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# What Is Wrong With Playing High?

Cesar R. Torres

The debate over playing football, or “soccer” as the game is known to North Americans, at high altitudes reached new heights in 2007 and 2008. Late in May 2007, concerned about mounting criticism, the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) decided to ban games under its jurisdiction at altitudes above 2,500 meters. The ruling, which affected cities in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, prompted a stern reaction in much of Latin America. The public outcry was so noticeable that in June, FIFA increased the limit to 3,000 meters. The roll back, however, was only provisional. FIFA awaited the results of an October meeting of leading experts on high altitude physiology before making a final decision. In December, FIFA ruled that no games “would be permitted at an altitude in excess of 2,750 metres” and “recommended that the same limit be enforced in all other international competitions” (19). This still affected stadia in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. However, FIFA agreed that games would be permitted if players were allowed to acclimatize.

FIFA’s compromising ruling was once again staunchly opposed in South America. Football’s regional governing body, the *Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol* (CONMEBOL), asked FIFA to reconsider imposing any altitude limit and ratified its support of the Bolivian national team “for disputing matches at great height, as is the case of the city of La Paz” (7). In March 2008, FIFA insisted on its 2,750 meters limit for international games (20). The following month, CONMEBOL countered FIFA’s ruling announcing that nine of its ten members were committed to competition at high altitude (8). While pressure mounted, early in May, FIFA temporarily suspended its ban. This allowed Bolivia and Ecuador to host qualifying home games for the 2010 Men’s World Cup in La Paz and Quito respectively. The concession was made, however, as Joseph Blatter, FIFA’s president stated, not to settle the issue but rather to “reopen the discussion” (5).

Throughout the 2007 and 2008 heightened controversy over playing football at high altitudes, FIFA reiterated the rationale for the ban. It focused on “medical and sports-ethical reasons” (18). Defending the original 2,500 meters limit, Blatter declared that playing “above that altitude is not healthy or fair” (2). Later he added that “In the World Cup we must have equal conditions for everyone” (35). FIFA is also reputed to have justified the ban on grounds of a “possible distortion of competition” (2).

In typical actions that reveal the intimate connection between science and football, FIFA first appealed to the expertise of high altitude physiologists to impose the ban and then temporarily lifted it while “further studies were conducted” (5. See also 17). Undoubtedly, FIFA believed scientific knowledge would help support contentions that football at high altitudes poses health risks to the players and introduces inequities into the competition. Scientific findings, therefore, would legitimate its controversial policy decision.

Although the main arguments advanced to support the ban focused on issues of health, fairness, and game distortion, FIFA did not elaborate why playing football at high altitudes is unfair and how doing so distorts the game. Nevertheless, it could be surmised that FIFA’s fairness argument relates to the supposed “home advantage highland teams have over their visiting lowland rivals,” (1) an advantage that is reputedly unfair because equitable training opportunities are not available to the latter. Critics of the ban disputed FIFA’s assertion that football at high altitude poses significant risk to players’ health. Their defense also touched on matters of fairness. However, these critics did not concentrate on the supposed advantage enjoyed by highland teams, but rather insisted that the ban was discriminatory. Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, affirmed that “We cannot allow . . . exclusion in the world of sports” (2). Alan García, president of Peru, referred to the ban as “Europeanist and insolent” (48). Similarly, CONMEBOL challenged the ban asking FIFA to recognize South America’s unique geography.

In this paper, and following the spirit of Blatter’s call to reopen the discussion on playing football at high altitudes, I explore whether playing in such conditions is unfair, distortive, and discriminatory, and consequently whether FIFA’s ban is defensible. The paper is organized in two parts. First, I analyze two related issues: a) FIFA’s contention that playing at high altitudes provides home teams an unjustifiable competitive advantage and b) the complaint that playing at high altitudes radically distorts the game of football. My approach is informed by an interpretivist understanding of competitive sport and its central purpose, and guided by Sigmund Loland’s theory and taxonomy of competitive advantage (40: pp. 41–106). I argue that neither a) nor b) are justifiable claims. In the second part of the paper, I suggest that FIFA’s ban unreasonably disregards local conditions and interests, is at odds with its own celebration of the game’s global status, and has negative consequences for an important segment of South American football. In short, this paper reveals that FIFA’s rationale to ban playing football at high altitudes is unsound and that the ban itself is morally indefensible.

## **I. Interpretivism, Competitive Advantage, and a Plausible Interpretation of Football**

Interpretivism is a theory of sport that has both explanatory and normative import. It is explanatory because it characterizes what constitutes sport and it is normative because it provides a framework for understanding, evaluating, and adjudicating ethical dilemmas in sport. What distinguishes interpretivism is that it supersedes the functions typically played by rules and conventions in sport. The theory, inspired in the work of Ronald Dworkin, says that sport presupposes principles of its own, an internal logic, that makes it distinctively intelligible. These principles directly address what sport is “about” and what is required to materialize that

“aboutness,” insights that allow us to transcend the letter of rulebooks and the acceptance of conventions. As Robert L. Simon puts it, an interpretivist account

[. . .] derives the principles and theories underlying sport . . . from an appeal to the best interpretation of the game or an inference to the best explanation of its key elements. Certain principles and theories must be presupposed if we are to make sense of key elements of sport, such as the rules, the skills that are tested, and possibly the history, traditions, and central elements of the ethos of particular sports. (53: p. 8)

That particular sports are “interpreted” should not be understood as a form of relativism in which interpretations are immune to criticism and where different viewpoints automatically possess equivalent status. In this sense, Nicholas Dixon argues that interpretivists “hold that judgments about sport should be based in part on rationally grounded principles about the nature and purpose of sport” (12: p. 106). When confronted with alternative interpretations of sport in general or a sport in particular, the one that best explains what characterizes it—that is, the one that survives the test of reason and can stand on its own merits—should be chosen.

In the current sport philosophy literature, the prevailing interpretivist approach to sport recognizes, following the analysis of Bernard Suits, that it is a game of physical skill created by rules and governed by a “gratuitous logic.” The gratuitous logic is fundamental in that the restriction of the physical means available to accomplish the stipulated goal provides sport with its distinctive characteristics (43; 56). In doing so, the gratuitous logic of each sport molds and informs these features. That is, it creates a number of highly specialized skills, what I call constitutive and regulative skills, through which certain defining excellences are exhibited (58). Hence, while sport challenge sportspeople to solve artificial problems through the implementation of highly specialized physical skills, competitive sport compares the skills of contestants vis-à-vis the artificial problem. Competitive sport, as R. Scott Kretchmar proposes, creates another set of skills, what he calls competitive skills (37). While fulfilling its comparative purpose, competitive sport determines superiority at overcoming the artificial problem and discriminates athletic quality. As Simon notes, this interpretation of the central purpose of sport and competitive sport is not written in the constitutive rules “but may be thought of as the best explanation of why the rules have such characteristics as the creation of artificial obstacles to achieving pre-lusory goals” (53: p. 10).

According to J.S. Russell, interpretivism presupposes two related principles when it comes to particular games. The first requires that the rules are interpreted “to generate a coherent and principled account of the point and purpose that underline the game, attempting to show the game in its best light” (51: p. 55). The second states that “rules should be interpreted in such a manner that the excellences embodied in achieving the lusory goal of the game are not undermined but are maintained and fostered” (ibid.). In other words, interpretivist accounts of particular sports requires a cogent and integral articulation of its gratuitous logic, which necessitates a serious consideration of the skills it requires, the strategies these skills generate, and the overall standards of excellence. These accounts also necessitate a fundamental commitment to advance their own interpretation of games, a demand that, as Russell points out, is “informed by basic considerations

of moral equality—namely, that participants are entitled to equal concern and respect” (51: p. 56). And from this duty to moral equality many other specific “duties to foster a context of competition” (*ibid.*) emerge. The interrelationship between the interpretation of sport in general or a sport in particular and the sphere of morality is undeniable.<sup>1</sup>

It should be clear that a thorough evaluation of FIFA’s ban on playing football at high altitudes requires an interpretation of the sport’s central purpose. However, before articulating such an interpretation, it is important to briefly introduce a theory of advantage in competitive sport; for it will also assist in evaluating FIFA’s claim that playing at high altitudes unfairly favors highland teams, thus violating the principle of moral equality.

Loland’s theory of advantage in competitive sport is informative and useful for my purposes. Since his analysis is grounded in moral resources and commitments found within sport itself, it has an unambiguous interpretivist connotation. Indeed, he appears to agree when arguing that while competing, contestants “ought to act according to the shared interpretation of the rules among the practitioners of the sport in question, if this interpretation is just” (40: p. xiv).

For Loland, competitive advantage is the operationalization and expression of “all essential elements found in athletic performance” (40: p. 84). The distribution of competitive advantage is conducted either through precise “physical-mathematical measurements” or “sport-specific advantage” (40: pp. 85–86). The difference between these two types of advantage is that the latter is meaningful only within the context of each particular sport. For instance, what counts as a “point” in football is different from basketball or volleyball. While in most track and field events advantage is awarded based on precise measurable units of time and space, in football advantage is awarded based on the number of points (goals) scored.

Further, Loland differentiates between “advantage gained formally and informally in the process of competing, and a final formal ranking at the end of a competition” (40: p. 85). Formal advantage is typically defined in the rules, however, informal advantage is not. The first refers to both the transitory and definitive outcomes of competition, the second to achieving a position during competition that increases the opportunity for formal advantage. One is demonstrated by a football’s half time or final score, and by the standings in a long jump competition after the preliminary round; the other by a football team that chooses to field three forward in an attempt to carve out more possibilities for scoring, and by a mile runner that refrains from taking the lead until the last lap, hoping that the push forward will eventually make him victorious. Loland, as well as many other scholars, insists that all competitive advantages “ought to be distributed primarily on an individual, meritocratic basis,” (40: p. 87) which requires that all contestants have equal opportunity to perform to the best of their abilities.

Loland discusses at length the conditions for equal opportunity, or fairness, in competitive sport. However, I will concentrate on his discussion related to “external conditions” and “direct competition,” (40: pp. 47–51) because it has particular relevance for assessing the ban on playing football at high altitudes. Direct competition occurs when contestants compete at the same time and share the same physical place. Football is a paradigmatic case of this kind of competition. By external conditions, Loland means weather conditions and the material conditions of competitive settings as well as contestants’ subjective experiences

of these conditions. He rightly argues that initial external conditions should be equal for all contestants but agrees that these conditions are hardly ever identical. Thus, Loland suggests two principles to deal with inequalities in this kind of conditions. They are as follows:

Uncontrollable inequalities in external conditions ought to be distributed by the drawing of competitors' positions. [. . .]

Controllable inequalities in external conditions ought to be eliminated, while partly controllable inequalities in external conditions ought to be compensated for by mixed procedures that to the greatest possible extent realize equal opportunity to perform. (40: p. 53)

An example of the application of the first principle relates to changing and irrepressible weather conditions during competitions held in the outdoors. For this, Loland recommends that, as is the case with football matches, starting positions are determined randomly by drawing lots. Of course, the radical solution of discontinuing all outdoor sports is also available. However, such action would not really address the issue but, rather, evade it altogether. It would ignore the value and joy of outdoor sports, and neglect the worthwhile additions that external conditions bring to competitive sport. As Loland clarifies, outdoor sport competitions "have values that should not necessarily be overridden by a single-minded concern for equality" (40: p. 49. See also 39).

The second principle applies, for example, to home field advantage. Solutions here are again imperfect. In football, as well as many other sports, any advantage that a team might obtain by playing home is compensated for by playing the same number of games with all opponents home and away. The notion underlying the procedure is that of reciprocity or, in John Rawls' terms, mutual benefit: each team is treated with equal concern and receives the same opportunity to benefit from playing in its ground (46: p. 88). In addition, any advantage the home field might provide is in principle neutralized by the disadvantages of playing away.

Having presented an interpretivist theory of competitive advantage, it is now convenient to succinctly articulate a view of football's central point and purpose. At the dawn of the twenty first century football stands as the icon of globalized sport. Even though this dictum increasingly sounds like a cliché, football undeniably is the world's most popular sport. Perhaps its tremendous appeal is related to the relative simplicity and adaptability of its rules, its undemanding equipment, and its openness to different kinds of physiques. As Richard Giulianotti notes, "Only a few rules must be observed if football is to be meaningfully played and watched. Outfield players cannot be allowed to handle the ball, [and] hacking must also be prohibited" (28: p. xi). At its core, the rules of football put together a test to be solved primarily through kicking. Juan Sasturain emphasizes this fundamental element stating that the name of the game refers to both "the object in dispute and the instrument or mean arbitrated to propel it: the ball and the foot" (52: p. 32). The relationship between these two elements is unmistakable and provides football with its distinctive character and charm. It is a game designed to challenge and test players' ability to command the ball with their feet in order to put it into the opposing net. In short, football is about the flourishing and perfection of kicking ability.

Accomplishing the goal of football requires the proficient implementation of different kinds of highly specialized skills, which as suggested above have been engendered by the proscriptions, prescriptions, and permissions stipulated in the rules. Among the constitutive skills, those that are meant to be tested and are typically implemented during open play, different forms of receiving, controlling, passing, shooting, and dribbling the ball as well as taking it from opponents are included. Opening up spaces to create opportunities for play, marking, or supporting teammates to create numerical superiority could also be considered constitutive skills. On the other hand, restorative skills, those that are implemented to put the game back on track after an interruption, comprise penalty kicks, corner kicks, and throw-ins, to name just a few. Although both sets of skills are necessary to carry on and complete matches, constitutive skills are considered more central to football (58: pp. 84–90).

FIFA itself has highlighted the centrality of football's constitutive skills. In its *Technical Report* of the 1998 Men's World Cup, FIFA announced that the tournament "offered attacking football in every sense." It approvingly stated that all participating teams "came on the pitch ready to go for goals and not simply prevent them" and announced that this was the formula "to play such entertaining football for a whole month" (14: p. 24). Similarly, referring to the subsequent Men's World Cup, FIFA declared that because the majority of participants took a "positive philosophy" that emphasized the creation of offensive options, "most matches in the competition were free-flowing, attractive encounters" (15: p. 74). In its *Report and Statistics* of the 2006 Men's World Cup, FIFA articulated its vision of football by making explicit factors that detract from the game. FIFA deplored the increasing use of delaying actions after minor collisions because it causes "frequent breaks in play." Moreover, the analysis explained that "Constant interruptions destroy the flow of the game and make it less attractive" (16: p. 19).

Hence, FIFA considers football at its best when open play predominates and breaks are infrequent. Open and fluid play not only requires the implementation of constitutive skills and their combination but also stresses their central value. It also favors forward-looking, or creative, football in which teams decidedly focus on scoring goals. This, in turn, underlines the relevance of ball possession, for without such control, it is difficult, if not impossible, to play creatively. As Allen Wade puts it, "The first and most important principle . . . is that ball possession determines everything" (59 p. 5). FIFA's vision of the game also underlines the desirability of collective play, since it is through it that attacking play is most effectively mounted. In this sense, FIFA declared favorably that in the 1998 Men's World Cup "Collective play and thinking was the guideline for most of the teams" (14: p. 32). Whether materialized or not, this interpretation of football is widely shared. For instance, Eduardo Galeano, a critic of both FIFA's policies and the game's offensive scarcity, agrees with it when scorning that "The '66 World Cup was usurped by defensive tactics" (25: p. 121). Even more telling is his suggestion that as the interpretation of the game presented here prevails, "football continues to be the art of the unforeseeable" (24: p. 204). Dexterous kicking creativity and unpredictability are at the heart of open, uninterrupted, and goal-seeking football.

## Is Playing Football at High Altitudes Unfair and Does It Distort the Game?

The interpretivist theory of competitive advantage and the interpretation of football advanced in the previous section are important tools to examine the ban on playing football at high altitudes. However, the ban's presumption that highland teams unfairly benefit from playing at high altitude must be questioned. This is a crucial issue. Although it is known that physiological performance is challenged in high altitude, the scientific knowledge on whether this challenge directly translates into a sport-specific advantage for highland teams is at best incipient. Claiming that "the direct link with football performance at an international level has not been shown or quantified before," Patrick E. McSharry has recently published an article investigating "whether and by how much altitude affects international football performance" (42: p. 1279).<sup>2</sup> McSharry statistically analyzed 1,460 matches played over a century in South America between national teams. He found that

The altitude difference between home and away teams in international football games in South America significantly affected the outcome of games. High altitude home teams scored more and conceded fewer goals when playing low altitude teams, and for each additional 1000 m of altitude difference the home team's score increased by about half a goal. (42: p. 1280)

The study was criticized in South America, especially in Bolivia, by both scientists and players. Some directed their criticism at the study's methodology (32), yet others, such as former Bolivian player, Milton Melgar, questioned whether it was meaningful in football to talk about an advantage of half a goal. He declared that only someone who does not know the complexity of the game would refer to such an advantage (3). Epistemological debates aside, it is possible to argue, considering established scientific procedures and practices, that more research is needed to confidently affirm that playing football at high altitudes decidedly favors acclimatized teams. In cases like this, the onus is on those who presume that an undeserved advantage exists to prove it. Interestingly, there is nearly no inquiry into whether highland teams' performance is negatively affected when coming down to play at sea level, an issue that might influence how football officials approach the debate of playing at different altitudes.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, for the sake of this argument, I will assume that playing at high altitudes directly translates into a measurable advantage for highland teams, whatever its magnitude may be. Otherwise, the moral dilemma simply vanishes. This seems appropriate, given that the temporarily lifted ban still looms on the football horizon

Another important point to consider is whether high altitude is an uncontrollable or controllable inequality in football's external conditions. There is a sense in which high altitude, much like weather, is largely uncontrollable because it is determined by geography. Yet, the decision to locate a stadium in one place or another is not uncontrollable. Though this applies in particular to future stadia, it does not affect existing ones. Bearing in mind the cost of these facilities, poor countries (such as those most affected by the ban) cannot reasonably be expected



to pursue such a solution. And there are also historical, cultural, and demographic variables, to name a few issues, to ponder when deciding on the location of stadia. Given these considerations, I take high altitude to be a partly controllable inequality in external conditions. Altitude cannot be altered, although stadia locations are somewhat controllable.

If I am right that high altitude is a partly controllable inequality in external conditions, there are several reasons to believe that the ban on football in such locations is unjustifiable. To start with, whatever sport-specific advantage highland teams systematically gain from their acclimatization to high altitude is effectively nullified by allowing teams to choose the location of their home games and requiring that they play each other twice: at home and at their opponents' grounds. This is the format that South American football officials have opted for in organizing the qualifying rounds of the Men's World Cup and the *Copa Libertadores de América*, a regional international club competition. In the former case, national teams play each other twice and the top four with the best overall record directly advance to the final of the Men's World Cup. In the latter, there is typically a group phase in which all teams play each other twice with the top two teams advancing to the final stages. Once there, teams enter a series of two matches (home and away) that ultimately determine the winner. Unlike a single elimination format, this kind of football organization minimizes the impact of high altitude or any other single factor, such as cheating, refereeing errors, or even fortuitous circumstances indirectly connected to single games, such as flight cancellations that might affect a team's preparation and performance.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, the underlying principle in the South American qualifying rounds of the Men's World Cup and regional international club competitions is that of reciprocity. As far as teams are given the opportunity to choose where to play at home and are obliged to play the same number of matches with all opponents home and away, all teams are treated with equal concern. Thus, the advantages and disadvantages related to playing home and away are, in principle, evened out. For instance, in South America whatever advantage is gained in high altitude might be compensated for by the disadvantage of playing in other challenging external conditions, such as tropical weather, which some scientists believe causes more troublesome adaptations than does high altitude (48). In other words, the procedures followed to organize the aforementioned football competitions fulfill Loland's principles for dealing with inequalities in external conditions as they compensate for the inequality created by playing at high altitude and maximize equal opportunity to perform.

Evidence that the organization of the South American qualifying rounds of the Men's World Cup and regional international club competitions compensate for the advantage gained by teams acclimatized to high altitude comes from the performance of Bolivian and Ecuadorian teams on the international stage. To date, Bolivia has qualified once for the finals of the Men's World Cup and Ecuador twice. Similarly, Bolivia has won the *Copa América*, the regional national team competition held since 1916, only when hosting it in 1963, but Ecuador has not managed to do so even at home. Finally, while an Ecuadorian team has just secured the *Copa Libertadores de América*, held every year, for the first time, a Bolivian team has yet to achieve this accomplishment.<sup>5</sup>

Supporters of the ban on playing football at high altitudes could argue that a better way to compensate for the inequality created by such conditions and maximize equal opportunity to perform is, as FIFA did for awhile, to impose a mandatory acclimatization period. FIFA's guidelines indicated an acclimatization period of one week before matches at altitudes above 2,750 meters and a minimum of two weeks for matches at altitudes above 3,000 meters (20).

This seems, however, to be an unwarranted paternalistic interference with the training process of teams. By and large, managers, coaches, and players are aware well in advance if their teams have to travel to play at high altitude. They should be free to decide how to best prepare for matches at high altitude. If the highland team does not constitute any threat to the welfare of visiting team, and there is no reason to believe it does, the liberties and autonomy of lowland teams should be respected. This is specially so when fairness is not at stake, as is the case above. Managers, coaches, and players know what is in their teams' best interest and act accordingly. Perhaps FIFA's role should be educational rather than intrusive in cases like this, to ensure teams have the most updated information on how to prepare for high altitude matches, thereby enabling them to make informed decisions. Ultimately, it should be their choice how to get ready for high altitude matches and, more generally, for all their football's obligations.

Many could argue that the demands of professional football do not allow lowland teams to prepare as they would like to for high altitude games. A great number of the players in the line up of South American national teams are part of the regional football diaspora. Most of them play in European clubs, and although some play in other South American clubs, very few play for high altitude clubs.<sup>6</sup>

Two things need to be said about this. First, the fact that the majority of national team players do not play for high altitude clubs, suggests that they are not acclimatized and do not benefit from such inequality. Hence, equal opportunity to perform is strengthened. Second, the fact that managers and coaches do not get their players for the length of time they would prefer before World Cup qualifying matches simply adds one more layer of complexity to managing and coaching South American national teams in contemporary football. The situation begs for innovative managing and training techniques. If all football inequalities would be met with bans or mandatory training adjustments, perhaps the flourishing of key managing, coaching, and playing abilities would stagnate. Moreover, since most managers and coaches are subject to similar constraints, equal opportunity, once again, does not seem to be at risk.

History provides a telling example that creativity could help negotiate high altitude. During the qualifying round for the 1974 Men's World Cup, Enrique Omar Sívori, then Argentina's coach, implemented an unorthodox strategy. He formed two groups, one to play matches at sea level and one to play Bolivia in La Paz at 3,600 meters above sea level late in September 1973. Early in August, Sívori sent the second group to Tilcara, a city at over 2,400 meters in the Northern Province of Jujuy, with his assistant coach to get acclimatized. In the meantime, the first group beat Bolivia in Buenos Aires 4–0 and tied with Paraguay in Asunción 1–1. On September 23, Argentina played Bolivia with a line up that included acclimatized players and a few from the sea level group, who arrived in La Paz hours before the match. Argentina won 1–0. The media dubbed this line up “the

ghost team,” which included future 1978 World Cup champion Mario Kempes, who made its debut in Argentina’s national team that day. Sívori’s strategy to deal with high altitude proved successful and it also gave young talented players the chance to prove themselves, who otherwise would have had to wait longer for his turn in the national team.

Whether feasible or not in the world of contemporary football, the strategy was not tried again. Another possible way of adjusting to high altitude, which does not involve moving to such locations for extensive periods of time, is the use of hypoxic air machines. The point is that creative managing and coaching has the potential to further compensate for the advantage highland teams gain from playing at high altitude. Since managing and coaching decisions can improve the chance to succeed in games at high altitude, they also strengthen the fairness that the reciprocity of playing highland teams at home and away brings about.

It is important to stress that the principle of reciprocity defended here to criticize FIFA’s ban on playing football at high altitudes is found, albeit implicitly, in the way football officials deal with other inequalities in external conditions, most notably home field advantage. The existence of home field advantage in football has been extensively explored and it is well known. Football teams playing at home have a greater chance to win than away teams.<sup>7</sup> Although home field advantage appears to be a controllable inequality in external conditions, FIFA has not considered eliminating or compensating for such advantage. For the former, it could request that the qualifying rounds of the Men’s World Cup be held in empty stadia or on neutral grounds. For the latter, it could impose an acclimatization period that would ensure visiting teams are adjusted to the opponents’ playing field or raucous followers, to name just a couple of variables. FIFA compensates home field advantage by simply requesting that opponents play each team at home and away, a reasonable solution to preserve equality of competition. Clearly, FIFA treats analogous inequalities in external conditions unequally. In other words, it unjustifiably applies a double standard to the advantage highland teams obtain from playing at high altitude. This jeopardizes the integrity of football, for it makes for a less coherent and principled interpretation of the game.

As far as FIFA and football communities across the world accept and encourage the globalization of the game, issues of equality in external conditions will hardly disappear. Moreover, inequalities in such conditions, in both global and local sport, will also hardly be eliminated. Diversity and complexity go hand in hand. It is appropriate to bear in mind that some inequalities in external conditions make competitive sport more consequential, intricate, nuanced, and attractive. The crucial points are the manner in which these inequalities that are hardly controllable are treated and the role they are given in competitive sport.

Nonetheless, even though it is acceptable to give these inequalities a role in competitive sport, sporting communities should make every effort to compensate for them in order to guarantee to the maximum possible extent that merit continues to be the primary principle through which competitive advantage is distributed. Otherwise, competitive sport, which for Loland includes a “delicate mix between meritocratic justice, chance, and luck,” (40: p. 91) becomes incompatible with equality of competition.

Another aspect of the ban on playing football at high altitudes relates to whether the inequality it creates actually adds to the overall value of the game or

radically distorts it. In addition to the challenge to physiological performance, it is known that high altitude affects the physics of football compared with that of sea level. Because atmospheric air pressure is lower at high altitudes, which reduces the drag and lift forces, footballs travel farther in high altitude when kicked with the same force and spin but “bend” less than at sea level.

Does this mean that the game is distorted in high altitudes? The answer is negative. Both at sea level and high altitude, the fact that football is primarily a test of kicking skills remains unchanged. Football at high altitudes continues to test proficiency in the players’ defining constitutive and restorative skills. If anything, high altitude demands the adjustment of football skills to its unique characteristics. The capacity to adjust football skills to various external conditions—from high altitude to hot and humid weather to grown and short grass—could be considered another component of the skill repertoire that elite players, as well as managers and coaches, should develop to succeed at that level of competition. Precise and effective sea level passing, shooting, and dribbling, for example, would have to be fine tuned if they were to continue to be precise and effective in high altitude. This process also pertains to a team’s pattern of play on the field.

So, rather than distorting the game of football, high altitude football opens up a vast and new array of individual and collective possibilities. It creates possibilities to explore players’ football limitations as well as novel collaborative playing arrangements. As a different competitive environment, playing football at high altitudes adds a new dimension to contesting skills, those “additional excellences related to the process of winning, such as leading, taking the lead, holding a lead, gambling for a lead, delaying strategically for a reversal late in the contest, [etc.]” (38: p. 189). The specific testing and contesting skills of football come together in delightful and inimitable units at high altitude. Football played in such external conditions develops the game’s complexity, dynamic, and potential. It increases opportunities to create football excellences and, therefore, enriches and honors the game. To put it in Galeano’s jargon, football at high altitudes takes the art of the unforeseeable to new and welcome heights.

Opponents of playing football at high altitude could contend that doing so has the potential to seriously distort the contesting elements of the game and, consequently, the validity of results, without jeopardizing the basic demonstration of testing skills. Their argument would propose that while reciprocity nullifies advantage regardless of its size, it does not nullify all potential harms related to advantage. For instance, if the advantage gained by highland teams were considerable, one of those potential harms would be the loss or severe attenuation of the “uncertainty” of outcomes. Competitive sport, including football, seems to be at its best when what Warren P. Fraleigh calls “sweet tension” –the ambiguity of possibility and impossibility felt toward winning– predominates (36). Indeed, sport communities across the world enjoy competition when outcomes are uncertain. If an advantage due to external conditions such as high altitude was so great as to virtually guarantee victory for one team, not only uncertainty but drama, excitement, close finishes, and come backs, among other competitive values, would be jeopardized.

This is a strong concern. I would be concerned if any particular advantage gained by external conditions virtually guaranteed victory, even, potentially, by a clearly inferior team. As suggested above, even though inequalities in external

conditions have a role in competitive sport, merit should to the maximum possible extent be the primary principle through which competitive advantage is distributed. Nevertheless, the ban proponents' concern that high altitude distorts the game's competition and invalidates competitive outcomes does not meet their own objection.

First, scientific analysis (31) indicates that the highland teams' percentage of home success drops from 82% to 40–50% when lowland teams acclimatized for one to three days, instead of playing on the day of their arrival at high altitude. This suggests that the disadvantage lowland teams experience when playing at high altitude can be compensated for with a minimal, and feasible, acclimatization period.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this also suggests that the magnitude of the high altitude-related advantage in football is neither as considerable as many like to believe, nor as terribly difficult to overcome. The point is that this minimal acclimatization period would prevent clearly inferior highland teams or highland teams with ability roughly equal to their visiting lowland rivals from winning due to the inequality created by high altitude.<sup>9</sup>

Second, even if this was not the case, the long history of South American football confirms that superior teams consistently advance to the finals of the Men's World Cup, and finish first in both regional national team and international club competitions. The indication is that reciprocity effectively nullifies the size of the advantage gained by highland teams playing at home which, to reiterate, meets Loland's principles for dealing with inequalities in external conditions. In doing so, reciprocity also maximizes equal opportunity to perform and assures the validity of football competition. In short, under the principle of reciprocity, playing football at high altitude does not distort competition and maintains, and probably enhances, sweet tension.

Finally, if the aforementioned acclimatization period functions as described, it is evident that a home and away series that includes such acclimatization could serve as another effective means of compensating for the disadvantage lowland teams have when playing away to highland teams. The combination of reciprocity, innovative managing and training techniques, adaptation of football skills to the unique characteristics of high altitude, and minimal acclimatization further preserves football's testing and contesting values in such conditions.

## II. Globalization and the Ban on Playing Football at High Altitudes

The term *globalization* typically refers to a process in which time and space are compressed, both objectively and subjectively, and interdependency among nations, societies, and individuals is largely amplified. According to Ulf Hannerz, this process is characterized by what he calls a global ecumene or "region of persistent cultural interaction and exchange" (33: p. 66). Several scholars have traced the historical development of globalization. Although it is recognized that embryonic forms of globalization were apparent since antiquity, the process accelerated from the fifteenth century onwards. Thus, "Ties of trade, warfare, migration and culture are of long standing in human history. [However,] More recent globalization processes have unleashed new sets of interdependency chains that have interconnected people from distant parts of the globe" (44: p. 189). Sport

has had extensive and intricate interconnections with these global processes. Following a general periodization of globalization, Joseph Maguire proposes a five-stage model to account for the emergence and diffusion of modern sport. Maguire's model roughly starts in the fifteenth century and extends to a period that covers the last forty years of the twentieth century (41). However, recent scholarship indicates that globalization is undergoing a new phase, characterized by an increasing interpenetration of local and global tendencies (29).

Notwithstanding the precise stage of sport globalization, it is undeniable that football has become the icon of globalized sport. Paraphrasing Hannertz, Giulianotti, suggests that the world dwells in "a 'global football ecumene', with South America as a crucial element of such cultural interaction and exchange" (30: p. 37). In the current form of football globalization, labor, capital, technologies, imageries, ideas, and information flow and intermingle fluidly and transnationally. Accordingly, "as football has become more global, so the number of social actors and their frequency of interaction has multiplied" (28: p. 24). The transnational character of football, usually coded as a form of universalism that transcends nations and particularisms, is much celebrated and sought out by FIFA. João Havelange, an association's former president, illustrates this, reasoning that

Football is not just a sport. It is the only universal link there is. It is the most democratic of all sports, we all talk to each other in a football stadium; everyone is equal. This feeling of democracy in the game is very important since football belongs to everybody. (29: p. 58)

Even more formally, and explicitly, FIFA declares in its statutes that one of its objectives is

to improve the game of football constantly and promote it globally in the light of its unifying, educational, cultural and humanitarian values, particularly through youth and development programmes. (21: p. 5)

In light of FIFA's pride in the global character of the game and its insistence in fostering the game diffusion, the ban on playing football at high altitudes appears at least bizarre if not flatly contradictory. In spite of its stated globalizing objectives, FIFA shrank the football landscape by setting limits to where the game could be played internationally. Given this contradiction, it is not surprising that, echoing a national sentiment, Bolivia's president declared that the ban "is not only a ban on Bolivia, it's a ban on the universality of sports" (2). Similarly, protesting the ban, *El Diario*, a Bolivian newspaper, avowed that "it's a universal and inalienable right for a people to play sports in its place of origin [sic]" (35). These comments are not unsubstantiated. In a globalized football world it is seriously problematic to pretend, using the title of a popular book about the forces of globalization written by Thomas L. Friedman, that the world is flat (23). It is not, either geographically, culturally, politically, or economically. The ban dissociates entire communities from football and ignores the game's local and regional origins, traditions, and meanings. In short, it punishes people for their fate in what might be called the "geographic lottery."

FIFA's ban on playing football at high altitudes poses potential threats not only to the universality of the game, as critics appropriately point out, but also to its diversity. The flattening of the football world entails a well-known concern

about the types of globalization that have a strong leniency to homogenize human landscapes around the world: a sort of tyranny of the majority that imposes its procedures, models, and standards on social, cultural, political, and economic institutions. In this case, FIFA's ban represents the tyranny of lowland football associations and communities. In an important way, by restricting diversity, the type of globalization advanced by FIFA punishes highland and lowland football communities alike. This is so because a rich source of football's testing and contesting values seems to be at risk under FIFA's style of globalization. If, as I have argued above, football at high altitude is not distortive and indeed promotes the game's complexity, dynamic, and potential, FIFA's ban unwarrantedly promotes a biased understanding of its aesthetics, one that favors distinctive lowland playing styles and strategies. In the end, the toll on football diversity is most likely to also accrue in terms of constrained football creativity, innovation, and development, and also in augmented football dislocation and marginalization.

At this juncture, it is important to underscore that the South American nations most affected by FIFA's ban on playing football at high altitudes have not built their stadia in remote locations to exaggerate any benefit from this external condition. The venues where Bolivia, Colombia, and Ecuador typically play their World Cup qualifying home matches (Hernando Siles Stadium [3,600 meters], Nemesio Camacho Stadium [2,640 meters], and Atahualpa Stadium [2,800 meters]), are situated in La Paz, Bogotá, and Quito, the respective capital of their nations. While these cities were formally founded by Spanish conquerors between the 1530s and the 1540s on sites previously populated by indigenous peoples, these stadiums were built in 1931, 1938, and 1951 respectively, well before football at high altitudes became a contentious issue (57: vol. 1, 355–357; vol. 3, 362–363; vol. 4, 516–517). The point is that these “national stadia” are located in hoary human dwellings, wherein, among many other life dreams, millions of people have been dreaming their football dreams since the early development of football brought the game to their mountainous geography.<sup>10</sup>

Galeano, afresh, captures the joy of Bolivians when their global football dream, born in the altitude of La Paz, materialized. He wrote,

For Bolivia, qualifying for the '94 World Cup was like reaching the moon. Penned in by geography and mistreated by history, it had attended other World Cups only by invitation and failed to score a single goal.

The work of coach Xabier Azkargorta was paying off, not only in La Paz where you play above the clouds, but at sea level. Bolivia was proving that altitude was not its only great player. . . . Bolivia sparkled in the qualifying rounds. (26: p. 193)

Albeit generally laudatory, Galeano's vignette includes a note of disdain for high altitude play. Oddly, in this, he echoes the position of FIFA, for which Galeano does not have much patience. FIFA's ban on playing football at high altitudes implies, even if well-intentioned, a discriminatory position that amounts to what might be referred to as “high altitudeism.” High altitudeism involves assigning different values to football when played at sea level or high altitude. It denotes disapproval of the latter based on the faulty assumption that high altitude football is unfair and distortive. This position is also faulty because high altitudeism

violates the principle of equal consideration of interests. For Peter Singer, who coined the term “equal consideration of interests,” the essence of this principle

is that we give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions. This means that if only X and Y would be affected by a possible act, and if X stands to lose more than Y stands to gain, it is better not to do the act. (55: p. 21)

This idea or principle is at the core of the abovementioned Bolivian’s exhortations, one that has been repeated by all the nations affected by FIFA’s ban, to respect the right of *all* people to play the game where they were born. What critics of the ban demand is that the interests of all football communities across the world are regarded with equal concern. Theirs is a call for egalitarianism.

It is important to note that this principle of equal consideration of interests does not dictate identical treatment of individuals or groups in different situations. Rather, it requires that all parties involved in a moral dilemma are treated as equals and their interests are given equivalent importance. This principle of equal consideration of interests suggests that individuals or groups may deserve differentiated treatment when they, or their conditions, are different in significant respects. These considerations make it compatible with the interpretivist analysis of the ban expounded in previous sections. The geography of high altitude football communities is a crucial difference that merits recognition and different treatment as long as the inequality created by high altitude is compensated for and equal opportunity to perform is realized.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear, however, that FIFA violates its own principle of universality via the ban. It disregards the interests of high altitude football communities and accords more value to sea level football. In short, it paganizes high altitude football and expels it from the great “global football ecumene.” In contrast to FIFA, CONMEBOL has defended the interests of all its affiliates. The latter insists that the “geographical South American peculiarity” (8) be considered when making decisions about international football. Geography extends well beyond the topographical features of a region and reaches well into human diverse talents, interests, and passions. Not attending to this more profound understanding of geography, could lead to an even more fractious and unjust global football order.

The debate over playing football at high altitudes reveals a growing tension between the global and local dimensions of football and their respective homogenizing and heterogenizing tendencies. It also reveals the mutual pollination and interdependency of these dimensions and their tendencies. As already mentioned, inasmuch as FIFA and football communities across the world promote the game’s global status, issues of equality in external conditions will continue to present challenges for the game’s international administration. If FIFA is to avoid contradicting its own stated objectives, it should strive for policies that respect the interest of all football communities across the world and, at the same time, honor a unitary and comprehensive vision of the game that makes the best sense. The analysis presented here suggests that this is most fruitfully accomplished when moral dilemmas are examined through a theoretical framework that incorporates an interpretivist theory of both sport’s central purpose and the game of football. The key, as demonstrated by FIFA’s incongruous high altitude policy, is to seek



out and foster integrity in global football. As Russell remarks, the rules of games, must be interpreted through “a principled rationale that attempts to make them cohere with a comprehensive conception of justice” (49: p. 34). What global football demands is the accommodation of particularities within the preconditions that makes football the physical test it is. The ban fails to accomplish this. Indeed, it negatively discriminates against long-standing football communities, disregards the football historical developments of their football cultures, threatens football’s diversity, and makes the game a less consistent and intelligible global practice.

## Conclusions

This paper analyzes the recently heightened debate over playing football at high altitudes and FIFA’s ban on playing in such conditions. I argue that there is nothing morally wrong with playing in that environment under the current organization of the Men’s World Cup qualifying rounds. First, whatever advantage high altitude provides acclimatized teams, it is neutralized when opponents play each other at home and away. In this competitive format, all teams are treated with equal concern, receive an equivalent opportunity to perform, and the principle of reciprocity or mutual benefit is enacted. Second, FIFA has an unjustifiable double standard when it comes to analogous inequalities created by other partly controllable external conditions such as home field advantage. FIFA has not attempted to ban the latter. In the absence of a valid rationale to treat analogous inequalities unequally, the ban on highland teams playing at home jeopardizes the integrity of the game. Third, innovative managing, coaching, and playing, which is equally open to all, has the potential to further compensate for the advantage highland teams gain from playing at high altitude. Moreover, if all football inequalities would be met with bans or mandatory training adjustments, the abilities of managers, coaches, and players as well as the excellences of the game would stagnate rather than flourish. It is important to highlight that a minimal and realistic period of acclimatization appears to compensate for the advantage gained by highland teams playing at home.

I also find FIFA’s claim that playing football at high altitudes distorts the game to be unsubstantiated. Although it is true that the physics of football changes in high altitude due to the effects of “thin air,” these changes do not threaten the game. If anything, high altitude requires skillful adjustments by managers, coaches, and players to its unique demands. Rather than being fatally compromised, football at high altitude remains a game that principally tests and demands the execution of a multitude of highly specialized kicking skills. Similarly, competitive skills are also furthered to new heights. The adaptation of the game’s testing and contesting skills to high altitude enriches the game by opening up creative opportunities at the individual and collective levels for meaningful competitive football story telling.

Finally, it was advanced that FIFA’s ban on playing football at high altitudes is at odd with its declared objective to improve and diffuse the game globally. I argue that the ban is discriminatory and implies a bias in favor of sea level playing, an attitude that amounts to high altitudeism. Moreover, the contradictory character of the ban and its implicit biased attitude, disregards the interests of football cultures with a long historical involvement with the game. Thus, these

cultures are not treated with equal concern. This further jeopardizes the integrity of the game. A more inclusive and just football global order requires balancing FIFA's universalism with the particularisms brought about by the intermingling of the global and the local in order to form a genuine football *communitas* in which the interests of all count. This, however, necessitates the adoption, through a broad discussion in which members of the *communitas* respond reflectively to each other, of a basic interpretation of football that puts the game in its best light.

To sum up, football at high altitudes neither constitutes a fundamental threat to fairness nor does it distort the game. The ban on playing in such conditions flattens the football world in unnecessary and unjustifiable manners. The arguments expounded here, I believe, render FIFA's ban morally unjustifiable and also threatens football's diversity and complexity. Altitude does not pose a threat to the future of football.

Blatter, a Swiss national, once declared: "I was born among the mountains. My village is opposite the highest mountains in Europe. Heights don't scare me" (48. See also 34). This quotation is engraved on a wall outside the Hernando Siles Stadium in the heights of La Paz. Much like the quotation suggests, perhaps what football practitioners should be aware of is not heights per se but of unfounded claims that they bring unfairness and distortion to global football. Wherever devotees and players dream their football dreams, whether they live at sea level or high altitude, football communities should strive to realize and expand the game's standard of excellence in ways that foster equal opportunity for performance for all involved.

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## Notes

1. Some readers may be intrigued as to why I defend at length a realist position (interpretivism), when moral realism is the dominant approach in applied ethics in general. In this sense, it is worth pointing out that several sport philosophers (see, for example, 4, 9) frame their analyses by applying to relativist or "antirealist" positions (i.e., different forms of conventionalism). However, Dixon (11,12) and Russell (50), among others, convincingly demonstrate the latter's limitations to address a number of problems arising in sport. They indicate that relativism in sport lacks the normative resources to criticize widely accepted practices or evaluate the desirability of a proposed rule change. This is so because relativism in sport considers consent or solidarity within the relevant sporting community as the ultimate criterion to solve these issues. In short, relativism in sport is incapable of developing elaborate rational arguments to support moral and nonmoral evaluations within the confines of this practice. After extensive argumentation, Russell declares that "Realism, including moral realism, in sport should be the standing view until we are given clearly sufficient reasons to reject it" (50: p. 158).

I suspect that CONMEBOL's reaction to FIFA's ban on playing football at high altitudes is an indication that, at this point, there is consensus in South America to continue playing the qualifying rounds of the Men's World Cup and both regional national team and international club

competitions in their present formats, which accommodate the interest and unique conditions of high altitude nations and clubs. However, this consensus might change. If that happens, given its tenets, sport relativism would simply have to accept the newly reached consensus. Sport relativism might potentially fail to treat all football cultures with equal concern, and take their interests and unique conditions into account, which could endanger the integrity and diversity of the game. (These issues will be discussed in the second part of this article.) It might also potentially incorporate extra lusoy skills (58) to football's basic test, endangering even further the integrity of the game.

2. A decade ago, Peruvian scientist Gustavo F. Gonzales (31) analyzed the outcomes of the international matches between the Bolivian national team and other Latin American and European teams from 1950 to 1993.

3. Some scientists believe that negative effects associated with the descent to sea level from high altitude might affect physical performance (see 32,47). Gonzales (32) observes that "In Peru, since 1961 the National Football Cup includes teams from sea level and those from 2000 to 4340 m. It is a well known fact that the chances of a high altitude team at low altitude are in general much lower."

4. For a discussion of situations that compromise competitive sport's central purpose, see (10).

5. At this point, one could wonder whether I would change my views if the World Cup or any other international competition, such as the *Copa América* or The Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football's Women's Gold Cup, was to be held in a high altitude locale. Although space limitations do not allow me to elaborate on this question, few points are in order. The principle of reciprocity would not apply in this kind of competitive format because during its two phases (group and single elimination), teams play each other just once. Nonetheless, this does not mean that equal opportunity to perform is necessarily threatened. First, with the exception of the hosting nation, all teams play on neutral ground, which fully eliminates most concerns about the lack of reciprocity. Second, teams know well in advance that they will participate in these competitions and have plenty of time to get acclimatized to high altitude. Proper acclimatization compensates for the initial advantage the high altitude hosting nation, or any other high altitude team participating in these competitions, might have; thus, strengthening equal opportunity to perform. Third, as implied in the second part of this paper, in addition to contradicting FIFA's globalizing objectives, barring the World Cup from high altitude locales entails a discriminatory attitude. It is worth noting that the *Copa América* has been organized several times in nations with high altitude stadiums, and on only a few occasions has proved victorious the host.

6. See (27) for the number of players on the roster of some South American Men's World Cup teams that played for foreign clubs from 1978 to 2006.

7. For a synthesis of the current state of knowledge with regards to home field advantage in football, see (45).

8. Given my arguments above, it goes without saying that this minimal acclimatization period should be voluntary.

9. If this is the case, the ban proponents' argument that the demands of contemporary professional football do not allow lowland teams to prepare as they would like to for high altitude games is compromised even more substantially, for most lowland teams can afford to arrive at the high altitude location one to three days before games. Indeed, most teams use this minimal amount of time to prepare for their matches.

10. For a description of the South American geography, see (6: pp. 33–45).

11. For discussions of the distinction between the right to equal treatment and the right to treatment as an equal, see (13: p. 22 and 54: pp. 33–35. See also 22: pp. 48–50).

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