

Americanizing the Beautiful Game: The NASL and America's Failed Bid for Cold War Soccer Dominance

Desmond Paul Hartigan-O'Connor

"Lev Yashin leads Soviets to glory in France."¹ As the final whistle blew in 1960, Soviet players and fans alike erupted in celebration as the USSR claimed the very first European Championship, rejoicing in the Soviet Union's triumph over yet another global sport. More than sixty-six years later, the Soviet Union's triumph in the inaugural European Championship still rings as one of the most notable games in soccer history.² Boasting a roster brimming with talent, including Lev Yashin, one of the greatest goalkeepers of all time, the Soviet Union defeated Yugoslavia on July 10 and conquered continental soccer.³ The Soviet Union's domination of global soccer brought joy back home, but shocked and alarmed American soccer aficionados. In a Cold War rivalry in which every bit of influence mattered, unchallenged Soviet dominance demanded a response. Thus, in 1967, a group of investor-owners founded the North American Soccer League (NASL), staking the United States' claim in the sport of soccer, and establishing a league that NASL leaders hoped would challenge Soviet dominance.⁴

In 1968, the NASL kicked off its first official season.⁵ Its founders hoped to attract both the admiration of international fans and the immense profit they suspected would flow from the combination of sport and television. For American sports fans, the league's founding was a moment of national pride: the likely beginning of an era in which no sport was safe from U.S. dominance. They had witnessed England's 1966 World Cup win, the first World Cup broadcast in the United States.⁶ Prior to this World Cup, soccer in the United States was sparse and rarely followed. This lack of interest was for several reasons: games were rarely, if ever, shown on TV,

¹ Tom Rostance, "Euro 1960: Lev Yashin leads Soviets to glory in France," BBC sport, last modified May 21, 2012, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/17680769>. He would go on to win the Ballon d'Or, soccer's highest award.

² Rostance, "Euro 1960," BBC sport.

³ "EURO 1960: All you need to know," UEFA.com, last modified January 1, 2023, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.uefa.com/uefaeuro/history/news/025a-0eb0ecf360cc-a9532565e049-1000--euro-1960-all-you-need-to-know/>.

⁴ For a description of the early days of the NASL, see Ian Plenderleith, *Rock 'N' Roll Soccer : the Short Life and Fast Times of the North American Soccer League* (Icon Books, 2014) Chapters 1 through 3

⁵ "North American Soccer League, "A Review of the Golden Era," accessed March 22, 2026, <https://www.nasl.com/a-review-of-the-golden-era>.

⁶ Malak Kassem, "When Did Americans Fall in Love with Soccer?," Saturday Evening Post, last modified March 2, 2026, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2026/03/when-did-americans-fall-in-love-with-soccer/>

other sports like the NFL and NBA were growing in influence, and soccer was associated with European nations, including the Soviet Union. There were no American professional soccer leagues. But the 1966 World Cup changed American soccer. For the English-speaking world, the British victory was a cultural and sporting triumph, drastically increasing the popularity of soccer in both its country of birth and in America. In its wake, the popularity of the sport exploded, and the first major American soccer league was formed.⁷ This league, the United Soccer Association, and another World Cup-inspired league, the National Professional Soccer League, brought the sport to domestic American audiences for the first time, and the sport's popularity began to grow. The NASL was a merger of these two smaller predecessors, and therefore emerged out of the post-World Cup interest in the sport.⁸

In 1978, league leaders came together to plan their ideas for the league's future, which they described in a 135-page report titled "North American Soccer League. A Strategic Plan. 1978-1987."⁹ In this document, they outlined a short list of primary goals for the next ten years: repairing the "strained relationship within the soccer community:" United States Soccer Federation ... and FIFA," "to develop United States and Canadian players to the level where they are competitive with the highest quality players throughout the world," and, of course, most importantly: "profit."¹⁰ Importantly, they also described how a close relationship with the United States government was vital, saying that the plan could only function if "governmental action [would] not become so restrictive as to seriously damage franchise rights, value, [or] competitive balance."¹¹ Even more critically, the plan outlined how international relations were a key issue in league operation: "the international aspects of soccer, while providing great opportunities, add complex dimensions to the environment in which the NASL operates."¹² By this, the document is showing how balancing league interests with international competitions and regulations was one of the NASL's main struggles.

Finally, this document showcased a tension in U.S. soccer between the drive to build an "American" sport and convince conventional American audiences to watch the game, while at the same time making the game relatable to the incredible diversity of fans from across the

⁷ "A Review," NASL.com.

⁸ "A Review," NASL.com.

⁹ North American Soccer League, *Strategic Plan: 1978-1987* (adopted October 14, 1977)

¹⁰ North American Soccer League, *Strategic Plan: 1978-1987*

¹¹ North American Soccer League, *Strategic Plan: 1978-1987*

¹² North American Soccer League, *Strategic Plan: 1978-1987*

globe. In service of this, the NASL plan emphasizes its players being average humans, saying, “It is normal for those who play amateur sports to fantasize that, but for a little extra effort or a bad break, they too could be playing the professional game.”¹³ This initiative was important because it showcased why the NASL sought diversity and a wide range of players: people came to watch players who represent them, and so introducing diversity to the league broadened possible audiences. Even further than the drive for relatability, the plan outlined how “more North Americans, and especially young North Americans, are expressing a 'one-world attitude.' They are not bound by barriers of race, sex, economic systems, geographic distances, and cultural variances, barriers which often limited their parents and forebears.”¹⁴ This “one-world attitude” became a crucial aspect of league strategy as the NASL sought to recruit Black players.

Over the 1980’s the NASL acquired several of the sport’s greatest players, most notably Brazilian star Pelé.¹⁵ For the United States, recruiting Pelé was a crucial strategic step in expanding into one of the last global frontiers as of yet untouched by the American exceptionalist mentality, and it showcased the NASL’s ability to recruit Black players. Despite high-profile signings like Pele, the league collapsed in 1984, only fourteen years after its debut.¹⁶

The rapid rise and equally rapid fall of the NASL demonstrated the impossible task of balancing the American cultural desire for entertainment and spectacle with an international pressure to play the “beautiful game” the way it had always been played. In its time, however, the NASL’s widespread signing and promotion of Black players, including but not limited to Pelé, created an environment of racial equality in soccer that weakened Soviet claims of U.S. racism.

Cold War sports rivalries were part of a broader intertwining of athletics and global politics.¹⁷ In soccer, global politics appeared in the deliberations of governing bodies like FIFA, or the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, which controlled the selection of host nations and participating teams for major tournaments. Most importantly, FIFA regulated the World Cup, choosing its location, rules, and qualification methodology. Additionally, while FIFA did not solely decide the rules of the game, as that is the job of the International Football

¹³ North American Soccer League, *Strategic Plan: 1978–1987*

¹⁴ North American Soccer League, *Strategic Plan: 1978–1987*

¹⁵ “Erika T. Zurita, “Soccer Goes American: Pelé and the Rise of American League soccer,” Smithsonian Institution, April 21, 2025, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/Pelé-and-rise-american-league-soccer>.

¹⁶ “A Review,” NASL.com.

¹⁷ “Cold War,” Britannica, last modified April 9, 2026, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War/Toward-a-new-world-order>.

Association Board, it was responsible for enforcing soccer rules across all FIFA competitions. Sport had often proven a surprisingly useful political tool during the Cold War. West Germany's 1954 World Cup victory, known as the "Miracle of Bern," for example, was framed by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer as symbolic of the country's economic recovery after World War II.¹⁸ Almost two decades later, "Ping Pong Diplomacy" helped thaw years of hostile relations between the United States and China through exchanges of ping-pong players. Through decisions on the location and nature of the World Cup and other tournaments, shaped by both its own political interests and the interests of its member nations, FIFA used soccer as a tool of social, economic, and political influence, as exemplified by its decision to host the 1970 World Cup in Mexico, expanding the tournament out of South America and Europe for the first time and showcasing that lobbying and negotiation by political leaders could influence FIFA's decision.

The NASL was another clear case of sporting politics. In a Cold War era where the U.S. and the Soviet Union fought to prove themselves and their corresponding ideologies superior in every sector of daily life, soccer, as the world's most popular sport, was inevitably affected. By founding the NASL, Americans aimed not only to expand economically by tapping into the global soccer market but also to assert that American athletes and institutions could compete and win in a sport long dominated by Europe, South America, and especially the Soviet Union. The league also offered critical infrastructure to the ambitions of U.S. soccer. As the primary contributor to the American national team, the NASL served as the global face of U.S. soccer. The United States Soccer Federation (USSF), the primary governing body for the United States national team, sought to host the World Cup, which required both a domestic league and adequate stadiums, both of which the NASL provided. This practical necessity, however, opened the door to broader ambitions. In establishing the league, organizers targeted both national audiences that, if soccer caught on, could build the sport into a cultural success, and international audiences, as they attempted to demonstrate that the U.S. could conquer an international game and challenge Soviet dominance.

¹⁸ Barbara Smit, "Miracle Men," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2004/jul/25/sport.comment1>

Aside from economics and competition, the incorporation of international talent and players was a deliberate strategy to demonstrate to the world that the U.S. was a place for everyone with talent. The NASL drew players from across the globe, giving people from Brazil to Germany a reason to care about U.S. soccer, and, by extension, U.S. culture. International appeal was not coincidental, but rather part of a broader strategic ambition. The NASL emerged as a Cold War cultural project through which the United States attempted to assert ideological, racial, and cultural superiority in the world's most popular sport; however, its collapse revealed the limits of Americanization, as domestic resistance to foreign governance and a failure to integrate global soccer culture ultimately doomed the league.

Race and Soccer

In its sixteen-year existence, the NASL recruited Black players extensively, both as a sporting strategy and as a means of demonstrating the United States' racial progress during the Cold War. During the 1960s and 1970s, racial inequality was a central axiom of global geopolitics. The Soviet Union frequently used American racial inequality and the violence of the Jim-Crow South as propaganda tools.¹⁹ While the Soviet Union itself was no longer as anti-racist as it presented itself, and in fact had "abandoned many of its earlier commitments" according to scholar Maxime Matusevitch, Soviet propaganda during the Cold War continually attacked the lack of U.S. racial equality.²⁰ For example, a Soviet poster created in 1948 depicted two different images, one of a Black man chained in front of the Statue of Liberty, titled "under capitalism," and the other a crowd of people of mixed races smiling with the caption "under socialism"

¹⁹ Andrew S. Rosenberg, "Race and systemic crises in international politics: An agenda for pluralistic scholarship," Cambridge University Press, last modified January 11, 2024, accessed April 24, 2026, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/race-and-systemic-crises-in-international-politics-an-agenda-for-pluralistic-scholarship/D40681669852CCB61BD1C6E9DDB16ACD>.

²⁰ Maxim Matusevitch, "An Exceptional Case? Problematizing Soviet Anti-Racism," *Black Perspectives*, last modified September 10, 2018, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://www.aaihs.org/an-exceptional-case-problematizing-soviet-anti-racism/>.

(Figure 2).²¹ The Soviet newspaper Pravda published scathing indictments of the United States following Little Rock, saying of the United States, “The racists' savage orgy in this town has shown for all the world to see that in the United States there is no freedom for its 15,000,000 [Black People] that in this country there is no equality of justice.”²² Even post-civil rights movement, Soviet movements like the “Free Angela Davis” campaign in the early 1970s looked to destabilize global perception of U.S. racial politics.²³ Claims like these highlighted U.S. racial divides, but the NASL not only avoided racist accusations on the whole but also utilized the global political racist climate to recruit talented Black players.

Globally, racism in soccer, especially in the English First Division, was rampant—coming from fans, coaches, and players. The NASL, by contrast, benefited from being the product of a rapidly changing and evolving America. Capitalizing on global racial tensions, the NASL was able to recruit players such as “Clyde Best—one of Britain's first Black soccer players” who later recalled wondering, “why should I go out there and perform when I have to put up with that kind of stuff,” referring to the racism he faced in England.²⁴ Although racism remained pervasive in 1960’s and 70’s America, the recruitment of Black players was nonetheless a crucial win for the NASL. The most prominent example of racial integration in the NASL era was Pelé, a Black icon and one of the most famous soccer players of all time. Pelé was recruited by the New York Cosmos in 1975 to be the face of the league and was received with overwhelming enthusiasm. In his first year after joining the league, he was placed front and center of the league's “media guide,” showcasing just how crucial he was to the league’s identity (Figure 1).²⁵ He was so well liked that following his farewell match, Jeff Carter, the son of President Jimmy Carter, formally thanked him for “the smiles he put on children's faces, the thrills he gave to fans of this nation and the dimension he added to American sports,” something he claimed “only Pelé” could do,

²¹ Steve Rose, “Racial harmony in a Marxist utopia: how the Soviet Union capitalised on US discrimination,” *The Guardian*, January 24, 2016, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2016/jan/24/racial-harmony-in-a-marxist-utopia-how-the-soviet-union-capitalised-on-us-discrimination-in-pictures>.

²² “PRAVDA Excoriates U.S. on Little Rock,” *The New York Times* (New York), October 3, 1957, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/1957/10/03/archives/pravda-excoriates-us-on-little-rock.html>.

²³ Maxim Matusevitch, “‘You Are Not Alone’: Angela Davis and the Soviet Dreams of Freedom,” Cambridge University, last modified February 26, 2024, accessed July 8, 2026, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-review-of-social-history/article/you-are-not-alone-angela-davis-and-the-soviet-dreams-of-freedom/B4C126C71F00C194FF2CC9DF8BC3D559?>.

²⁴ Clyde Best, as quoted in Ian Plenderleith, *Rock 'N' Roll Soccer : the Short Life and Fast Times of the North American Soccer League* (Icon Books, 2014)

²⁵ Phil Woosnam, *1976 North American Soccer League Guide* (North American Soccer League, 1976), accessed February 10, 2026, <https://www.sportsarchive.net/documents/9774#page/n47/mode/2up>.

highlighting that American perceptions of soccer performance transcended racial boundaries.²⁶ In Britain, by contrast, Cyrille Regis, a Black soccer star and powerful forward for West Bromwich Albion who had been called up to the English national team, received a bullet through the mail, accompanied by a note that read “if you put your foot on our Wembley turf you’ll get one of these through your knees,” showcasing a disparity in racial treatment between English and American soccer.²⁷ Through strategic marketing and player decisions, the U.S. was able to use the NASL to point out that, if anything, U.S. soccer was less marred than English and global soccer with racism, fighting back against Soviet depictions of America as a racist society.

Beyond high-profile figures like Clyde Best and Pelé, the NASL incorporated many players representing the Black diaspora from Europe and the Caribbean, capitalizing on racial turmoil within those regions to strengthen the league. Black South African players living under apartheid were a key recruiting target for the NASL, among them 1968 Rookie of the Year Kaizer Motaung. Following a successful playing career, Motaung returned to South Africa and founded the Kaizer Chiefs, naming the club after his former NASL team. The Kaizer Chiefs grew into one of the largest soccer teams in South Africa and today remain perennially near or at the top of the South African Premiership. Motaung and his countrymen saw the NASL as a way to flee apartheid and play in an environment where, for the most part, they were treated as equals to other players. Importantly, we can see evidence of targeted recruitment through Motaung’s Kaizer Chiefs, the best of whose players he used his connections in Atlanta to get into the NASL. Motaung recalled his shock at the treatment of Black players in America, saying, “America was an eye-opener for me. I am in a foreign country, but here are Black people holding high positions being respected worldwide.”²⁸ This style of international recruitment both brought talent to the league and raised the global image of the United States as a place where black athletes could go to escape racism and persecution.

²⁶ Jeff Carter, as quoted in Michael Lewis, “How Pelé lit up soccer in America and left a legacy fit for a king,” *The Guardian*, last modified September 30, 2017, accessed April 23, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/sep/30/Pelé-soccer-america-new-york-cosmos?utm_source.

²⁷ Cyrille Regis, *My story*, as quoted in “Regis on Big Ron, racism and death threats sent with a bullet,” *Sports Journalist's Association*, last modified September 9, 2010, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://www.sportsjournalists.co.uk/other-bodies/football-writers/regis-on-big-ron-racism-and-death-threats-wrapped-in-a-bullet/>.

²⁸ Kaizer Moutang, as quoted in John M. Sloop, “How apartheid, European racism and Pelé helped cultivate a culture of diversity in US soccer that endures into Messi-era MLS,” *The Conversation*, February 20, 2026, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://theconversation.com/how-apartheid-european-racism-and-Pelé-helped-cultivate-a-culture-of-diversity-in-us-soccer-that-endures-into-messi-era-mls-197172>.

Recruiting Black players was a political strategy for the NASL, but also an important economic strategy. In its first year, twelve of the league's initial seventeen teams folded, reflecting struggles in attracting talented soccer players at reasonable prices.²⁹ Teams usually collapsed because they spent more on players than they brought in through ticket sales. Ticket sales, in turn, were low because the league was perceived as inferior to European leagues, and so soccer fans became disinterested in attending games, and average sports fans saw little to entice them to follow the sport. In response, the NASL turned to the recruitment of Black players to build quality, through a mix of experienced stars and younger, unappreciated talents. While older stars attracted attention, the recruitment of young Black players rapidly grew the league, as the NASL was able to use perceived racial progress following the civil rights movement to present a unique opportunity to incoming players: at least partial escape from racial prejudice. Leroy DeLeon, a player from Trinidad and Tobago, for example, chose to join the NASL because, in a recruiting trip to Britain's West Ham, he had seen only one Black player, Clyde Best, while "the Washington Darts, however, alone had seven different Trinidadians on the roster."³⁰ More broadly, structural racism in global soccer markets meant that Black players were often undervalued, allowing NASL teams to recruit high-quality players at lower cost.³¹ By targeting Black players, the NASL was able to incorporate talented youngsters who were ostracized elsewhere, and the technical level of the league increased dramatically as a result.³²

American politicians leveraged NASL integration to project an image of racial progress to the NASL's two audiences: American and international soccer fans. League leaders framed integration as both a reflection of the broader cultural shifts of the civil rights movement and a response to international pressure on the United States to address racial inequality. Although it was an independent league, the NASL was influenced by global politics directly, because it was intertwined with the U.S. government in several ways. First, the NASL collaborated with the United States Soccer Federation, attempting to build a strong national team with "American

²⁹ John M. Sloop, "How apartheid, European racism and Pelé helped cultivate a culture of diversity in US soccer that endures into Messi-era MLS," *The Conversation*, February 20, 2026, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://theconversation.com/how-apartheid-european-racism-and-Pelé-helped-cultivate-a-culture-of-diversity-in-us-soccer-that-endures-into-messi-era-mls-197172>.

³⁰ John M. Sloop, "The incidental progressive politics of the North American soccer League: a case study in the complex forces behind constraints and possibilities," Taylor and Francis Online, last modified April 10, 2025, accessed April 26, 2026, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14791420.2025.2482192#abstract>.

³¹ Sloop, "How apartheid."

³² Sloop, "How apartheid."

hero” players that they hoped would demonstrate American sporting excellence.³³ Second, the U.S. government openly embraced the league through a pair of public meetings with Pelé at the White House in 1975. Henry Kissinger, the U.S. Secretary of State, prepared a brief discussing how vital it was for the U.S. to grow the sport of soccer, demonstrating the political influence of the league.³⁴ Kissinger stated “your presence will do a great deal to stimulate professional soccer... in this country,” and then followed that by saying of Brazil and soccer “it (soccer) will be very positive and helpful to the friendly relations between our two countries.” As global audiences increasingly associated sporting excellence with the Soviet Union, the United States lost global influence. The association between the Soviet Union and soccer was so strong, in fact, that the sighting of soccer fields in 1970 Cuba triggered a near panic in the White House, as Kissinger explained to H.R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff at the time, “Cubans play baseball. *Russians* play soccer.”³⁵ The establishment of the NASL thus reflected a deliberate effort by the U.S. to elevate its international sporting profile and reclaim a measure of influence that was deeply intertwined with broader Cold War rivalries. The U.S. government also attempted to use the league to demonstrate progress toward racial equality in order to refute Soviet attacks on American equality, evidenced by American discrimination. By publicly meeting with prominent Black NASL stars, the U.S. government was arguing that American sporting excellence transcended racial boundaries. Through the recruitment of Black players, the NASL indirectly showcased improved racial equality in the U.S., countering Soviet claims through the world’s favorite pastime.

Overall, the NASL was born into a Cold War America widely criticized for racism that turned comparative racial equality into one of the league’s most compelling selling points for Black players. South African midfielder Webster Lichaba joined for this reason, saying of his time in the NASL, “You were allowed to eat in any restaurant; you went into any club if you wanted to ... it was different, a different lifestyle altogether. You were treated as an equal.”³⁶ The promise of equality drew in Black soccer players from around the world, and their experience in

³³ Dan Levin, “The Penalty for Success,” *Sports Illustrated*, September 2, 1974, 16.

³⁴ “MEETING WITH PELE (EDSON ARANTEL NASCIMENTO) BRAZILIAN SOCCER STAR,” CIA.gov, last modified June 28, 1975, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.comparative.cia.gov/readingroom/document/loc-hak-74-5-2-2>.

³⁵ Patrick J. Haney, “Soccer Fields and Submarines in Cuba: The Politics of Problem Definition,” Jstor, last modified 1997, accessed July 8, 2026, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44638777?seq=1>.

³⁶ Webster Lichaba, as quoted in Sloop, “How apartheid, European racism and Pelé helped cultivate a culture of diversity in US soccer that endures into Messi-era MLS.”

the United States kept them. Those who later returned to their home countries were “energized to act against apartheid and confident of their ability to succeed in joint struggles against racism.”³⁷ In doing so, the NASL became a symbol of good race relations in the United States and across the globe. While the Soviet Union promoted racial equality rhetorically, the NASL allowed the United States to visually perform integration on a global stage.

Americanization and Regulation in Soccer

The NASL experienced a fundamental tension between assimilation and Americanization. NASL players and coaches, many of whom were foreign-born, sought to assimilate U.S. soccer into the global soccer community in order to build a broader soccer community and create player and cultural exchange with European teams. NASL owners, in contrast, hoped to Americanize and commercialize the sport. Danny Blanchflower, a British announcer hired by the NASL as a television commentator, for example, was instructed to both narrate the sport and introduce it in its most basic form to American viewers.³⁸ He was shocked when the network asked him to avoid criticizing teams and players. The network, representing the economic interests of league owners, considered such criticism damaging to the perception of the league.³⁹ His experience left him frustrated, writing, “One problem was that few of the team owners had any real love for soccer. Some owned stadiums, and soccer was just another circus to fill up empty seats.”⁴⁰ In pursuit of “filling up seats,” he charged, NASL owners often lost motivation to keep the sport “pure,” seeking instead to maximize attendance. To this end, the league initiated rule changes in an attempt to impose American cultural and commercial values onto a global sport.⁴¹ As the NASL itself acknowledged, the NASL “felt it needed to sell the sport of soccer to North Americans,” and in this pursuit, “modified the rules in an attempt to make the game more exciting, and comprehensible, to the average sports fan.”⁴² These changes “included a clock that counted time down to zero as was typical of other timed American sports...implemented in 1972 a 35-yard line for offside... [and] introduced a penalty shootout in

³⁷ Sloop, "How apartheid."

³⁸ "NY Cosmos at Seattle Sounders NASL Soccer 7/5/75," video, YouTube, posted by Tim Hanlon, August 17, 2014, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY0YnSioVwU&list=PLtabXocLL0ibt-I6FPbyZkeOK9J2Sgo_p&index=6.

³⁹ Danny Blanchflower, "Just One Truth For Me," *Sports Illustrated*, June 10, 1968, 45.

⁴⁰ Blanchflower, "Just One Truth," 45.

⁴¹ Blanchflower, "Just One Truth," 45.

⁴² "A Review," NASL.com.

1974 to decide matches that ended in a draw.”⁴³ In European competition, by contrast, the offside line was placed at the halfway point of the field, and matches that ended in (sanctioned) ties resulted in teams earning a point each. By modifying the rules, the NASL hoped to create a fast, unique, American rendition of soccer, which could develop independently enough to assert U.S. individuality while at the same time acclimating American fans to the sport.⁴⁴

Many of the rule changes were designed specifically to increase scoring. In other major American sports, particularly football and baseball, scoring was more common, and so early NASL architects looked to augment NASL goal tallies.⁴⁵ Modifying the offside rule reduced the effectiveness of the “offside trap,”⁴⁶ a defensive strategy, resulting in more frequent goal-scoring opportunities. Draws, too, were looked down upon in American sports culture, hence the introduction of the penalty shootout, in which players take alternating one-on-one shots against the goalkeeper to decide the single winner of a game that had been tied in open play.⁴⁷

The NASL borrowed heavily from other major American sports in other ways, introducing cheerleaders and mascots, which were unheard of in European leagues, to create a more familiar and entertaining environment for American viewers. Although cheerleaders and mascots may not seem as bizarre as the suggested rule changes, these were still explicitly Americanized interjections, now even stretching off the pitch. Cheerleaders and mascots intruded on the fan experience, from the moment a fan entered a stadium to the moment of departure. Unlike popular American sports such as football, basketball, and baseball, which were invented in their modern forms in the United States and have been historically dominated by Americans, soccer was quintessentially international, both in origin and in terms of team pedigree, which created both a challenge and an opportunity. Many historians cite the international nature of soccer as an explanation for the slow adoption of soccer in the United States, as it was considered a European, not American, sport, and it also helps us explain NASL rule changes. NASL innovation was a reflection of the prevailing thought among NASL commissioners that attendance at NASL games was low because the sport was neither “American” nor entertaining

⁴³ “A Review,” NASL.com.

⁴⁴ “A Review,” NASL.com.

⁴⁵ “A Review,” NASL.com.

⁴⁶ “Simple Offside Explanation and Examples,” video, Youtube, posted by Catalan Soccer, May 2, 2020, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPv7Hm2Z9OY>.

⁴⁷ “What Is A Soccer Penalty Shootout, Explained? - Soccer Stats Vault,” video, Youtube, posted by Soccer Stats Vault, September 4, 2025, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxxZfpScHFY>.

enough. Exemplifying this thinking, Phil Woosnam, NASL commissioner, said in an interview that “those kids [the American public] are starving for an American hero.”⁴⁸

Phil Woosnam’s assessment highlights another element of the paradoxical nature of the NASL. While teams had to bring in talented international players to raise the level of play, rampant importation meant that few teams were truly headlined by American players. Instead of building up American youth players, the NASL signed foreign talents, and in doing so, was destructively prioritizing short-term spectacle over long-term sustainable development.

If international respect or even dominance were indeed the ultimate goals of the NASL, then it is safe to say that the league was something of a failure. Rather than garnering global respect, the odd rules and style of American soccer alienated many European observers to the point that FIFA, the federation in charge of hosting the World Cup and one of the most important political entities in soccer, threatened to ban the U.S. from international competition if the rules of the NASL were not standardized to those of the rest of the world. A 1978 article in the *New York Times* quoted Rene Courte, FIFA spokesperson, who said NASL rules, “are illegal under F.I.F.A. statutes and we will certainly consider disciplinary action if they are not changed. This action may well constitute a suspension from F.I.F.A.”⁴⁹ The NASL’s new rules, intended to broaden the audience for soccer, acted not as a unifying change that proved U.S. innovation and capability to a skeptical Cold War world, but rather confirmed international doubts about American ability to assimilate.

Perhaps the most serious consequence of suspension from FIFA would have constituted a ban from hosting the World Cup in the future. As Courte warned: “Since the host country automatically qualifies for the finals, we have to be sure that standards of play get somewhere near the average world level. This will never be the case in the United States unless they change their views and put their house in order.”⁵⁰ Hosting the World Cup was significant for the United States for two reasons: the World Cup brought in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue, and hosting it would certainly increase the popularity of the sport in the United States. The unbounded opportunity that the World Cup could bring to U.S. Soccer meant the NASL took FIFA’s threat extremely seriously. But the NASL was in a difficult position. It could sacrifice the

⁴⁸ Dan Levin, “The Penalty for Success,” *Sports Illustrated*, September 2, 1974, 16.

⁴⁹ “U.S. Facing World Soccer Ban over Rule Deviations,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 1978, accessed January 29, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/04/27/archives/us-facing-world-soccer-ban-over-rule-deviations.html>.

⁵⁰ Here Courte uses “finals” to refer to the World Cup: host nations automatically qualify for the tournament, but not the finals.

rules that showcased American innovation and independence, as well as risk a decline in popularity as the sport became more “boring” to American audiences, or it could keep these rules and risk being banned from the global soccer landscape. The NASL was struggling, in other words, to balance the needs of the U.S. people, who wanted a more American and exciting form of the sport, with the preferences of European sports fans, who had the soccer money and influence to decide the rules of the game and the location of the World Cup. It was impossible for the NASL to appease both. In the end, the NASL reneged on its rule improvisations, notably the offside line, and returned to abiding by the global standard.

Infrastructure and Sports Culture

The U.S. took a long time to warm up to soccer, owing in part to the game’s early dominance by Britain, a former colonial power of the United States. Details of the invention of soccer are disputed, but it is mostly agreed that the game was first, and most prominently, played in England. Scholars Eric Hobsbawm and Steven Hellerman described the sport as “the child of Britain's global presence...this simple and elegant game.”⁵¹ As “children of Britain's global presence” themselves, the American people were understandably far from eager to embrace a sport that sprang from British imperialism. Ivan Waddington, another historian of the origin of soccer, vehemently disagreed with much of what Markovits said. He has attacked Markovits and others' idea of soccer becoming the predominant sport simply because it often “got in first,” but even acknowledged the role of colonial resentment in the slow adoption of soccer in the United States. According to Waddington, in fact, the “status rivalry with the former colonial power” led Americans to seek out sports or rule changes that were “distinctively non-British.”⁵² This cultural chasm resulted in what Markovits and Hellerman refer to as a lack of “hegemonic sports culture” for soccer in the United States.⁵³ A hegemonic sports culture is one in which a sport dominates not only in terms of the number of athletes playing it, but also in the broader cultural conversation, in what people watch and discuss. Non-hegemonic sports, by contrast, may involve significant participation but lack consistent visibility or cultural influence in national identity and

⁵¹ Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman, *Offside : Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 1.

⁵² Ivan Waddington and Martin Roderick, "American Exceptionalism: Soccer and American Football," Taylor and Francis online, last modified December 14, 2009, accessed July 8, 2026, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17460269609446393>.

⁵³ Markovits and Hellerman, *Offside*, 5.

public discourse. Historically, soccer in the United States has belonged to the latter category. While millions of Americans have played the sport, it has lacked the same cultural influence that sports like American football, basketball, and baseball have obtained.⁵⁴ This absence of a hegemonic soccer culture, a product of American rejection of a traditionally European cultural import, meant that Americans did not consistently think about, discuss, or consume soccer in the way that fans in other countries did.

By 1968, the year of the first NASL season, soccer had become strongly associated with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, especially after notable Soviet successes like Lev Yashin, who remains the only goalkeeper to win the Ballon d'Or, the sport's highest individual honor. Aside from this award, and their 1960 European championship win, the Soviet Union team was also three-time European Championship runners-up, two-time Olympic gold winners, and Dynamo Kyiv, a Soviet club, also won the Cup Winners' Cup twice and the UEFA Super Cup. In this context, embracing soccer was not just embracing a game, but it was a symbolic alignment with foreign powers that stood in ideological opposition to the United States and capitalism. As a result, soccer remained culturally peripheral in the United States. Without a hegemonic sports culture to sustain widespread interest, the country failed to fully develop its potential talent pool. Without constant discussion, watching, and cultural reinforcement, most Americans never considered soccer as a primary sport, limiting its popularity and that of the NASL while also limiting its development in the United States. This limitation can be seen in *Sports Illustrated*, one of the most popular sports magazines of its time, which, in November 1973, during the peak of the NASL, had a single article about soccer, equal to the number about sharpshooting, and far below the double-digit articles about basketball and football.⁵⁵ This showcases how little of the national consciousness soccer took up, resulting in issues in player, coach, and team development.

American culture itself played a large part in the struggles of soccer in the United States in the form of its college-centered recruitment system. For the biggest American sports leagues, most notably the NFL and NBA, collegiate players entered leagues through drafts. This system was harshly juxtaposed with the traditional soccer system for talent development. In international

⁵⁴ Over 14 million in 2026, according to Jose Sanchez, "soccer in the U.S. - statistics & facts," Statista, last modified December 17, 2025, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.statista.com/topics/2780/soccer-in-the-us/#topicOverview>.

⁵⁵ See *Sports Illustrated*, November 5, 1973, Volume 39, No. 19; November 12, 1973, Volume 40, No. 20; November 19, 1973, Volume 39, No. 21; November 26, 1973, Volume 39, No. 22.

soccer leagues, by contrast, teams develop talent through their academies. These academies have expensive facilities near the teams, and they develop players from a very young age, eventually integrating them into the first team as they grow older. American NASL teams did not have academies, and so they lacked the influx of young talent that academies brought. In practice, this meant that all incoming youth players had to come from college sports, with the first NASL draft held in 1972. Due to the lack of a hegemonic soccer culture, college soccer teams were sparse and ill-funded. In 1958, for example, Bob Guelkus, one of the most successful college coaches of all time, asked St. Louis University (which would eventually produce a decorated team) for money and games with which to found a college soccer team.⁵⁶ In response, St. Louis's athletic director said he had "a budget of \$200 and a schedule of two games."⁵⁷ In comparison to the sums it took to create a championship basketball team, \$200 was a pittance. College soccer in the 1970s was small and undeveloped, producing few professional-grade soccer players. As such, NASL teams had limited choice in draft picks, and the players they could draft tended not to be very good by international standards. The national team, which unlike the NASL could not recruit players from abroad, lacked young talent and continually struggled to qualify for the World Cup because they simply could not beat Mexico, their conference rivals, who had a long tradition of soccer and a well-established soccer league.⁵⁸

Despite its large population, the U.S. was not developing its soccer talent, which was one of the original purposes of the NASL. Instead of producing world-class players and proving Americans could indeed play soccer, the league was reduced to a last stop for European players at the end of their careers, with international opinion of American soccer remaining in its fallen state. Aside from reflecting poorly on the U.S., this inability to develop talent may have eventually led to the league collapsing entirely. By the waning years of the NASL, the cost of paying international stars meant that NASL teams were spending over 70% of their budget on player salaries, which proved to be an ultimately unsustainable figure, as dwindling audiences resulted in little income to pay those salaries.⁵⁹ Because they did not produce their own players, NASL teams could not sell their contracts to raise funds. In 1983, an article from the

⁵⁶ Gwilym S. Brown, "Blues in the Night for the Cougars," *Sports Illustrated*, November 19, 1973, 38.

⁵⁷ Brown, "Blues in the Night," 38.

⁵⁸ Ed Farnsworth, "The World Cup drought: US Soccer, 1950-1990," The Philly Soccer Page, last modified April 10, 2014, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://phillysoccerpage.net/2014/04/10/the-drought-us-soccer-1950-1990/>.

⁵⁹ "The rise and fall of the original North American Soccer League and the New York Cosmos," Soccer Walks, last modified March 31, 2019, accessed April 26, 2026, <https://www.soccerwalksnyc.com/news/2019/3/31/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-original-new-york-cosmos-and-the-nasl>.

Commercial Appeal described how “only one team according to league sources ever has turned an annual profit.”⁶⁰ This team, the Minnesota Kicks, still collapsed despite having been profitable for a short period of time. Even when NASL teams made tactically smart signings, their tendency to recruit primarily older, experienced players, who were unlikely to be resold for high fees, resulted in economic difficulties.

It is not surprising that a league in which just one team ever made an annual profit collapsed. In the end, the NASL’s rampant spending and focused recruitment of international superstars, as well as its failures in developing American youth talents, were a reflection of its prioritization of American cultural values over global soccer values. By not developing youth players, not only did the NASL doom itself, but it also failed in its goal to challenge Soviet soccer dominance. It was not until many years later that the U.S. was truly considered better than the USSR at soccer, and that eventual success was not born through NASL players. Instead, the eventual cultural isolation of the USSR, combined with increased American participation in European soccer, finally tipped the scales.

The NASL was not merely a failed sports league, but an ill-fated Cold War experiment in cultural expansion. An organization founded out of a boom in nationwide interest in the sport following the 1966 World Cup, the league represented and was far more than just a collection of soccer teams. It was the first manifestation of the United States's untapped potential in the world’s game, and at the same time, it revealed that the United States was simply not ready to play great soccer. Although the league never consistently attracted the crowds it sought, it is important to acknowledge its moments of glory. It did truly give many Americans their first introduction to the sport, and it set the stage for the eventual development of Major League Soccer (MLS) in 1993, as well as thousands of soccer players, coaches, and teams. Additionally, the NASL's use of the penalty shootout was of significant cultural importance to the world of soccer, as it was one of the very first leagues to introduce a rule that eventually became a staple of the biggest tournaments.

⁶⁰ *The Commercial Appeal*, as depicted in Daniel Evensen, "The Sins Of The NASL," Football Manager Projects, last modified February 6, 2025, accessed April 26, 2026, <https://fmprojects.substack.com/p/the-sins-of-the-nasl>.

On multiple counts, the NASL was also a snapshot of the Cold War. Every carefully calculated NASL promotion or signing had the potential to be one small victory in a larger war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Through this league, the U.S. was able to attract Black players looking to escape persecution elsewhere. In doing so, it effectively dismantled one of the Soviet Union's most effective pieces of propaganda, and the teams themselves benefited immensely by drawing from a talent pool yet untapped by other major leagues, and also creating the perfect environment to attract established Black superstars. This effort, in conjunction with purchasing well-known players from Europe, formed the basis of several truly interesting years of games, as evidenced by a record figure of over 45,000 fans a game in the New York Cosmos 1980 season.⁶¹

In tragic irony, however, it was precisely these ambitions of global assimilation and US independence that exposed the limits of American power. The league's reliance on foreign talent undermined its goal of proving domestic superiority, its rule changes alienated the very global audience it sought to impress, and its failure to develop grassroots infrastructure revealed that cultural dominance could not simply be imported or engineered. In this sense, the NASL reflects a broader truth about the Cold War itself: while the United States could project power and influence across the globe, it could not always reshape deeply rooted cultural systems to fit its own model.

For all of its failures, though, the NASL did truly do one thing right. Although accepting FIFA's rule changes may have sped up the decline of the NASL, the decision to give up on the American need for a unique, Americanized sport in order to stay in FIFA may have been the single most important decision in the history of American soccer. In 1994, ten years after the final NASL game kicked off, the U.S. hosted the World Cup for the first time. The tournament was a massive success. It attracted huge crowds and inspired millions to start playing the sport, ushering in a new era of soccer in the United States, much like the 1966 World Cup that heralded America's first soccer boom. In the months and years before the 1994 World Cup, the U.S. recognized a problem: to host the tournament, they needed a league. From the ashes of the NASL, rising, like its predecessor, from a World Cup hosted on the foundation built by the players, teams, and organizers of the NASL, Major League Soccer was born.

⁶¹ "NASL Attendance," Nasl Jerseys, accessed April 24, 2026, https://nasljerseys.com/Templates/Stats/Attendance.htm?utm_source.

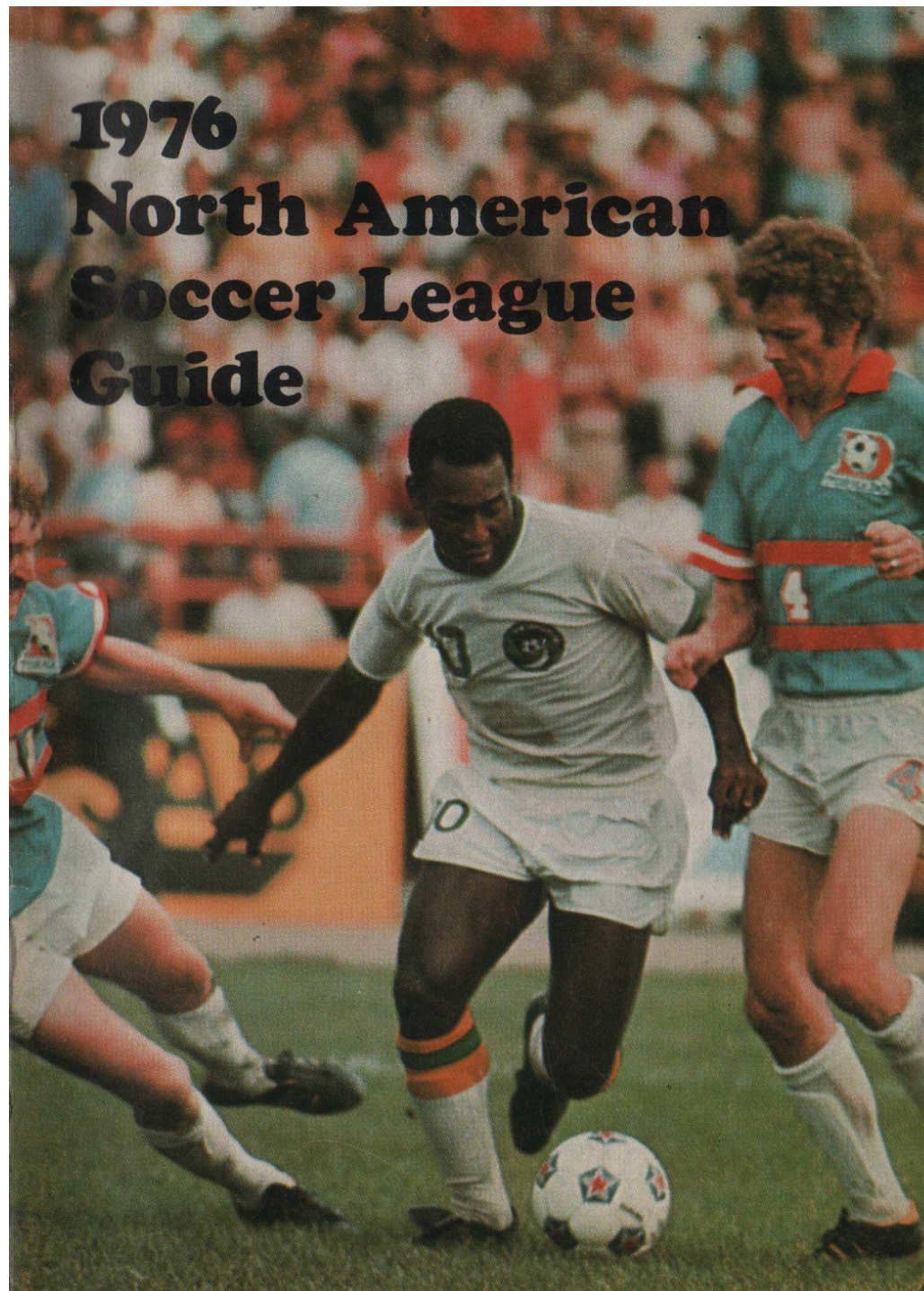


Figure 1. Phil Woosnam, *1976 North American Soccer League Guide* (North American Soccer League, 1976), accessed February 10, 2026, <https://www.sportsarchive.net/documents/9774#page/n47/mode/2up>.



Figure 2. Steve Rose, "Racial harmony in a Marxist utopia: how the Soviet Union capitalised on US discrimination," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2016, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2016/jan/24/racial-harmony-in-a-marxist-utopia-how-the-soviet-union-capitalised-on-us-discrimination-in-pictures>.

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