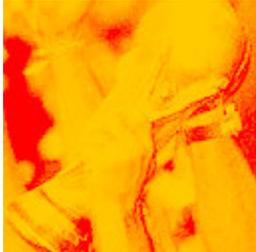


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**2002**

## Football fever - it's a man thing

World Cup frenzy in a country that isn't playing

**Rhymer Rigby**  
**Sunday June 23, 2002**  
[The Observer](#)

'German?', 'Dutch?' asks the dog butcher, bringing down his cleaver with a puppy-splitting crunch. 'No,' I reply, trying hard to look at him and not the dead dog he's skilfully dismembering, 'Inggris.' He grins: 'Ah Inggris - David Beckham! Michael Owen!' Is he, I ask, an England supporter? 'No,' interrupts the man selling oven-ready fruit bats on the next stall. 'He support Argentina, but now Argentina go home - Hahahaha!'

A few weeks back, when my girlfriend and I first pitched up in Sulawesi - the curious K-shaped island in the middle of Indonesia - we'd worried that we'd have trouble following the progress of England's finest. We needn't have. World Cup fever is, if anything, stronger than it is back home. If there's a match on, wherever you are, the business of the day grinds to a halt as groups of men noisily make for the nearest TV.

If you want to talk to the locals, you'd better be prepared to talk football. 'Back home,' laments Klaus, a 60-year-old German diving enthusiast, 'I don't even watch football. But now I have to learn the names of the entire German team just so I can have a conversation.'

But for all the fervour there remains one small problem. No matter how much the Indonesians might love the beautiful game, there's no getting away from fact that Indonesia isn't playing. Back in 1938 they did. In the guise of the Dutch East Indies they became the first South East Asian country to qualify, and were walloped 6-0 by Hungary in their only game.

So who do the locals support? The answer seems to be just about everyone. Drive into any city and it looks like the UN has come to town: restaurants, shops, homes and businesses are aflap with the flags of foreign nations.

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In the major cities, finding somewhere to watch a game is as easy as stepping into the nearest shop or restaurant. But if football is a religion here, it has competition from the real thing. Ten minutes into England v Sweden, the mosque called the faithful, the TV set was solemnly switched off and the audience spent 10 minutes kneeling in the direction of Mecca. Worship concluded, the match went back on, cigarettes were relit and betting resumed.

But religious differences are small beer compared to the problems thrown up by the island's tortured geography and rural Indonesia's chaotic infrastructure. Stuck out on the Togean islands off eastern Sulawesi and our guesthouse's (and island's) only TV couldn't get a signal. Perhaps the satellite was down or the tuning was out - some of the men even muttered darkly that football-weary female staff might have sabotaged the satellite dish.

With kick-off fast approaching, it was decided there was nothing else for it: we'd have to take the hotel's barely seaworthy boat to the nearest village, some 40 minutes away. As there can't have been more than a couple of TVs in town, we watched the proceedings in a smoke-filled concrete room (all Indonesian rooms are smoke filled) on a portable with two thirds of the village. Actually it was an unbeatable atmosphere, even if most of them were Argentina fans and half the kids were wearing 'Osama bin Laden is my hero' T-shirts.

Up in the sophisticated north near Manado and your viewing is less likely to be disrupted by either satellites or Allah. Still, it's a very alien experience. Strange as it may seem, in most places outside the Costa del Oz that is Bali there's no such thing as a pub to watch the football in. But restaurants are absurdly cheap and many locals catch the match while they eat. It was in one of these we caught South Korea's remarkable trouncing of Portugal. As the Koreans scored, our fellow diners went wild - a stirring show of Asian solidarity. I showed my own personal support for the underdogs by ordering curried dog.

Of course there's one major constituency that isn't too thrilled about all this - the women of Indonesia. For although the mere mention of Michael Owen is enough to send most teenage girls into paroxysms of giggles, their mothers just don't want to know, especially as the evening matches often clash with one of the country's most popular soaps. But when scheduling conflicts do arise, even if there's only a few minutes of a match left, these stern matriarchs take unilateral action and switch over. And rather than object, their men folk shrug and give you a resigned 'she's-the-boss' look.

Although football-mad Indonesia is still very much a male-dominated society, there's no doubt it's the women

who hold the remote controls.

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