

Despite its British origins, Americans get a bad rap for using the word 'soccer'

10 June 2014, by Laura Bailey

Americans use the word soccer to describe the game that just about everybody else in the world calls football, and this duel over semantics enrages purists of the game.

But few realize that the word soccer actually originated in Britain in the late nineteenth century, said Stefan Szymanski, a University of Michigan professor in the School of Kinesiology. Szymanski examines the rise and fall of the word soccer in his paper, "It's [football](#), not soccer," and suggests that the venom unleashed by critics of the word soccer has more to do with anti-Americanism than with tradition.

"These people have conveniently forgotten, or they don't realize, that the word soccer originated in England," and is thought to be associated with upper middle class students at elite universities, Szymanski said. "(The term soccer) was only later adopted by Americans to distinguish it from gridiron."

To understand how the vitriolic debate over usage of soccer or football began, Szymanski's paper outlines British and U.S. publications and [book titles](#) from 1900 on to chart the popularity of both words, particularly the nosedive of the term soccer in British English.

In the first half of the twentieth century, soccer was a recognized term in Britain but it wasn't widely used in publications there until after World War II, he found. In Britain, the term peaked between 1960 and 1980, when it was used almost interchangeably with football.

One can only speculate on the rise and fall of the use of the word soccer in Britain, Szymanski said.

"Stuffer pre-war era editors" may have perceived the word soccer as too informal, Szymanski said, but after the war, word usage may have become more informal. Or the popularity of U.S. soldiers

who were stationed in Britain may have reinforced the usage.

"In the 1980s you start to hear the argument that soccer is an American word, as distinct from the British football," Szymanski said. "It is hard to think of any explanation for the decline other than the rising popularity of the word soccer in the U.S."

Szymanski argues that both words are necessary.

"Americans will continue to call the game soccer whatever anyone else says, not out of perversity but out of the need to distinguish it from America's favorite game, football," Szymanski said. "The rest of us can continue to get mad about it if we want, but it might more sensible to get over it and recognize that our favorite [game](#) can just as easily be called soccer as football."

More information: The complete paper is available online: [ns.umich.edu/Releases/2014/June...tball-not-soccer.pdf](https://ns.umich.edu/Releases/2014/June/tball-not-soccer.pdf)

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