



Thirty-One Nil: The Amazing Story of World Cup Qualification

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MacK says

To begin with, my envy of James Montague knows no bounds. I've often daydreamed about writing this story. Travelling the world, getting to know players, coaches, and fans on every continent, and then telling the story to others seems like the best possible job. I'm not about to leave my family or my job to do it...fortunately, there's Mr. Montague.

James Montague takes the reader through the peaks and valleys of World Cup quests by venturing to the literal peaks and valleys of our world. From Kyrgyzstan's cliffs where displaced nations like Syria and Afghanistan have to face off, to the low lying islands of American Samoa, he helps us see what it was like for nations to embark on the road to Rio for the 2014 FIFA Men's World Cup. Along the way you meet quirky coaches and passionate players. While you understand the people beautifully, the games almost seem like an after thought. To be fair, a play-by-play book might have been impossible, but more vivid game highlights would much appreciated.

Still, the actual results are not the focus of the story. Through it all Montague helps readers who may never have known or thought about the game on these far flung fields feel like they are there, because we, like Montague himself, have to adjust our expectations and engagement with others. Montague and the world travelers he interviews code-switch frequently between what they've known and take for granted and what others need or expect. The national trauma of genocide, the role of religion, the biases bred from new immigrants, all of them are processed and adjusted to in order to keep the story swimming along. Anyone who code-switches (which is to say everyone) can understand that, even if they don't get the game, or the nations he covers.

I really liked Montague's work, even though I wish I had been the one to write it. I bet, if you're a fan of the beautiful game or the beautiful world we live in, you will too.

David says

31-0 tells the story of a number of the lower-seeded national soccer teams as they attempt to qualify for the 2014 World Cup. In it, the author travels to 6 continents, as he watches teams with no chance to make the big dance (such as American Samoa), teams from partially recognized nations such as Palestine (whose team is FIFA-approved) and Kosovo (whose team isn't), teams with a slight chance (Egypt, Bosnia, and Iceland), and even powerful Croatia.

In it, soccer is often seen as a main unifying factor in places where there isn't much to unify the population, and it can also be a source of division (see Hungary/Romania and Croatia/Serbia) between nations.

My main reason for giving the book a low rating is because it just took me so long to read it. I am not a fast reader at the best of times, but I don't think there seemed to be much continuity between the chapters; it was always: New continent, new players, new teams, and coaches. This made it a struggle to return to at times.

Holly Cruise says

Is this book using football to shine a light on a wide range of differing and challenging social situations across the world, or is it using the lens of a very different set of countries to examine football?

Whistlestop and episodic, these snapshots into the lives of some of the teams and fans vying, usually massively against the odds, to qualify for Brazil 2014 takes in some truly fascinating situations. Football is played against backdrops of war and revolution - either ongoing situations like countries caught up in the Arab Spring, or longer term scars from the countries and almost-countries that made up Yugoslavia. Football is played against a backdrop of hopelessness - the desperate plight of Eritreans in their dictatorship or how American Samoa and San Marino keep going despite the almost complete futility of their efforts.

The book works best when it boils things down to a human level - Egypt's Mohamed Aboutrika and Bob Bradley trying to hold it together as the country collapses and rebuilds itself repeatedly, or Jaiyah Saelua, the American Samoan who also happens to be the world's first openly transgender (as we in the West would understand it) player.

I would give this book an extra half star if I could. It's interesting and informative, although it reads more like a long newspaper article than a weighty book. Definitely recommended though for those who recognise that football cannot be divorced from its surroundings and that there's more to life than the super-drilled, media-trained big names of the countries which usually qualify for the World Cup.

Giuliano says

From the Palestinian team in the West Bank to the Serbia vs Croatia rivalry; from American Samoa, a team that once lost a match by 31 goals, to the reclusive and well-guarded Eritrea team, from Afghanistan to Haiti, Rwanda to Egypt, this book explores many questions which all have a common theme: football.

What defines an international football team? Is it a flag, international recognition or the feeling of belonging to a specific ethnic group? What social impact does international football have on each nation and on the world as a whole? How can poor, war-ravaged countries dream of a better future, where they stand tall, proud and victorious, even if this dream only lasts 90 minutes?

The author travelled far and wide to follow the road to the FIFA World Cup in Brazil, narrating the stories of many unsung heroes who sacrificed a lot to represent their country at international level.

The book also focuses on the minnows – San Marino, Monserrat, Antigua and Barbuda – these teams may be small and lose games often (watch out for mighty Iceland however!), but they all share the love for the beautiful game. The lack of international superstars who earn shocking wages, the ‘normality’ of those players gives us a refreshing look at football at elite level and moves us and inspires us.

Edward Isaacs says

As much about an array of social, political, and economic problems throughout the world as it is about football, *Thirty-One Nil*, named for a heartbreaking defeat suffered by American Samoa at the hands of Australia, follows Jame Montague as he takes a very interesting, and often very dangerous, trip around the world to follow a number of the world's lowest-ranked underdogs in their long-shot campaigns to attempt to earn a spot at Brazil in 2014. An extremely riveting tale, *Thirty-One Nil* kept me interested from start to finish, even though I already knew the outcome of the 2014 World Cup.

Alex Bloom says

Montague takes the reader all around the world, discussing some of the most politically charged national soccer teams in the world, and the symbolism that their teams' performances have for their countrymen. Even the non-soccer-fanatic would enjoy some of the stories to gain an appreciation for why soccer is the world's sport.

Alex says

I decided to read this book as the new campaign for the World Cup started in Europe...and was getting close to the hexagonal in CONCACAF. I loved the book. The chapters about the tiny Caribbean states, or Pacific Islands or Lebanon are some of the best ones. I truly enjoyed reading about pure passion for this game...no betting schemes, no doping, just playing for fun - the story of the Antiguan players fishing in a pond in Florida made me laugh. Montague has a true talent for the type of sports writing/story-telling that only a few writers around the world have/had - some writers from L'Equipe or someone like Ioan Chirila from Gazeta Sporturilor.

I am looking forward to his next book.

Dan Lee says

I read another review of this book and the reviewer said that it reads like a collection of articles for a periodical. That's largely true, but I think it's also just about the only way you could write this kind of book. The author attended World Cup qualifying matches on six continents, telling the stories of players and coaches from underdog national sides like American Samoa and Eritrea.

A fun read. I'm happy I took the time to go along for the ride.

C M says

In "Thirty-One Nil" British journalist James Montague travels the globe to cover the qualification process for the 2014 World Cup Soccer in Brazil. From the first to the last game he visits the small and exotic national

teams, from Palestine to Iceland and from Haiti to Samoa. It is an amazing tour-de-force, logically, how he gets from and to all these places and gets access to so many officials and players. It makes for some great anecdotes and stories, but unfortunately he tries to do too much too superficially. Consequently, much of the book reads like a combination of a travel guide and a match report, spiced up with the occasional forced literary construction. He describes rather than analyzes, rarely capturing the unique atmosphere of the event. Hence, much of the book falls flat, saved only by the fact that no one else has ever described it.

Don't get me wrong, any lover of culture and soccer will appreciate the book and enjoy several parts of it. Most interesting was his reflection on the meaning of national teams in a globalized world, in the postscript, where he argues that even though more and more teams are selecting players with tenuous connections to the country most people continue to have strong nationalist feelings toward "their" national team. his notwithstanding, I feel that a narrower focus and more in-depth reporting would have created a more gripping read. Which is why I will definitely read his earlier book on the Middle East next.

Pinko Palest says

not so good: a rather rambling travelogue through some of the world's hot spots which happen to be underachivers in football. The author appears to be naive, but I'm not so sure: He doesn't tell you anything to help you understand the conflicts, merely mentions that they have happened and that they still influence football fans and players. Nor does he shy away from chatting, more or less amicably, with the MPs of Jobik in Hungary

Richard says

Thirty-One Nil by James Montague follows a collection of teams around the world in their bid for qualification to the 2014 World Cup. It is good travel writing with a focus on football. It is like going there, learning the local facts, but not actually being there at all. The drama of each match and their importance comes through. The book is good, well written, interesting, and gives you a sense of the world as a place of multitudes. It also chimes with my perception of football as something which shows a mirror up to the society that plays it, and is itself a social force that brings disparate people together.

Gabriel says

One of the best sports books I have ever read. Engaging, personal, fast-moving, and empathetic.

Richard McGeough says

Ever wondered how it feels to be the manager of San Marino's national team, a team that has never won a competitive game? What's it like to manage or play for a national team like Haiti, Rwanda, Palestine or Bosnia, whose countries have been ripped apart by disaster and war? And how on earth did tiny Iceland get within 90 minutes of qualifying for the 2014 World Cup finals in Brazil?

This book is excellent in those chapters that focus on the true underdogs of international football, the teams that never stood a chance of qualifying for the finals, but whose teams have fascinating stories, including that of American Samoa's transgender star player. Other chapters focus - sometimes at considerable personal risk to the writer - on teams who do stand a chance of qualifying, but who must contend playing against a backdrop of civil strife (Egypt in the early months of the Arab Spring) or ugly nationalism (Croatia, Serbia and Hungary). These were interesting stories in their own right, but at times it made for a rather unfocused read, as if lacking a real underlying theme. But this is a relatively minor quibble. Thoroughly recommended if your interest in football extends beyond the glamour.

Aurélien Parlouer says

Good geopolitico-footbalistic piece. Too bad that reading it 4 years after the release makes it less powerful.

Matti Karjalainen says

Englantilainen James Montague matkusti ympäri maailmaa ja tutustui Brasiliassa pelattuihin jalkapallon MM-kisoihin valmistautuvien joukkueiden karsintarupeamaan eri puolilla maailmaa. Kokomuksensa hän sitten tallensi "Thirty-One Nil: The Amazing Story of World Cup Qualification" -kirjaan. Nimensä kirja sai surullisenkuuluisasta ottelusta, jossa Australia pölytti Amerikan Samoaa maailmanennätyslukemin 31-0.

Lukukokemus oli ihan viihdyttävä kurkistus kansainväisen jalkapalloperheen takapihoille eli toisin sanottuna futiskulttuuriin sellaisissa maissa, jotka harvemmin pääsevät valokeilaan urheilullisilla ansiollaan ja tuskiaan koskaan osaksi ns. maailman suurinta show'ta. James Montague vierailee muun muassa San Marinossa, Haitissa ja Ruandassa, tutustuu kirjan ilmestymisen aikaan edustusoikeuttaan havittelevan Kosovon tilanteeseen, seuraa Antiguan ja Barbudan pelaajien kalastusretkeä vieraespelimatkalla USA:ssa, ja tutustuu Palestiinan maajoukkueen arkeen, josta on kauniisti sanottuna glooria kaukana.

Suosikkiluvussani vieraillaan Amerikan Samoalla ja tutustutaan joukkueeseen, joka ei ole koskaan voittanut ensimmäistäkään peliä ja yrittää toipua maalivahtinsa Nicky Salapun kanssa surullisenkuuluisasta Australiapelistä. Vuoden 2014 kisojen karsinnoissa pitkä putki viimein katkeaa ja joukkue saavuttaa ensimmäiset voittonsa, mistä kiittäminen on myös keskuspulustaja Jaiyah Saelualle, ensimmäiselle transsukupuoliselle jalkapalloilijalle, joka on edustanut maataan MM-karsinnoissa.

"Thirty-One Nil" on kiinnostavimmillaan kuvatessaan juuri edellämainittuja futiskääpiötä, mutta vähän jakomielitautisesti joukkoon on valikoitunut myös kohtalaisen menestyneitä ja kovatasoisia joukkueita, kuten esimerkiksi Kroatia, Romania, Serbia ja Egypti. Montague keskittyy näissä maissa kuvaamaan lähinnä jalkapallon saamia poliittisia ulottuvuuksia, jotka eurooppalaisten maiden osalta ovat kyllä tulleet kerroituksi muissakin yhteyksissä. Egyptiä koskevat luvut luotsaavat ihan ansiokkaasti arabikevään tapahtumiin.

Kaiken kaikkiaan ihan viihdyttävä opus, olkoonkin, että se on hieman kiinni kirjoittamisajankohtansa poliittisessa ja urheilullisessa tilanteessa; maailma on jo hieman muuttunut noista viiden vuoden takaisista päivistä.
