



The Global Playground

You may not realize how avidly sports have entered the global arena.¹ Sports, according to one political historian, is now "the most globalized [legitimate] business in the world." Historically, the majority of players and teams in most sports competed only on their own home turf. There were, of course, some exceptions—notably the World Cup in soccer and the Grand Slams of tennis—but by and large, local fans used to be happy to cheer on local talent. Today, however, fans everywhere demand to see the best, and "best" has become a decidedly global standard.

How has sports managed to score so well with an international customer base? For one thing, satellite TV now brings live events from just about anywhere in the world to fans just about anywhere else in the world. Thus the key players in the sports-promotion business—team owners, league representatives, and sports associations—have broadened audience exposure, expanding fan bases and augmenting revenues, especially through advertising that cuts across national borders.

Likewise, because more fans expect to see the world's best teams and players, the search for talent has become a worldwide phenomenon. Today, for example, you can find U.S. and European professional basketball scouts in remote areas of Nigeria looking for tall youngsters who can be trained to play a sport that's been imported from half a world away.

THE INTERNATIONAL JOB MARKET

Fortunately for foreign talent scouts, today's top-notch players are willing to follow the money wherever it may take them. Take soccer—the world's most popular sport and one in which the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) boasts more member countries than the United Nations. Many of the best Brazilian players now play for European teams with much higher payrolls than their Brazilian counterparts, and in just about every sport, top players play for pay in foreign countries. British soccer star David Beckham has played for professional teams in England, Spain, the United States, and Italy.

Interestingly, fans continue to follow national favorites even after they've taken their talents elsewhere. About 300 million Chinese tuned in to watch local basketball legend Yao Ming's first game in America's National Basketball Association (NBA). England's professional soccer league (Premiership) includes players from about 70 countries, which helps to increase the TV fan base outside England.

Many athletes, of course, join national teams for such international competitions as the Olympics and soccer's World Cup.

How the ATP Courts Worldwide Support

If you're a fan of individual sports, you've probably noticed that players are globe hoppers. Take tennis. Although its popularity has grown in many countries, no single country boasts enough interested fans to keep players at home for year-round competition. In any case, today's top-flight tennis pros come from every continent except Antarctica, and tennis fans everywhere want to see the top players compete on local courts. For 2009, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) sanctioned 63 tournaments in 31 countries. It also requires member pros to play in a certain number of events—and thus stop over in a number of countries—to maintain international rankings.

Because no tennis pro can possibly play in every tournament, organizers must attract enough top draws to fill stadium seats and land lucrative TV contracts. Tournaments, therefore, compete for top-billed stars, not only with other tournaments but also with such regular international showcases as the Olympics and the Davis Cup. How do tournaments compete? Your first guess is probably right: on the basis of money. Prizes for two weeks' worth of expert serving and volleying can be extremely generous (about U.S. \$7 million for the 2009 singles champions of the Australian Open).

Remember, too, that tournaments earn money through ticket sales, corporate sponsorship agreements, television contracts, and leasing of advertising space. The more people in the stadium and TV audience, the more sponsors and advertisers will pay to get their attention. Moreover, international broadcasts attract sponsorship from international companies. The sponsor list for the 2009 Australian Open tennis tournament included a South Korean automaker (Kia), a Dutch brewer (Heineken), a Swiss watchmaker (Rolex), a French personal care company (Garnier), and a U.S. financial firm (GE Money).

From National to International Sports Pastimes

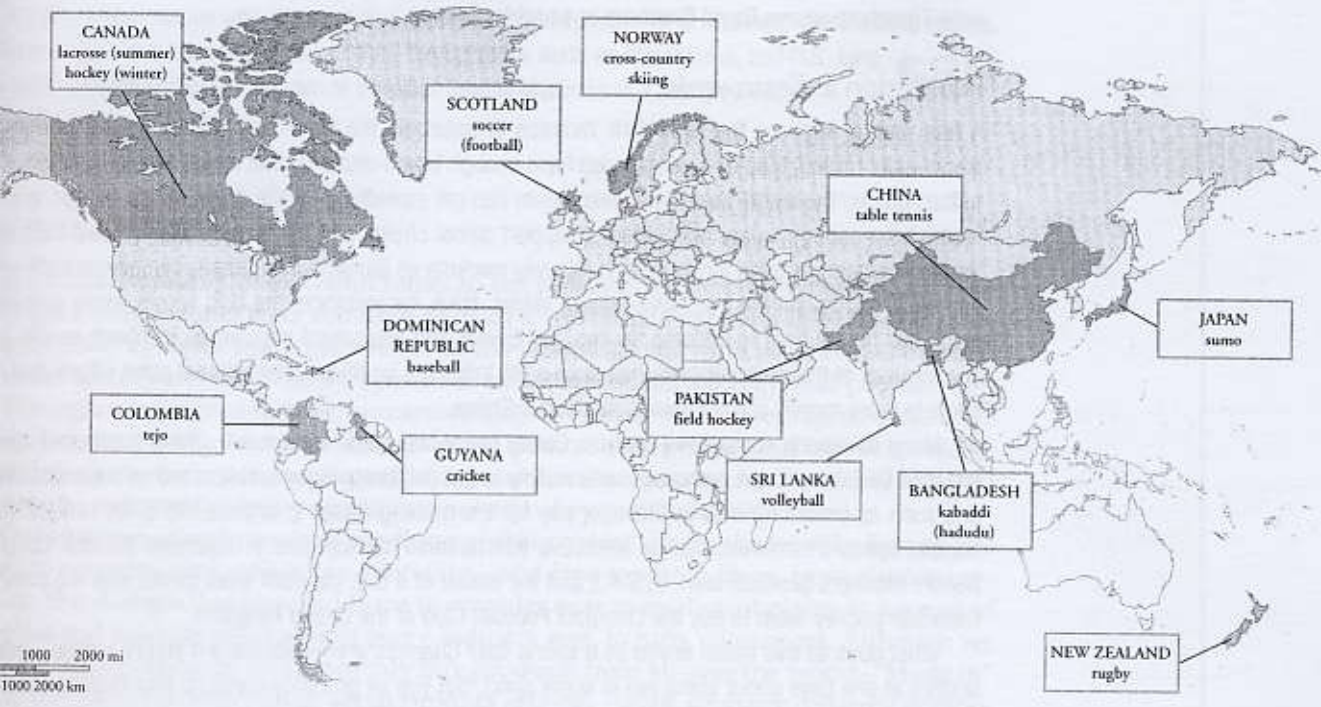
Some countries have legally designated a national sport, and some others effectively have one. Map 1.1 shows a sample of these. However, other sports have sometimes replaced national sports in popularity, such as cricket's replacement of field hockey as India's most popular sport.

1.1 Examples of National Sports

Of the 33 countries have either defined a national sport by law or de facto have a national sport. Some national sports are shared by more than one country, such as cricket by six former British colonies in the Caribbean. Some others have been established to protect an historical heritage, such as tejo in Colombia. Note also that Canada has two designations, one for winter and one for summer.

The information on sports was taken from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_sport (accessed March 3, 2009).

Given that this is a Mercator projection, the scale approximates east-west distance at the equator; however, the farther you move from the equator, the more the east-west distance is distorted.



Further, the International Baseball Federation now has 112 member countries, even though baseball is popular only among North Americans for most of its history. As TV revenues flattened in North America, Major League Baseball (MLB) began broadcasting games to international audiences. Increased exposure not only broadened the global fan base, but it also showed youngsters all over the world how the game was played. As late as 1986, only 14 percent of MLB players were born outside the United States; by 2000, that number had climbed to 28 percent. The average MLB clubhouse is now a bastion of multilingual camaraderie, with players and coaches talking baseball in Spanish, Japanese, and Korean as well as English.

WIDE WORLD OF TELEVISED SPORTS

Surprisingly, other professional sports groups have expanded their global TV coverage (and marketing revenues). Most viewers of Stanley Cup hockey watch from outside North America. Fans watch National Football League (NFL) games in more than 120 countries and NBA games in about 200. If you lived in the North African nation of Tunisia and enjoyed simultaneous access to multiple TV channels, you could watch more hours of NBA action than there are hours in the year.

And TV isn't the only means by which sports organizations are seeking foreign fan bases and players. In recent years, the National Football League (NFL) of the United States sponsored a now-defunct professional league in Europe. It continues to underwrite flag-football programs in Chinese schools, and it will televise regular NFL games in Europe through 2011. With the growth of broadband, we'll soon enter the