, judo, modern pentathlon, rowing, rugby, sailing, shooting, table tennis, taekwondo, tennis, triathlon, volleyball, weightlifting, and wrestling (Figure 4.3.3). The two leading team sports in the United States—American football and baseball—are not included.

Figure 4.3.3 Popular Sports

Women's judo in the Summer Olympics



Surviving Folk Sports

Most other sports have diffused less than soccer. Cultural groups still have their own preferred sports, which are often unintelligible to people elsewhere. Consider the following:

- Cricket is popular primarily in the United Kingdom and former British colonies, especially in South Asia, the South Pacific, and Caribbean islands.
- Ice hockey prevails, logically, in colder climates, especially in Canada, the northern United States, northern Europe, and Russia.
- Wushu, martial arts that combine forms such as kicking and jumping with combat such as striking and wrestling, are China's most popular sports.
- Baseball, once confined to North America, became popular in Japan in the late nineteenth century after it was introduced by American Japanese returning from studies in the United States, as well as Americans working in Japan ([Figure 4.3.4](#)).
- Australian rules football is a sport distinct from soccer and the football played in North America. Distinctive forms of football developed in Australia, as well as the United States and Canada, as a result of lack of interaction among sporting nations during the nineteenth century.
- Lacrosse was traditionally played by the Iroquois, who called it *guhchigwaha*, which means “bump hips.” European colonists in Canada picked up the game from the Iroquois and diffused it to a handful of U.S. communities, especially in Maryland, upstate New York, and Long Island ([Figure 4.3.5](#)). In recent years, lacrosse has fostered cultural identity among the Iroquois Confederation of Six Nations (Cayugas, Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras) because they have been invited by the International Lacrosse Federation to participate in the Lacrosse World Championships, along with teams from sovereign states, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Figure 4.3.4 Regions of Baseball Fans

The area of support for a baseball team is an example of a functional region. The Yankees and Red Sox have support in regions of the country outside the Northeast.



Figure 4.3.5 Surviving Folk Sports

Lacrosse played by high school students



Despite the diversity in distribution of sports across Earth's surface and the anonymous origin of some games, organized spectator sports today are part of popular culture. The common element in professional sports is the willingness of people throughout the world to pay for the privilege of viewing, in person or on TV, events played by professional athletes.