Hope is Round and Leather: Football Unifies a Strife-Torn Haiti

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

In strife-torn Caribbean nations such as Haiti, hope is hard to come by. Poverty and political conflicts throughout its history too often overshadow the islands' stunning beauty and color. In these warm-climate islands that cry out for structure, only sport responds. In the Caribbean, the calendar year isn't split by the season's winter, spring, fall and summer, but "into cricket season and football season" (Hislop qtd. in Ferguson vii). Football, the proper and logical term for what America calls soccer, provides an opportunity that is often sought for, but rarely found. While cricket plays its part in the Caribbean, football as a unifying force is a commonality shared all over the world, capable of helping the most troubled areas. In this group of Caribbean nations that is divided no more geography than by political-strife and poverty, football provides hope, unifies the people and nations, and offers cultural pride as shown through Haiti as a lens.
Hope is Round and Leather: Football Unifies a Strife-torn Haiti
Matthew Guinto

In strife-torn Caribbean nations such as Haiti, hope is hard to come by. Poverty and political conflicts throughout its history too often overshadow the islands’ stunning beauty and color. In these warm-climate islands that cry out for structure, only sport responds. In the Caribbean, the calendar year isn’t split by the season’s winter, spring, fall and summer, but “into cricket season and football season” (Hislop qtd. in Ferguson vii). Football, the proper and logical term for what America calls soccer, provides an opportunity that is often sought for, but rarely found. While cricket plays its part in the Caribbean, football as a unifying force is a commonality shared all over the world, capable of helping the most troubled areas. In this group of Caribbean nations that is divided no more geography than by political-strife and poverty, football provides hope, unifies the people and nations, and offers cultural pride as shown through Haiti as a lens.

Examining the hardships experienced in both 20th century and modern-Haiti is imperative to fully comprehend the importance of football’s role in Haitian culture and society. Political volatility and devastating economics have torn the Caribbean nation for decades, and the contemporary issues are all too similar. Ironically, the first free Black Republic now struggles greatly with modern day slavery. While history shows the hardships that Haiti endured, it also illustrates football’s ability to positively impact a nation. An interview with Haitian-American student, Leslie Pierre, demonstrates a personal account of Haiti’s struggles and the resulting importance of football as a culture. Specific instances from the 1974 and 2006 FIFA World Cup provide evidence that shows football’s contribution to political tranquility, nationalistic and cultural pride, while creating an avenue for hope. Football is a globally accepted language that not only unifies the people of a nation, but links together the different countries of the world and allows them to share a common identity and heritage. Whether in the stadiums under the lights or in the streets in the shadows, football provides a freedom for Haitians from their everyday struggles.

Arguably the most politically torn and impoverished nation of the Caribbean, Haiti is also one that has forever engraved its name in Caribbean football history. Despite Haiti’s hundreds of years of turmoil and poverty, the last fifty years have proven to be the worst. Since the election of 1957, which saw Dr. François “Papa Doc” Duvalier named President, a solid political standing has failed to exist in Haiti. As “Papa Doc” named himself dictator and President-for-life in 1964, he formed a private militia known as the “Tonton Macoute,” killing and exiling over ten-thousand Haitians to-date (Ferguson 17). After “Papa Doc’s” death in 1971, his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, succeeded him and continued the ways of his father, leaving the country in continued disarray. Ferguson explains the full effects of the Duvalier regime on Haiti in his article “Papa Doc, Baby Doc; Haiti and the Duvaliers,” stating:

Haiti suffered twenty-nine years of deprivation and repression which reinforced its already unenviable image and which caused unimaginable suffering to its people. Haiti under the Duvaliers consequently became a byword for underdevelopment, corruption and state terrorism. The extravagant wealth of the Duvaliers, the abject poverty of the Haitian people, the savagery of the Tonton Macoutes: these were the impressions which formed the world’s perception of Haiti. The county was, in words of Graham Greene, a “nightmare republic” (Ferguson vii).

After the Duvaliers, two exiled Presidents in the coming years saw the development of a “new political unrest, sparked by deteriorating economic conditions” (WorldAlmanac).

Due, in large part, to the political instability and oppressive government of Haiti, poverty increased, and “as the 1990s began, the
gross national product of Haiti was only about $340 per capita, among the lowest in the world” (WorldAlmanac). Leslie Pierre is a twenty-year-old Haitian-American student at Syracuse University who fled Haiti for America in the early 1990s. Having escaped with his parents who were political activists just before the Aristide-era, he recalls the great effect the poor economic situation had on Haiti:

There is no such thing as organized football in Haiti . . . I played [football] everyday in the streets or my yard, which really was the street I guess. Bare feet and a tennis ball — that was it. No fields, no grass, just gravel. Goals were . . . rocks, towels, bottles. That’s the economics of Haiti, sadly (Pierre.)

This notion offers an understanding of two chief components of Haitian culture and society: privation and football. While it exemplifies the hardships that plague the once-beautiful nation, what is more significant, is that football survives these conditions. This is the importance it has in Haiti, a struggling island that lives on through its football.

The devastating condition of Haiti doesn’t stop at political volatility and the wretched economic situation. While these are the more widely recognized adversities facing Haiti, modern-day slave-trade largely contributes to Haiti’s dreadful condition, despite being far less known. In the article “Author Struggles to Stay Removed from Slave Trade” by Anthony Brooks of National Public Radio, the author of A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern-Day Slavery, Benjamin Skinner explains how Haiti is still wracked with slavery in 2008:

With $50 and a plane ticket to Haiti, one can buy a slave . . . ‘I pulled up in a car and rolled down the window,’ he recalls. Someone said, ‘Do you want to get a person?’ He was initially told he could get a 9-year-old sex partner/house slave for $100, but he bargained it down to $50 (Brooks).

As astonishing as it is that slavery still exists, it is even harder to grasp that a slave of the 1850’s would cost somewhere between $30,000 and $40,000 given inflation; instead, modern Haiti values life at roughly $50 (Brooks). Having spent his childhood seeing these circumstances firsthand, Pierre’s feeling towards the issue is alarming and shocking in its own right, which he regretably admits:

Sadly, but truthfully, nothing about Haiti surprises me anymore. It’s terrible; physically, mentally, economically, scientifically, biologically. And the reason that [Haiti’s] so bad is because it consumes everyone and the only way to get ahead by any means is to be corrupted. It’s the only way to eat in Haiti.

Although it is far less identified in contribution to Haiti’s demoralizing state, modern-day slavery is one of the major causes.

In a setting that Haiti’s history and modern conflicts create, it would seem that the Haitians are enslaved to this dangerous society, unstable political government, and hopeless lifestyle. However, they have football, and according to Jamaican reggae legend Bob Marley, “football is freedom” (“Music and Sports”). This freedom — football — is hope? Leslie Pierre agrees, “Football gives us hope . . . All of the bullshit — poverty, war, violence, politics; nothing can touch football. Football is untouchable. That’s why it means so much to us [Haitians].” As presented in the article “Love-Haiti dynamic; Soccer is a religion and a rare unifying force, for strife-torn nation” by Kevin Baxter, football is a hope for political peace, a reason for national pride, and offers “a different way to think about Haiti” (Sanon qtd. in Baxter).

History suggests that political tranquility, nationalism, and a country’s renaissance are all realistically attainable through football. The ability to end wars and to bring about peace in strife-torn nations such as Haiti and the Ivory Coast boasts the importance of football on a global stage. As seen with Cote d’Ivoire, also known as the Ivory Coast, football unified both sides of the nation and ended its ongoing civil war of four years. The African nation, divided into two by the rebel-held north and the government-controlled south, shocked the football world with its first ever qualification
into the 2006 FIFA World Cup. However, more shocking was the impact that the qualification had on this torn nation as its team displayed members of both northern and southern parties unified together. The northern Ivorians, who claimed they were frequently discriminated against, were host to Ivory Coast and Madagascar, which saw the home-side win resoundingly five to zero; however, it wasn’t the emphatic score, but the cries of thousands of fans that rang through the streets, “We are at peace now! The war is over!” (Copnall 2). Now, two years after their qualification, the Ivory Coast is still at peace.

However, achieving peace is not a new phenomenon of football. In reference to Haiti’s only qualification into the World Cup in 1974, “Haitians might have been living in dire poverty and under the repressive regime of ‘Baby Doc’ Duvalier, but at least their team qualified for the finals in Germany” (Ferguson 18). Ranking in with poverty and political corruption in terms of effect on the Haitian people, this state of mind exemplifies football’s importance: we can forget the hardships... we’ve qualified! It wasn’t just the people who forgot, but the regime as well. In fact, “it was rumored that [Baby Doc] was bankrolling the team, paying the group of talented amateurs out of his own, admittedly very full, pocket” (Ferguson 18). Jacques Fitzgerald Lemoine states, “When Haiti is playing soccer, those guys are Haitian, too. During the games they are at home watching. There’s no crime when there’s a soccer game... The Duvalier regime put some TVs in parks and the parks were full... It was something awesome” (Baxter). As history proves in these cases, reformed governments and political peace are certainly worth hoping for, and football is capable of achieving it.

While it would be unfair to say that football is the only way to solve wars and create a better life, it would be just as unfair to ignore football’s ability to do exactly that. According to Baxter’s understanding of Haiti, football allows the Haitian people to forget about everything. Forgetting one’s troubles when football is being played is separate from achieving complete peace; however, it is a temporary truce that, as in the case of Ivory Coast, can lead to sustained tranquility. Using football as a vehicle to forget problems and to attain peace may not be the only way to progress, but it is a viable route that has been successful as seen in the examples of the Ivory Coast and in Haiti. In these examples, football shows how it creates a hope and a belief for a brighter future, as well as a reason to cheer and be proud (Copnall 2).

For nations that have little, there is often little to look forward to; there is scarcity of food, clothing, prosperity, and most devastatingly, pride. Although Haiti has had trouble making it past the qualifying rounds since the heroics of 1974 and “the level of play is spotty at best...[,] none of that seems to matter” (Baxter). After beating Trinidad and Tobago in January 2008 to win their first Caribbean Cup, Haiti’s fan base and nationalistic pride are booming once again, even if only in professional football. With either the World Cup or the Olympics every two years, it’s a “take-your-pick” from history for evidence that football offers national pride. For Haiti specifically, it was their epic qualification in Germany, 1974. Almost any Haitian or Italian over thirty-years-old can probably recall when Haiti led the football world for six minutes, thanks to Emmanuel “Manno” Sanon.

Haiti’s first opponent, previous runners-up, Italy, was protected by legendary goalie Dino Zoff. Having gone 1,143 minutes without conceding, Italy was undone when Sanon’s speed put him through, and he found the net around Zoff (Ferguson 18-21). The Italians confused and the Haitians elated, they held on for six heroic, long minutes before Italy drew level. Haiti lost three to one, but it never mattered. The pride exuded by Haiti after scoring their first World Cup goal against the impenetrable Italy still has people asking, “Where were you when Sanon scored on the great Dino Zoff?” Haiti won’t forget that feeling and they will relish in it to this day, such is football’s offering of national pride.

Although Pierre, 20, is not old enough to have witnessed it, he recalls the hundreds of times he has seen the highlights of that game and the countless stories he was told about it. As he explains, “If not for our football, mild at best, we have nothing to be proud of Haiti for.” Like most Haitians, he is unconcerned with
describing their play as mild, at best; however, he notes that this lack of talent should not suggest a lack of passion, stating, “The passion we have [in Haiti] reflects a totally opposite game than what Haitian football is.” Instead, he argues that passion as great as Haiti’s emulates the passion and following of a skilled and highly successful side. But this is not the case for Haiti, he emphasizes:

Professionally, we’ve qualified once and it’s been downhill from there . . . Haiti lacks the resources and most importantly the knowledge to ever become powerful in football. [Haiti is] a hundred times worse off, but our passion is a hundred times more than in America. Here [in America] it’s just a sport, but it’s a lifestyle [in Haiti], a necessity (Pierre).

Haiti still holds on to football for dear life, a necessity that is full of national pride and unprecedented passion that “many Haitians hope will provide a positive image of their homeland to the world at large” (Baxter).

For Haiti, football creates opportunity and presents an avenue to get away from the hardships of everyday life. It is a hope of Haiti to continue to change for the better. A stable government, political rest, and national pride are what are needed for Haiti to advance. As it did for Haiti in the 1970s, football can provide the route for progress and “hopefully if [Haiti] keeps advancing people will have a different way to think about Haiti” (Baxter). This rebirth is one of the ultimate hopes for football. A different view of Haiti would show the colorful culture and beautiful sights that the Caribbean islands should again be known for, as they once were. Football provides the only glimpse left of that beautiful Haiti from history, a notion that Pierre explains:

Every place and everything had its own time. Four-hundred years ago was Haiti’s time. With all of our trade of cocoa and sugar cane, we were one of the most prosperous trading agricultural countries in the world. That was a beautiful Haiti. And that was then, and now is now. Now, in 2008, he reflects on Haiti’s inability to produce caused by all that has negatively impacted the island throughout time, explaining, “There is a saying that even the ground will no longer produce for Haitians . . . And I see no hope for Haiti, but then that’s why there’s football; it gives us that glimmer that we [Haiti] need so badly.” This exemplifies not only the role of football, but the need for the hope it creates in a society and culture that is otherwise hopeless.

By design, whether in international competitions or domestic leagues, football is a virtual melting pot of language, culture, and heritage. As a globally accepted language itself, football links not only the people of a nation, but the nations of the world by weaving a common heritage and culture. This common identity demonstrates football as a unifying force, arguably its most important ability. While the political struggles of Haiti and Ivory Coast show how football unifies the people of a nation, it can also unite a group of different countries as seen with Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. As the only nation of the Caribbean to qualify for the 2006 FIFA World Cup, Trinidad and Tobago was supported by the rest of the region, without any regard to the rivalries that otherwise exist. They displayed their support and belief in their slogan, which was written proudly on the side of the team’s bus and website, “Here come the Soca Warriors – the fighting spirit of the Caribbean” (“Trinidad and Tobago”). This slogan typifies football’s unifying power of fans and shows how one nation can represent an entire region.

Although the example of Trinidad and Tobago shows support and unification through representation of an area, what is not as visible is how football unifies countries that are linked by heritage and history. Due, in large part, to Brazil’s great success and Haiti’s lack thereof, the relationship is much more valuable in the eyes of Haiti. However, this association was not based solely on success. Despite being separated by the Caribbean Sea and the equator, Haiti and Brazil are unified mostly through links in common African heritage, a notion that Baxter explains:
Haitian soccer got its next big push from Pele and the Brazilian national team, which together won three World Cups from 1958 to 1970. Ninety-five percent of the Haitian population is black, so the success of Brazil’s largely black team was inspiring.

As Baxter quotes Lemoine, because “Brazil was the first team to win the World Cup with blacks . . . and the greatest soccer player was a black guy . . . Haiti embraced soccer like Canada embraced hockey.” This idea is understood and held close by most Haitians, who use these connections of African heritage to draw hope. A group that Pierre counts himself in, stating:

It did offer hope . . . football is all that matters in Haiti. As a kid growing up in Haiti, I played all day every day. Every kid hoped to be the next Romário [of Brazil] or Maradona [of Argentina]. There was something about the way those two countries played that was so pure. As a Haitian, we looked at Brazil’s success and we are like them because of our African heritage — they helped give us this hope.

Haiti’s ability to identify with Brazil and make these connections between African heritages shows the importance of football as a unifying force. As a result of this unification, Brazil offers Haiti the hope for purity, which is something that the political and economic standing fails to provide.

Because football’s importance to Haitian culture and society is evident, in most aspects of life, it is hard to determine what or where it has the greatest impact and gives the most hope. Is it the hope that comes from the professional stadiums and the lights, playing on the world’s stage, having a reason to cheer and forget the life one lives when football isn’t being played? Or is it a more recreational hope that comes from the streets and the shadows, where heart and passion outweighs the economic and political devastation of Haiti? While arguments can be made for and against both sides, it seems a likely stalemate. According to Ferguson, Haiti is “no longer purely recreational; [Haiti] provides major entertainment” (45). As Ferguson develops this understanding, he explains that while “professional football may be the Holy Grail of Caribbean football . . . its day-to-day lifeblood is the amateur ethos,” the reason for which these Caribbean nations exude such passion and pride in their football (47). The difficulty in differentiating importance is most apparent when looking at the ability to unify with regard to professional and recreational football. As Pierre argues, the two cannot be separated. As he understands, to outsiders of Haiti, it is the professional football that would seem to provide the most for Haitians because it is what we see on television. However, he explains that although he can’t distinguish, it might very well be the professional side, recalling how it was in Haiti:

Football is everything. It unified men and woman. It didn’t matter where you are from or what you’re political view was or what your economic standing was. Football was pure, which is something we understood from watching countries like Brazil and Argentina. And that gives us all hope and joy. In fact: June 6th 2:45 PM, Argentina vs. Brazil. Every calendar in Haiti is marked. You want to see abandoned streets? Visit Haiti on June 6th. You’re fighting with your neighbor on June 5th, but you’ll watch on his television June 6th. He won’t mind, either. That’s football.

The relationship between the two is co-dependent; in World Cup years, the recreational football seems to come alive even more than usual. However, as Pierre concludes, as long as football is around, whether professional or recreational, there will be a reason to smile and a reason to hope for Haitians, and “that is all that matters” (Pierre).

Maybe it’s ending civil war and achieving political peace, or maybe just a reason to cheer and be proud for six short minutes; football’s capabilities are endless in Haitian eyes, hope being the underlying theme of the vast majority. Along with the ability to unify, hope comes from football’s capacity to produce for Haiti when everything else fails to do so both recreationally and professionally. Although it cannot produce food and money, it does produce the opportunity to hope and believe in a better
future. While this is the sad truth about modern Haiti, it fortifies the importance of football, a last resort, which, despite its record or skill-level, has not yet failed the struggling nation.

Works Cited


