

Professor predicts Brazil will win World Cup

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Government professor Christopher Anderson, a former semi-pro soccer player, has launched a statistically based soccer blog. He predicts Brazil will take the cup in South Africa this summer.

A few weeks ago Christopher Anderson, professor of government and a former semi-professional soccer player in Germany, launched soccerquantified.com, a blog that submits the World Cup -- held this year June 11-July 11 in South Africa -- to [statistical analyses](#).

Among his findings: Richer, democratic countries do better (although it's not clear why), and some countries perform systematically better than others.

He predicts Brazil will take the World Cup, the crowning athletic event of world's most popular sport.

To him, the interesting question is why. "I'm interested in understanding the connection among politics, international sports and soccer, and the characteristics of countries and how they do in the World Cup," he said. "Political scientists have studied specific events, like when a soccer match ignited a military conflict between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969. When Argentina won the World Cup in 1978, the military dictator in power claimed credit for it. In Spain, Franco favored the Madrid team over Barcelona."

When Anderson was invited to contribute to The New York Times' soccer blog, his post provoked outrage from some fans who took

umbrage at the idea of looking at their beloved sport through numbers.

"In every sport, some people think you just can't quantify what makes a good player or team," Anderson said. "Others think there is something to be learned by observing things systematically. It's more a matter of faith for some people than a matter of evidence, and I totally respect that. I think you can do both.

"I use data about past competitions to make predictions about this year's competition. And to the extent there's something systematic going on in the data, we should be able to use data about the past to make predictions."

But there's room for error. Lots of it. Anderson said the probability of any one of 32 national teams winning the World Cup is quite low, partly because so many factors may influence a tournament: altitude, food, the team's hotel and the all-important home field advantage -- which will be lost on South Africa, "a really weak team. Their fans will go nuts over them, but it won't benefit them," said Anderson. "Brazil has the best shot going in, but that doesn't mean they're going to win this thing."

Many soccer fans also favor Brazil. "They have an amazing team," Anderson noted. "The question is what makes them so great. I think that's where you can use statistics to see if it's about how well they're doing currently, how strong this team is compared to other teams or perhaps the fact that they have experience advancing in this tournament -- that's another really good predictor."

Then there's the matter of emotion. It tends to run rather high among fans. Anderson said this intensity of rooting for or against a country has been likened to a substitute for war. "It gives you a chance to let out your ethnic aggressions in a peaceful way," he said.

As for his personal soccer career, it was cut short when he was 18 or 19. "I didn't think I was ever going to go anywhere as a professional player, so I focused on going to college," he said. "In Europe, you cannot be both an athlete and a student. The NCAA student-athlete system is unique in the world."

Analysis aside, [soccer](#), said Anderson, "is a beautiful, aesthetically pleasing sport." And now that every match of the [World Cup](#) is shown on American TV, Anderson said, "for my research I'm going to have to do a lot of couch sitting this summer."

Provided by Cornell University

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