

# The World is Round Like a Football

## From Anglobalization to Offshoring

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### ABSTRACT

The study of football has often overlooked one of the game's central aspects—the ball. Yet it is an object that undeniably has a transnational history. Created in England, where football was invented, the object quickly spread as the game took root beyond the British Isles. National industries appeared in Europe during the interwar period, and competed with British manufacturers. Different types of balls were available on the market. With the globalization and increasing commercialization of football that began in the 1960s, football production was taken over by major sports brands, which brought uniformity to the model, and diffused it to the four corners of the world. Local production has lost importance in the face of these multinationals, while the production centers for most balls gradually moved abroad, especially to Southeast Asia.



A TELSTAR ball by the company Adidas (right), inspired by the Telstar telecommunications satellite (left), for the 1970 World Cup. Source : [Google](#)

All of the more or less legendary accounts regarding the beginnings of football tell the story of a leather sphere that arrived on a boat, or came in a soldier's haversack or a teacher's suitcase. Circumference, weight: the object's technical characteristics were specified in 1872 by the laws of the Football Association in London (between twenty-seven and twenty-eight inches, or 0,657 m and 0,700 m; initially between twelve and fifteen ounces, or 340 and 400 grams). It was also expected that "no material that could present a danger to the players should be used in its production." In reality, many balls quickly lost their shape, absorbed water, and even burst in the middle of a match.

## **Producing the English Way: Anglobalization**

However, until the 1930s, footballs remain a vehicle for what certain British historians have called “Anglobalization,” which is to say globalization under English influence. The sportsmen of the Old World indeed turned to English producers to buy their equipment, which was already produced on a large if not mass scale. For instance in the early 1900s, the Shillcock company, which was created in Birmingham in 1862, produced and sold approximately five thousand footballs per year. The production of a football actually depended on both artisans and industry. It began with the choice of croupions (large pieces of leather), and continued with the punch cutting of panels of a certain thickness, solidity, and color. Most often rectangular, some pieces had a T shape, or were round and pentagonal. Then came the most delicate part of the work, namely the assembly. Made by hand by “sewers,” it required genuine know-how to produce a spherical envelope. The process ended with the insertion of a bladder with a rigid valve—made by manufacturers of rubber products—which was protected by a slit tied shut with leather laces.

Like other leather accessories imported from across the Channel during the First World War, the football was taxed as a luxury product. “Sporting French soldiers” wrote to the press and sports organizations asking for these precious spheres. In 1917, the sports journalist Georges Rozet even spoke of a “football crisis,” which was ultimately resolved, it appears, by an order for approximately five thousand balls from England by the Ministry of War.

## **The emergence of a national production in Europe, offshoring**

While the practice and spectacle of football underwent intense development in the 1920s, and protectionist barriers began to fall, the production of footballs tended to become nationalized. French manufacturers such as Ducim (until 1922), and later Allen, became the official suppliers of the Coupe de France de football and the 1938 World Cup. These national productions were more affordable, although not all users were convinced by the quality of balls made on the continent: British balls remained the standard. During the 1934 World Cup in Italy, the “tipo Federale 102” ball was supposed to demonstrate the virtues of fascist autarky. The regime enjoined Italian football players and teams to prefer it over foreign competitors. However, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), which was founded in 1904 and organized the competition, prudently required hosts to provide three balls for each match, two from Italy and one from England, in the event Italian production proved inadequate.

In 1947, the Danish player and engineer Eigil Nielsen created a rubber valve integrated within the leather envelope. The ball’s surface was now uniform, and it was no longer possible to change the inner tube without unstitching the panels. The time of brands and innovation had come. The Orléans-based Plaut et Pradet company, which trademarked the Hungaria brand in 1931, developed and patented a ball twenty years later that was sold under the surprising name of “Scaphandre.” Assembled from fourteen panels, six of which had been cut spherically, it quickly took hold due to its stability and solidity. It was exported throughout Europe, with the help of substantially lowered customs duties thanks to the European Economic Community (EEC), as well as in Israel, where it was used for the 1965 National Cup. The French subsidiary of the German company Adidas, which was established in Alsace in 1959 and advised by the player Just Fontaine, decided to produce a ball that could compete with the Scaphandre. This was the Telstar, a ball bearing a satellite’s name, whose black pentagonal panels and white hexagonal panels became, during the Trente Glorieuses, a genuine international icon for football, which was in full expansion amid rejuvenated European societies. The entrism and influence that Horst Dassler, the CEO of Adidas France, had with FIFA and national federations and leagues, such as the Fédération française de football or the Deutscher Fussball Bund (DFB), contributed to this success. However, the oil crisis and competition from new industrialized countries weakened medium-sized companies such as Hungaria, which later changed its name to Hunga, and still produced 100,000 balls in 1976.

## Globalization and diffusion

Soon, balls were produced at low cost on a global scale, by the hands of Asians or Meso-Americans, and sold based on varying levels of workmanship in large supermarkets and major sporting good stores, such as Décathlon in France and Intersport in Switzerland. Some balls included the colors of European football, especially through the special editions issued by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Beginning in 1986, leather was replaced by synthetic materials such as polyurethane, which ensures the product's impermeability. While many balls were still assembled by hand, others were thermo bonded. Judging whether the balls handed to players conformed to standards and quality remained a sensitive exercise. In fact, there was such variance that in 1996 FIFA adopted a Quality Programme "to harmonise and improve the quality of footballs present on the market." While in the 1970s Plaut and Pradet were still assembling some of their balls by "tolling" with artisans in Sologne or Brittany, and even in the county jail of Orléans, Adidas and other European equipment suppliers relocated their production to Asia, and to Pakistan in particular, where the workers in the city of Sialkot produced forty of the fifty-six million balls manufactured in the mid-2010s.

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