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Soccer - the world's most exciting sport

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5 January, 2006

THE ARTICLE

Soccer - the world's most exciting sport

English soccer is more exciting than any of the top American team sports – that's according to the statistical research of US scientists. Eli Ben-Naim of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and his colleagues analyzed the results of 301,657 games of soccer, baseball, hockey, basketball and American football played since 1888. They scrutinized the predictability of results and proposed "the likelihood of upsets as a measure of competitiveness". They said: "We introduce a mathematical model in which the underdog team wins with a fixed upset probability." Their number crunching found that soccer matches in England's top league are more likely to produce upsets, with the underdog winning, than matches in America's major league sports.

The survey is not all grim reading for aficionados of American sports. It seems that soccer has become less exciting and more predictable over the past fifty years. This suggests that there is less parity in the English league and the potential for upsets is lessening. On average, the underdog wins 45 percent of the time in soccer, although this figure has markedly fallen in the past decade. In contrast, the frequency of upsets in baseball is increasing. The results show that baseball has already surpassed soccer to become the more exciting of the sports. Rugby, cricket and other team sports were omitted from the survey because they do not have a big following in the US. The survey also failed to account for the soccer fever that will grip the world with this year's month-long soccerfest – the World Cup Finals.

Source: <http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060102/full/060102-1.html>

WARM-UPS

1. SPORT: In pairs / groups, brainstorm a list of the most exciting sports in the world. Which ones are the best? What makes them the best? What improvements would you make to them? Are they played by most of the world's countries? If not, why not?

2. UPSETS: Do you like sports that produce upsets? Does the possibility of upsets make the sport more exciting? With your partner(s), look at the list below. Have you ever got angry because the winner wasn't the one you liked?

- Sport
- Elections
- Nobel Peace Prize
- Olympic venue
- Music awards
- The Oscars (Academy Awards)
- "Time" magazine's Person of the Year
- Beauty contest

3. CHAT: In pairs / groups, decide which of these topics or words are most interesting and which are most boring.

English soccer / excitement / statistical research / colleagues / baseball / hockey / basketball / competitiveness / underdogs / upsets / grim reading / aficionados

Have a chat about the topics you liked. For more conversation, change topics and partners frequently.

4. SPORTING OPINIONS: Do you agree with these opinions on sport?

- a. I always support the underdog.
- b. Sport is being ruined by money.
- c. Sports stars get paid too much.
- d. Sport is trivial.
- e. Sport helps countries reconcile and have better relations.
- f. It's not the winning that counts, it's the taking part.

5. TWO-MINUTE SPORT DEBATES: Face your partner. Take part in the following for-fun debates. Partner A strongly believes in the first argument.

- a. Soccer is more exciting. vs. Baseball is. It has higher scores.
- b. Sumo is infinitely cooler than wrestling. vs. Sumo is fat guys falling over.
- c. Skiing is better to watch than skating. vs. Skating is a lot more engrossing.
- d. F1 is a million times more thrilling than horse racing. vs. Horse racing is best.
- e. Men's sport beats women's every time. vs. Many women's sports are better.
- f. Golf is the world's dullest sport. vs. A 5-day game of cricket is the most boring.
- g. The Olympics is the best sports event. vs. You cannot beat soccer's World Cup.
- h. Drugs should be used to make sport better. vs. Drugs have no place in sport.

6. SOCCER: Spend one minute writing down all of the different words you associate with soccer. Share your words with your partner(s) and talk about them. Together, put the words into different categories.

BEFORE READING / LISTENING

1. TRUE / FALSE: Look at the article's headline and guess whether these sentences are true (T) or false (F):

- a. American scientists say English soccer is more exciting than US sport. T / F
- b. The scientists looked at over 300,000 games across five sports. T / F
- c. Their model was based on upsets being a measure of excitement. T / F
- d. English soccer matches produced far fewer upsets than other sports. T / F
- e. The survey is grim reading for aficionados of American sports. T / F
- f. There is increasingly less parity among teams in English soccer. T / F
- g. Basketball has overtaken soccer in being the most exciting sport. T / F
- h. The survey factored in the fever that comes from soccer's World Cups. T / F

2. SYNONYM MATCH: Match the following synonyms from the article:

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------|
| a. statistical | considerably |
| b. scrutinized | little guy |
| c. proposed | buffs |
| d. underdog | examined |
| e. number crunching | put forward |
| f. grim | balance |
| g. aficionados | numerical |
| h. parity | excluded |
| i. markedly | gloomy |
| j. omitted | analysis |

3. PHRASE MATCH: Match the following phrases from the article (sometimes more than one combination is possible):

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| a. more exciting than any of the | all grim reading |
| b. They scrutinized the predictability | following in the US |
| c. the likelihood of upsets as | crunching |
| d. number | fallen in the past decade |
| e. more likely to produce upsets, | of results |
| f. The survey is not | to become the more exciting... |
| g. there is less parity | with the underdog winning |
| h. this figure has markedly | top American team sports |
| i. baseball has already surpassed soccer | in the English league |
| j. they do not have a big | a measure of competitiveness |

WHILE READING / LISTENING

GAP FILL: Put the words in the column on the right into the gaps in the text.

Soccer - the world's most exciting sport

English soccer is more exciting than _____ of the top American team sports – that's according to the statistical research of US scientists. Eli Ben-Naim of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and his _____ analyzed the results of 301,657 games of soccer, baseball, hockey, basketball and American football played since 1888. They _____ the predictability of results and proposed "the likelihood of _____ as a measure of competitiveness". They said: "We introduce a _____ model in which the _____ team wins with a fixed upset probability." Their number _____ found that soccer matches in England's top league are more likely to _____ upsets, with the underdog winning, than matches in America's major league sports.

scrutinized
colleagues
crunching
mathematical
any
produce
upsets
underdog

The survey is not all _____ reading for _____ of American sports. It seems that soccer has become less exciting and more predictable over the past fifty years. This suggests that there is less _____ in the English league and the potential for upsets is _____. On average, the underdog wins 45 percent of the time in soccer, although this figure has markedly fallen in the past decade. In contrast, the _____ of upsets in baseball is increasing. The results show that baseball has already _____ soccer to become the more exciting of the sports. Rugby, cricket and other team sports were _____ from the survey because they do not have a big following in the US. The survey also failed to account for the soccer fever that will _____ the world with this year's month-long soccerfest – the World Cup Finals.

frequency
omitted
aficionados
lessening
grip
grim
surpassed
parity

LISTENING

Listen and fill in the spaces.

Soccer - the world's most exciting sport

English soccer is more exciting _____ the top American team sports – that's according to the statistical research of US scientists. Eli Ben-Naim of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and his colleagues _____ the results of 301,657 games of soccer, baseball, hockey, basketball and American football played since 1888. They _____ the predictability of results and proposed "the likelihood of upsets as a measure of competitiveness". They said: "We introduce a mathematical model in which the _____ team wins with a fixed upset probability." Their number _____ found that soccer matches in England's top league are more likely to produce upsets, with the underdog winning, than matches in America's _____ sports.

The survey is not all _____ reading for _____ of American sports. It seems that soccer has become less exciting and more predictable over the past fifty years. This suggests that there is less _____ in the English league and the potential for upsets is lessening. On average, the underdog wins 45 percent of the time in soccer, although this figure has _____ fallen in the past decade. In contrast, the frequency of upsets in baseball is increasing. The results show that baseball has already surpassed soccer to become the more exciting of the sports. Rugby, cricket and other team sports were _____ from the survey because they do not have a big following in the US. The survey also failed to _____ for the soccer fever that will _____ the world with this year's month-long soccerfest – the World Cup Finals.

AFTER READING / LISTENING

1. WORD SEARCH: Look in your dictionaries / computer to find collocates, other meanings, information, synonyms ... for the words **'team'** and **'sport'**.

- Share your findings with your partners.
- Make questions using the words you found.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

2. ARTICLE QUESTIONS: Look back at the article and write down some questions you would like to ask the class about the text.

- Share your questions with other classmates / groups.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

3. GAP FILL: In pairs / groups, compare your answers to this exercise. Check your answers. Talk about the words from the activity. Were they new, interesting, worth learning...?

4. VOCABULARY: Circle any words you do not understand. In groups, pool unknown words and use dictionaries to find their meanings.

5. STUDENT "SPORT" SURVEY: In pairs / groups, write down questions about team sports.

- Ask other classmates your questions and note down their answers.
- Go back to your original partner / group and compare your findings.
- Make mini-presentations to other groups on your findings.

6. TEST EACH OTHER: Look at the words below. With your partner, try to recall exactly how these were used in the text:

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| • top | • aficionados |
| • colleagues | • parity |
| • proposed | • average |
| • model | • surpassed |
| • crunching | • following |
| • major league | • grip |

DISCUSSION

STUDENT A's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student B)

- a. Did the headline make you want to read the article?
- b. Do you like soccer?
- c. Where is the world's best soccer league?
- d. Do you prefer the word "soccer" or "football"?
- e. Why do you think American football is called "football" when it's largely played with the hands?
- f. What do you think is the most exciting sport in the world?
- g. Do you prefer individual or team sports?
- h. What elements of sport excite you the most?
- i. Do you get upset when your favorite team or star is upset?
- j. Do you always root for the underdog?

STUDENT B's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student A)

- a. Did you like reading this article?
- b. What do you think about what you read?
- c. Do you agree with the survey's findings?
- d. Why do you think baseball and American football are not played in anywhere near as many countries as soccer?
- e. Do you think the relatively low scoring games in soccer makes it a boring sport?
- f. Who do you think is more famous worldwide, soccer's Pele or baseball's Babe Ruth?
- g. Who do you think is the most famous sports star ever?
- h. Are you more passionate about your favorite local team or your national team?
- i. The soccer World Cup is the planet's most watched televised event. Does this make soccer the best sport in the world?
- j. Did you like this discussion?

AFTER DISCUSSION: Join another partner / group and tell them what you talked about.

- a. What was the most interesting thing you heard?
- b. Was there a question you didn't like?
- c. Was there something you totally disagreed with?
- d. What did you like talking about?
- e. Which was the most difficult question?

SPEAKING

SPORT: In pairs / groups, agree on a score of 1 to 10 for the points in the top row. A score of "1" means no excitement, beauty, etc; a score of "10" is perfection.

SPORT	EXCITEMENT	BEAUTY	ATHLETICISM	UPSET POTENTIAL
Soccer				
Baseball				
Sumo				
Golf				
F1 motor racing				
Other _____				

Change partners and talk about the scores you agreed on with your old partner(s).

Talk about the reasons for any differences in your scores.

HOMEWORK

1. VOCABULARY EXTENSION: Choose several of the words from the text. Use a dictionary or Google's search field (or another search engine) to build up more associations / collocations of each word.

2. INTERNET: Search the Internet and find more information on English soccer. Share your findings with your class in the next lesson. Did you all find out similar things?

3. MY SPORT: Make a poster about your favorite sport. Explain why you like it and what makes it so exciting. Show your poster to your classmates in the next lesson.

4. LETTER: Write a letter to your favorite sports magazine or TV show. Explain what you think of Mr. Ben-Naim's survey. Show your letter to your classmates in the next lesson. Did everyone write about similar things?

ANSWERS

TRUE / FALSE:

- a. T b. T c. T d. F e. F f. T g. F h. F

SYNONYM MATCH:

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------|
| a. statistical | numerical |
| b. scrutinized | examined |
| c. proposed | put forward |
| d. underdog | little guy |
| e. number crunching | analysis |
| f. grim | gloomy |
| g. aficionados | buffs |
| h. parity | balance |
| i. markedly | considerably |
| j. omitted | excluded |

PHRASE MATCH:

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| a. more exciting than any of the | top American team sports |
| b. They scrutinized the predictability | of results |
| c. the likelihood of upsets as | a measure of competitiveness |
| d. number | crunching |
| e. more likely to produce upsets, | with the underdog winning |
| f. The survey is not | all grim reading |
| g. there is less parity | in the English league |
| h. this figure has markedly | fallen in the past decade |
| i. baseball has already surpassed soccer | to become the more exciting... |
| j. they do not have a big | following in the US |

GAP FILL:

Soccer - the world's most exciting sport

English soccer is more exciting than **any** of the top American team sports – that's according to the statistical research of US scientists. Eli Ben-Naim of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and his **colleagues** analyzed the results of 301,657 games of soccer, baseball, hockey, basketball and American football played since 1888. They **scrutinized** the predictability of results and proposed "the likelihood of **upsets** as a measure of competitiveness". They said: "We introduce a **mathematical** model in which the **underdog** team wins with a fixed upset probability." Their number **crunching** found that soccer matches in England's top league are more likely to **produce** upsets, with the underdog winning, than matches in America's major league sports.

The survey is not all **grim** reading for **aficionados** of American sports. It seems that soccer has become less exciting and more predictable over the past fifty years. This suggests that there is less **parity** in the English league and the potential for upsets is **lessening**. On average, the underdog wins 45 percent of the time in soccer, although this figure has markedly fallen in the past decade. In contrast, the **frequency** of upsets in baseball is increasing. The results show that baseball has already **surpassed** soccer to become the more exciting of the sports. Rugby, cricket and other team sports were **omitted** from the survey because they do not have a big following in the US. The survey also failed to account for the soccer fever that will **grip** the world with this year's month-long soccerfest – the World Cup Finals.