

Beautiful games: The World Cup

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

The rest of the world calls it “the beautiful game,” and for a month of World Cup soccer competition Americans get to see it on TV—the moments of explosive action and the constant flow of movement from one end of the field to the other, with hardly any commercial interruptions. More Americans (19.4 million) recently watched Ghana eliminate the U.S. in the World Cup than, on average, watched a World Series game last year.

Soccer generates passionate loyalties that sometimes erupt into violence. National teams become symbols of national identity. Americans were sorry to see their team eliminated, but the loss did not evoke the intense grief felt by the people of many other nations when their teams suffered defeat.

Baseball is another beautiful game that inspires deep passions. I fell in love with baseball listening to radio broadcasts of the Pittsburgh Pirates while sitting with my father on our front porch. Rosie Rosewell was the announcer and Bob Prince provided the color commentary. When Pirate slugger Ralph Kiner hit a home run, Rosewell would blow a whistle and say, “Open the window, Aunt Minnie, here she comes!”

This year the Chicago Cubs, my hometown team, looked sound, even promising, at the beginning of the season. Management had assembled the third-highest player payroll in the major leagues. But bad things seem to happen to the Cubs. This year, highly paid pitchers have not performed well. The ace of the staff was sent off to address anger-management issues. Sluggers have not been slugging and Gold Glove infielders have been committing errors. Base runners have been getting picked off.

After each game the manager faces the cameras and confesses that he’s tried everything he can think of. The team seems afflicted with what Kierkegaard calls a sickness unto death. Redemption is not in sight.

My dad bought me an official baseball score book when I was young and taught me how to score the game. As a boy I did it for virtually every game. I still mark the

scorecard when I go to watch the Cubs. It not only helps you focus on what's happening, it provides historical context—which, as biblical scholars know, means everything. It's important to know that the hitter at the plate has struck out twice already.

On a delightful day this summer I was in my seat at the Cubs game, with my ten-year-old granddaughter beside me. She showed interest in my written record of what was happening on the field, and soon she was holding the scorecard and marking down DP: 6-4-3 for a double play, and a K for a strikeout, and a backward K for a called third strike.

The Cubs lost badly that day, but it was still a beautiful game. And the row of scorecards on my shelf, next to the biblical commentaries, bear silent witness to biblical virtues: patience, endurance, steadfastness, hope—and love.