

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Is Soccer Called 'Soccer' Instead Of 'Football'?

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[Jane] This is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids* from Vermont Public Radio.

I'm Jane Lindholm. Every episode we take one of the questions that you ask, and we find someone cool to answer it.

Today's question is about sports, but really it's more about language and culture.

Do you hear that sound? Do you know what it is? It's the sound of a bunch of football players practicing. Oh wait, I said football. In the rest of the world that would be right. But if you live in the United States you probably call it soccer.

Well, one of you wondered why.

[Kala] My name Kala. I am seven years old. I live in Colchester, Vermont. My question is why is soccer called 'soccer' instead of being called 'football'?

[David] Hello, Kala. This is David Saward, the men's soccer coach down at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. And I'm really happy to be talking to you today.

It's a really interesting question because so many people around the world play the game of football. What happened with the word soccer and football, it goes back to the 1800s when the game was developed and there were two groups of people in Britain who got together to set the rules of two different games, one that was known as rugby football and another was known as association football. And from those two first words 'rugby' and 'association' came two very separate games.

And so rugby actually became abbreviated to the word 'rigger' and out of the word 'association' came the word soccer. And that really is the root of where the two differences came.

[Jane] Have you ever seen the sport of rugby? It's pretty different from soccer. For one thing you're allowed to catch the ball and carry it, run with it. In soccer you aren't allowed to touch the ball with your hands unless you're the goalie or you're throwing the ball in from out of bounds. But as Coach Saward was saying both rugby and soccer are different forms of football sports or at least they were when they were first invented rugby football and association football. Association Football is what we now call soccer. Think of how 'association' is spelled. There's an S-O-C in there, association, and people shortened that word into soccer. So instead of saying association you'd just say soccer.

So then the two different forms of football were nicknamed 'rigger' and 'soccer' was kind of ironic here is that the word 'soccer' came from Great Britain and these days you'd probably never hear someone in England or Wales say 'soccer' they just call it football. But Americans brought the British word 'soccer' over to this country. And as the sport became more popular 'soccer' stuck. Coach Saward says there's good reason for it sticking. It helps differentiate soccer from other sports.

[David] When you look around the world there are all sorts of different forms of football. So there's American football, there's Australian-rules football, there's Gaelic football, there's rugby football, and then there's association football. So for the clarity of everybody over here I think that where we say the word 'football' we tend to think of people running around with helmets and pads on, and so soccer is a very clear distinction.

[Jane] As you might be able to pick up from his accent, Coach Saward grew up in England. So he grew up playing football but for the last 30 years he's been coaching the sport in the US and calling it soccer.

[David] I've gotten into the routine of calling it soccer now but when I go back to Britain or back into Europe I actually fall back into calling it football. It is like two different languages but I think soccer works very well over here.

[Jane] Like a lot of coaches David Saward started first as a player. That's where he developed a love for the game.

[David] We used to play all the time and friends over in the park it is a simple game cheap game. We needed a ball and not much else. And television didn't really cover the game, but I was born close to a ground. It is the classic story in Europe where distances are much smaller. You know, I was two miles from a professional team and used to go with my father, dreamt of being a pro one day, was never quite good enough and decided that I would like to become a teacher. I didn't really know that I would end up coaching the game, but it's been my life now for the last 35 years and it's been fantastic.

[Player] Touch two, to your right...

[Jane] Coach Saward said he always dreamed of being a professional player but he didn't quite make it. One of the cool things about him though is that he found a way to make a career working in soccer even though he wasn't a professional player. He has coached the Middlebury College team for 32 years now this fall. That's a long time.

My own brother has made a career in soccer too. He's a coach now at a college in New York but for several years he worked for two different major league soccer teams. Those are the premier professional teams in the U.S...

[David] My name is David Lindholm and I worked for Chivas USA and the Colorado Rapids. I was in the communications department which meant that it was my job to talk to media members from TV and radio stations, newspapers, and Web sites about the team and also to help them interview players and coaches. I did my work in two languages because lots of players were from countries where Spanish is the main language. Sometimes I translated interviews. So if a player said something 'El equipo ha jugado un buen partido y que estaba muy contento de haber marcado el gol,' I would tell the journalist that he said, 'that the team had played a good game and that he was very happy to have scored the goal.' I was always with the team including when we traveled across the country to play games. It's always much harder to win in the other team's stadium than your own. And so when we did we would come back to a hotel in such a good mood. The post-game team dinners on those nights when everyone was eating together and laughing having worked so hard to get the result that we wanted, those were my favorite moments working in professional soccer.

[Jane] So there are a lot of different ways to have a career in sports even if you don't wind up being a professional player. But we did get messages from a couple of players who had very successful professional careers.

[Alejandro] Hey, guys. My name is Alejandro Moreno. I'm originally from Venezuela, a country down in South America. I wanted to share with you a couple of my favorite moments as a professional soccer player. The first one took place down in South America in a tournament called Copa America that brings all the countries from South America together to play for a big, big huge, humongous trophy.

It's a very important competition. And Venezuela wasn't supposed to do all that well because we had to play against very talented teams with very big names like Neymar from Brazil. And of course Lionel Messi from Argentina but our team we worked very hard. We believed in each other we trusted each other and we'd made it as far as our country had ever made it in the tournament. We went all the way to the semifinals and made our country very happy and very proud. And we were very proud of the work that we had done.

The second moment that I wanted to share with you was when MLS Cup in 2008 with the Columbus Crew I was fortunate enough to win in 2002 with the L.A. Galaxy and 2006 with the Houston Dynamo. But in 2008 the game was 0-0 and a player by the name Guillermo Barros Schelotto. He played a ball down the sidelines. I was able to get that ball, I faced up the defender dribbled past the defender with speed, got my head up, or tried to find the far post with a nice powerful low shot that got past the goal keeper and we were up one nothing.

And as I turned and I heard the roar of the crowd and I saw my teammates trying to chase me down and I looked up in the stands, the first people that I saw in the stands were my lovely wife, Melissa, my kids Gregory and Alejandro, and my parents who had flown all the way from Venezuela to watch me play in a big, big moment. That was a significant moment. That meant a lot to me and to my family. And that was my last championship in Major League Soccer.

[Jane] These days you can find Alejandro Moreno calling soccer games on TV in English and in Espanol. Another guy you might see on TV also sent us a message.

[Alexi] My name is Alexi Lalas and I used to play soccer professionally and for the United States many, many years ago back in the 1900s probably before many of you were even alive. And now I talk about soccer on television.

[Jane] Alexi Lalas played professionally for many years. He played in the World Cup in 1994. In addition to playing for the U.S. national team for many years he played for a team in Italy and then he was one of the key players in the early years of the professional league I mentioned earlier. It's known as MLS. Later on Alexi Lalas was in charge of a couple of soccer teams.

[Alexi] And yes I call it soccer. I call it soccer because that's what I grew up calling. I grew up doing many of the same things that you probably do. I grew up with Mom and Dad coaching, and orange peels and juice boxes at half time, and travel teams and all of these different things that are part of growing up in the United States playing soccer and it introduced me to a game that I love. And a game that's still a huge part of my life now. Now a lot of people will ask me what's your advice to kids who love the sport? And it's pretty simple. This is what I tell them. If you're the best player on your team you need to find a better team, because the only way that you ever get better at any sport or let's be honest in anything in life is testing yourself against better competition. So if you're the best player on your team, congratulations. But if you want to get better, you've got to find a better team.

[Jane] And that advice is coming from a pro. We were hoping to get some advice from some of the players on the U.S. women's national team as well. But we didn't quite have enough time before we got this episode out to all of you because the team was preparing for a friendly-match against Thailand. The U.S. women's team has won three World Cup titles and four Olympic gold medal, though this year the team lost in the quarter finals of the Olympics in Brazil.

Thanks today to Alexi Lalas and Alejandro Moreno for their insight, and to Coach David Saward and the Middlebury College men's team. And to my brother David Lindholm. And thanks to Kala for that great question. If you like playing soccer send us a picture of yourself in action and we'll put it up on our Facebook page. You can send it to

questions@butwhykids.org. That's also the address you can use to send us your questions.

We've been getting some really great ones and we are hard at work right now on episodes about the sea, about weather and about why we have a president.

What do you want to know about? Have an adult record your question on a smartphone and send the file to questions@butwhykids.org

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