

“It’s Football not Soccer”

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Abstract: The world’s most popular game is generally known as “football” in most of the world, its full name being “Association Football”. There are many other versions of football, e.g. rugby, Gaelic, Australian Rules and the version played in America where it is called “football”, colloquially “gridiron” and which the rest of the world refers to as “American football”. Americans have long referred to Association football as “soccer”, to point where many people believe it is in fact a word invented in America. In fact, the word is thought to have originated in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century and was commonly used there without being considered an Americanism. However, it appears that as the popularity of soccer has grown in the US, the word has been used less and less in British English. This paper uses data from uses of “football” and “soccer” in publications in Britain and the US since 1900 to chart the relative popularity of these words and, in particular, to chart the rise and fall of the word “soccer” in British English.

Keywords: football, soccer

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1. Introduction

Type the phrase “it’s football not soccer” into a google search and you unleash a torrent of invective. The invective is aimed almost exclusively at Americans, the message is that the world’s most popular game is properly called “football” and that the use of the name “soccer” is an American invention which should be dropped. The tone is generally abusive. Sometimes there is wit- e.g. a picture of a football/soccer player alongside a player of the game that Americans usually refer to as football (gridiron, or more commonly in the rest of the world, American football) with arrows pointing to the ball, the feet and the hands- and the suggestion that the American game might be better named “hand-egg” (referring to the oval shape of the American ball). But mostly there seems to be just anger and frustration. Many seek to associate American use of the word with alleged American imperialism and cultural hegemony. Here are some examples

“It seems that almost every American can't understand that there is no sport called soccer its FOOTBALL!”

Daniel Gooch , Analyst Mar 24, 2010, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/368301-to-all-americans-its-football-not-soccer>

“But I can’t help but fear for the sport of football, or might I say, for the name “football.” I do not wish to be in a world which calls it soccer. And knowing the influence that American cultural exports seem to have on the rest of the world, my fears are definitely justified.”

Priyank Chandra December 29, 2010, <http://blogcritics.org/its-football-not-soccer/>

“While Vidarsson makes an excellent point, the argument that soccer should be called football is far more compelling. The United States is not only holding onto a grudge lasting more than two centuries, but its reluctance to call the sport by its appropriate name only raises controversy concerning the game. As a game that has been around for centuries, soccer has earned the right to be given the name of football. It is a far more accurate name and is internationally recognized.”

Joshua Bender, February 1, 2013, <http://www.uchscommander.com/sports/2013/02/01/giving-a-name-to-the-game-its-called-football-not-soccer/>

“Association football began its conquest of the world, and eventually everyone came to call the most ubiquitous game in the world football. And that was that. Except it wasn’t, because for reasons that are not immediately apparent, the Americans decided to invent a meeker, idiotic version of rugby, which they called American football. They play the sport in helmets, and there are more breaks in it than in a French work week. One imagines they designed it this way to fit in as many television advertising slots as possible. And for that reason, what they should call football they call soccer. And as only Americans can, they have steadfastly refused to obey the rules of things. They always have an air of faint surprise that the rest of the world does not call it soccer.”

Sipho Hlongwane, 24 June 2013, <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2013/06/24/its-football-not-soccer>

“I agree, it completely winds me up when ever i gotta type soccer in Who plays soccer anyway???? the americans, thats all...the rest of the world play proper football. and american football for a national

sport! WHIMPS!!! i wanna see them play the proper game of rugby, then maybe they can go and name new sports. arrgg got me all angry then lmao”

Best answer to “Football is Football not Soccer?” on Yahoo.com

<https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080826071845AAUiP8x>

“Dear Americans, Here is an important lesson for you to learn: There is no sport called "Soccer". The sport that was invented between the years 220 and 680 (yes, years with 3 digits do exist) is called Football. Nobody knows why you guys call a sport that was invented somewhat later (1869) and is played by motorbikers (that's why they wear helmets, not so?) football. It's neither played with the feet nor with a ball. If you called it American Rugby I am sure nobody would argue.”

Beat Zimmermann, July 03, 2010, <http://airnavigationinstitute.blogspot.com/2010/07/and-its-football-not-soccer.html>

“Repeat after me:

It's football, not soccer.

It's football, not soccer.

It's football, not soccer.

It's football, not soccer.

It's football, not soccer.”

Amber, August 26, 2011, <http://www.codeforsomething.com/2011/08/football-not-soccer/>

(All downloaded 5/18/2014)

Go to Google images for this phrase and you will see numerous t-shirts, cartoons and related images on the same theme. It is also possible to buy merchandise online which uses this slogan and variants. There are several videos online using variants of the phrase “it's football not soccer”, including one by the famous British comedian John Cleese, addressed to Americans on this point.²

Many of these comments emanate from English speaking Britain, but this diatribe is often advanced by football/soccer fans from other nations, and not just former British colonies. One blog page lists the word used in several countries for the game, all of which are variants on the word “football”, in order to highlight (critically) the heterodox American usage.³

A smaller minority of fans are aware of the fact the name “soccer” appears to have originated in England at the end of the 19th century, and was then adopted by Americans. An article in the online version of the German newspaper Der Spiegel (June 7, 2006)⁴ by the American/German journalist Michael Scott Moore pointed this out. He argued that the negative comments made by British observers about the use of the word soccer could be explained as a reaction of the American preference for football (gridiron) over football (soccer): “A semantic reaction from the UK is only to be expected.”

This paper explores this semantic reaction by an analysis of the use of the words “soccer” and “football” in American and British publications from 1900 until the present. The data shows that the use of the

² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sD_8prYOxo

³ See <http://9gag.com/gag/3579195/it-s-football-not-soccer-learn-the-things-americans>

⁴ See <http://www.spiegel.de/international/naming-the-beautiful-game-it-s-called-soccer-a-420024.html>

word “soccer” in British newspapers and books has been in relative decline for the last thirty years or so, just as the relative frequency of the term in American publications has increased. The penetration of the game into American culture, measured by the use of the name “soccer”, has led to backlash against the use of the word in Britain, where it was once considered an innocuous alternative to the word “football”.

The data also reveals that while the word “soccer” was known in Britain at the end of the 19th century, the word was seldom used in newspapers or in the titles of books, and only started to become popular after the second world war. Thus in Britain the word has experienced a relatively abrupt rise and fall, whereas in the US it appears to have grown steadily relative to the word “football” for more than a century.

2. Some “football” and “soccer” history

According to the Oxford English dictionary the first recorded use of the word “football” in English was in 1486. A game played on Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras) in London is described by William Fitzstephen in 1175 (in latin), and it is widely conjectured that this was a game of football.⁵ Shrove Tuesday football was popular practice across England⁶ from the middle ages until the end of the nineteenth century and latin chronicles refer to the activity of playing at ball with the feet (*ad pilam cum pede*). Laws of various Kings ban the playing of ball games – Edward II (1314), Edward III (1349), Richard II (1389), Henry IV (1401) and Edward IV (1477) – these ordinances aimed at diverting young men toward the practice of archery, more helpful to the military ambitions of the monarch.⁷

The antiquarian Joseph Strutt, writing in 1801, identifies the game of “foot-ball” and says “It was formerly much in vogue among the common people of England, though of late years it seems to have fallen into disrepute, and is but little practiced” (p168).⁸ About this time it appears that the game became popular with the aristocratic boys of England’s leading schools- Eton, Harrow, Winchester, Rugby and so on. Each school developed its own version of the game. The desire to play games against boys from rival schools, especially while attending University (meaning Cambridge or Oxford at that time) required some standardization. The first written rules of the game were penned in Cambridge in 1848. The Football Association was founded in London in 1863 to promote the game and the rules adopted were based on Cambridge rules. But standardization created conflict.

⁵ “every year on the day called Carnival—to begin with the sports of boys (for we were all boys once)—scholars from the different schools bring fighting-cocks to their masters, and the whole morning is set apart to watch their cocks do battle in the schools, for the boys are given a holiday that day. After dinner all the young men of the town go out into the fields in the suburbs to play ball. The scholars of the various schools have their own ball, and almost all the followers of each occupation have theirs also. The seniors and the fathers and the wealthy magnates of the city come on horseback to watch the contests of the younger generation, and in their turn recover their lost youth: the motions of their natural heat seem to be stirred in them at the mere sight of such strenuous activity and by their participation in the joys of unbridled youth.”

⁶ Games are recorded as being played in London, Kingston-Upon-Thames, Chester, Alnick and the annual game played in Ashbourne, Derbyshire, started around 1667 and is still played today.

⁷ On the early history of the game see e.g. Morris Marples, *A History of Football* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1954), A.H. Fabian and Geoffrey Green (eds), *Association Football*, Volume One (London, Caxton Publishing, 1960) and Neil Wigglesworth, *The Evolution of English Sport* (London, Frank Cass, 2002)

⁸ Joseph Strutt, *The sports and pastimes of the people of England* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1898).

There had always been variants of the ball games which involved the use of the hands, and in the 19th century this version of the game came to be most strongly associated with Rugby School. In 1871 a group of clubs met in London to form the Rugby Football Union, to codify and develop their version of the game. From this point onwards the two versions of football were distinguished by reference to their longer titles, Rugby Football and Association Football (named after the Football Association). This distinction is thought to be the origin of the "soccer". The rugby football game was shortened to "rugger" (OED, 1893), a term recognized in British English to the present day, and the association football game was, plausibly, shortened to "soccer" (OED 1891). This theory is supported, for example, by a letter to New York Times from 1905 (figure 1).

	Origin of the Word "Socker."	
	<i>To the Editor of The New York Times:</i>	
It	seems a thousand pities that in reporting	
Association	football matches THE NEW YORK	n
TIMES,	in company with all the other news-	p
papers,	should persistently call the game	tl
"Socker."		st
In	the first place, there is no such word, and	
in	the second place, it is an exceedingly ugly	sl
and	undignified one.	tl
You	may search the English papers through	
and	through, and in all the long columns of	sl
descriptions	of games you will not find even	st
"Soccer"	(which is probably the word in-	tl
tended.)		tl
As	a matter of fact, it was a fad at Oxford	n
and	Cambridge to use "er" at the end of	
many	words, such as foot er, sport er, and as	
Association	did not take an "er" easily, it	
was,	and is, sometimes spoken of as Soccer.	
During	the visit of the Pilgrims some wise	o
person	(presumably an Englishman) explained	a
to	a newspaper reporter that the game was	a
called	Socker because the players were socks!	
It	is to be hoped that this heresy will not	tl
spread,	and that THE NEW YORK TIMES will	
henceforth	head its articles "Association Foot-	b
ball."	FRANCIS H. TABOR.	h
New	York, Nov. 25, 1905.	u

Figure 1: Letter to the New York Times, November 25, 1905

Between 1850 and 1900 the game of football fragmented into a number different versions played in various parts of the anglo-saxon world. Rugby football divided into two codes in 1895, Rugby Union and Rugby League, primarily on the issue of payment- “League” became professional and “Union” remained amateur for an entire century. Both rugby codes are played with an oval-shaped ball and allow the use of feet and hands. Gaelic football, a game developed in Ireland and codified in 1887 is played with feet and hands using a round ball, while Australian Rules football, known from at least 1858, is played with an oval shaped ball on an oval shaped field also using both feet and hands. Finally, the game called “football” in the US (colloquially “gridiron” and “American football” in Britain and elsewhere) evolved out of collegiate athletics in the late 19th century. The first officially recorded college football game was played in 1869 between Princeton and Rutgers according to Rutgers Rules, which were a cross between Association Football and Rugby Football rules. Over the next decade or so different colleges played to rules that leaned either towards the Association or Rugby codes, until Walter Camp, a player and then coach at Yale instigated a series of developments that created the distinctive American game.⁹

Notwithstanding Tabor’s complaints of heresy, it seems that the use of “soccer” to denote to Association football game and “football” for the indigenous American game took root in the first decade of the twentieth century. Figure 2, an article from the Washington Post in 1906, provides a useful illustration of the status of the word “soccer” in the US at this time. Concerns about the brutality of gridiron had been expressed in the 1890s, but a crisis arose in 1905 when several college players died during games. President Roosevelt instituted a process of reform during 1905-1906 which led ultimately to significant rule changes and increased safety. During this process there was a national debate over the position of “football” in society and several colleges suspended the game. As the article suggest, alternatives were considered, and Association football was championed by many (including Henry Chadwick, the “father of baseball”). Clearly at this time both “Association football” and “soccer” were recognized names of the game, with the latter being more colloquial.

⁹ On the early history of football in America see e.g. John Lucas and Ronald Smith, *Saga of American Sport* (Philadelphia, Lea & Febiger, 1978), Benjamin Rader, *American Sports* Fourth Edition (New Jersey, Pearson Education, 1999). On the history of Australian Rules Football see Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football* (Melbourne, Schwartz Publishing, 2003). On the history of rugby football and break between the two codes see Tony Collins, *Rugby’s Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football* (London, Routledge, 2006). On the history of Gaelic football see Mark Duncan, Mike Cronin and Paul Rouse, *The GAA: A People’s History* (Cork, Collins Press, 2009).

IF NOT FOOTBALL, WHAT

Question Confronting Those Who Would Abolish It.

NO READY-MADE SUBSTITUTE

Reasons for Changing Existing Sport
Rather Than Establishing Another.
Association, Gaelic, and Rugby Game.
Gaelic Game Unknown in Colleges.
English Boosted Association Football.

In spite of many objections which may be made against the present game of college football every follower knows that it also possesses substantial excellencies. This makes a difficult problem for some of those who would abolish it, for they ask themselves what to put in its place. It is unfortunate, they say, to do away with anything of real virtue without giving something equal to it in return, and the reason why most colleges have not or do not wipe football out of their list of sports is probably because they do not see any satisfactory substitute for it at hand.

The substitutes most commonly proposed for the modern college game are those which suggest themselves through having the same name, that is, Rugby football, association football, and Gaelic football. Aside from the matter of name they have no noticeable resemblance to American college football, and are no more entitled to be considered as substitutes for it than sports like lacrosse or pushball, but just as much so, and are as good as anything that exists ready made.

Rugby football is practically unknown in the United States, but stands a chance to become important on the Pacific Coast, at least, in view of the agreement just reached between Stanford and California, the leading universities of that section, to play it next season instead of the present game, or any modification of it devised by an Eastern rules committee. Gaelic football is played to a slight extent, but only in places where athletic clubs have been established devoted particularly to Irish national sports. Association football has spread to quite a degree within recent years, and, aside from good clubs in various cities, is now a recognized sport in a number of colleges.

Soccer's Place in Sports.

Association football was not introduced as a substitute for the prevailing game, nor pushed in opposition to it, but was set up with the idea that it was worth playing on its own account and might properly take a place among other sports. Not until this fall, when public sentiment began to grow against the existing college game, was association football observed seriously as a substitute for it, and it must be said that it has found few supporters in that capacity.

Of all games bearing the name, it most deserves to be called football, because it is altogether a kicking game, in which the hands may not be used at all. This feature was made prominent when the

Figure 2: Washington Post January 1 1906

port which keeps the arms in idleness throughout can ever attain wide popularity among those who have grown up through a boyhood of American games. In both the association and the Gaelic games the field is the same; a round ball used instead of the oval of Rugby and American football, the rules concerning actual play are similar, and the dress is the same. In the association game no player except the goal-keeper may use his hands, but in the Gaelic sport the ball may be struck with the hand; and when off the ground it may be caught and kicked in any manner desired. In neither game can the ball be carried or thrown. In the association game the scoring is by kicking the ball between the goal posts, but in the Gaelic contest points may also be scored by sending the ball over the cross-bar between the goal posts, or over the goal line within twenty-one feet of either goal post. On this account the Gaelic defense has to cover sixty-three feet of the end line, and fifteen men are usually employed in the game, as against eleven in association football. Pushing from behind, butting an opponent with the head, tripping or holding are not allowed in either association or Gaelic football.

Relation of Rugby to American Game.

Rugby football bears a closer relation to the American game than either association or Gaelic. Indeed, the American game originated directly from it, but the evolution has been so rapid and of such character that the differences are now more striking than the similarities. The point at which the two games diverged was the admission into the American sport of the privilege of using interference in front of the ball when advancing.

This led by degrees to formations and signals, and is to-day the essence of the American game.

In the Rugby game any player who is between the man on his side with the ball and the goal toward which the latter is running is off-side, and is not allowed actively or passively to obstruct any opponent until he is again on-side. An off-side player is placed on-side only when an opponent has run five yards with the ball, where one of his own side has run in front of him with the ball, or when one of his side runs in front of him, having kicked the ball from behind. These provisions prevent interference, and have therefore developed the English and American games along radically different lines.

Aside from this one feature, the two are largely similar in their rules, although necessarily widely different in play. The ball may be carried in Rugby, and it may so be passed in any direction, except forward, as in our own game.

3. The usage of the words in Britain and the US

I examine the changing frequency of usage of the words “soccer” and “football” since 1900. To do so I rely mainly on word counts from the Times of London and The New York Times. I have also looked at the frequency of appearance of these words in the titles of books published in the UK drawn from A Football Compendium published in 1999. Finally I have looked at word frequencies from a corpus database for the UK newspapers The Guardian and The Independent from 1984 to 2012, and also for the American magazine Time from 1923 to 2006.

(i) The London and New York Times

Table 1 summarises the frequencies of the words “soccer” and “football” in The Times of London by decade since 1900.¹⁰ Until the 1970s the frequencies for both words taken together were growing more or less in line with the size of the newspaper, and hence the fraction of articles referring to the sport remained roughly constant between 1% and 2%. The last three decades are associated with a significant increase, appearing in almost 6% of articles in the most recent decade. This reflects the growing cultural significance of sport and football/soccer in particular.

The third column in the table illustrates that references to the word “soccer” have increasingly been associated with an American context. Major League Soccer did not start until 1996, following the hosting of the FIFA World Cup in the USA in 1994, which generated a very large spike in mentions of the word “soccer”. In 1994 “soccer” appeared 1103 times, more than double the average for the previous five years (533) and 30% more than the average over the following five years (836). By contrast mentions of the word “football” in 1994 barely increased.

Table 1: “football” and “soccer” in the London Times

Decade beginning	total articles containing the word "football" or "soccer"	fraction of articles containing the word "football" or "soccer"	Fraction of references to "soccer" that also refer to "World Cup" or "America" or "Major League Soccer"	"soccer"/("soccer" + "football") excluding American context
1900	4779	0.013	0.143	0.001
1910	5714	0.010	0.158	0.003
1920	11138	0.014	0.094	0.008
1930	14261	0.017	0.186	0.008
1940	6093	0.013	0.091	0.008
1950	9788	0.016	0.185	0.022
1960	13109	0.016	0.343	0.048
1970	13935	0.019	0.256	0.080
1980	29393	0.029	0.323	0.063
1990	67426	0.042	0.519	0.057
2000	93995	0.057	0.456	0.048

¹⁰ The digital online archive was accessed via the University of Michigan Library. Word searches were conducted on a year by year basis.

The table shows that the word soccer has always had an American association, but that it has increased sharply in recent years. For the first half of the twentieth century these associations accounted for between 9.1% and 18.6% of mentions, while in the last two decades roughly half of all mentions are in American context.¹¹

The last column of Table 1 shows the frequency of the mentions of the “soccer” as a percentage of all articles containing either the word “soccer” or “football”. This shows that “soccer” was only rarely used in the first half of the twentieth century accounting for less than 1% of references to either word, but became much more popular after World War Two. At its peak in the 1970s it accounted for 8% of all mentions of the word, but since then it has fallen into significant decline. This is best seen in figure 3.

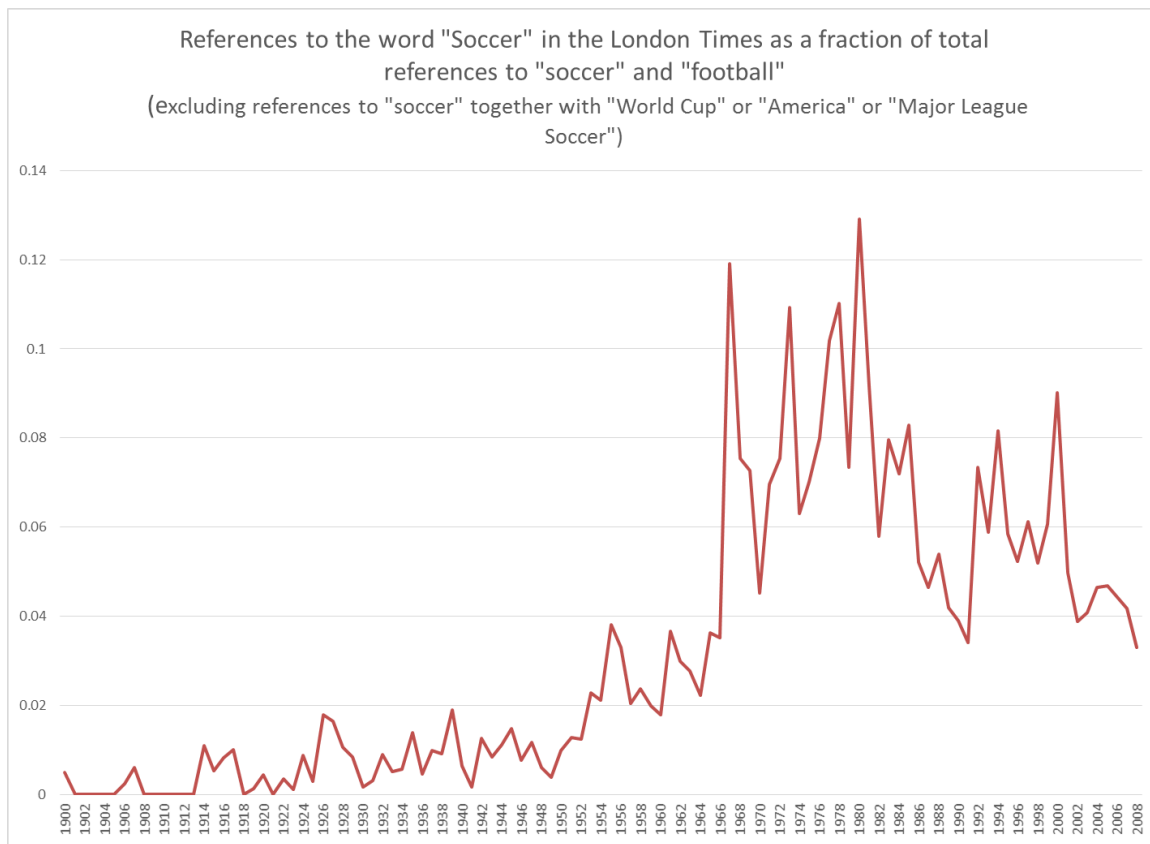


Figure 3

The post-war increase seems to take place in two distinct phases. Firstly, from 1950 there is a fairly steady increase from around 1% to nearly 4% in the last 1950s where it seems to stabilize until the mid-1960s, and then a significant jump in 1967 (the year after England won the World Cup) to almost 12%,

¹¹ It may be that this understates the importance of the American connection, since an article about soccer in the USA need not involve only the specific keywords considered here.

from when on it oscillates between 5% and 13% until 1980, after which it declines to between 3% and 9%. The average for the periods 1967-1980 is 8.5% which the average for the period 1981-2008 is 5.7%, which is significantly smaller ($p = 0.0007$).

The data for the New York Times display a different trend, as can be seen from figure 4 and Table 2.¹² Figure 4 suggests that, absent two large spikes, one in 1914 and the other in the years leading up to 1980, there has been a fairly steady upward trend in the use of the word “soccer” relative to “football”, growing from around 10% in the first decade on the 20th century to around one third of all mentions in the last decade.

The 1914 spike is particularly interesting since the mentions of soccer actually exceed the mentions of football, despite the fact that most histories of sport do not identify this a particularly significant moment in the history of American soccer. Some sampling of the articles in that year suggest that the event is not a phantom and there genuinely were a large number of reference to the game, and indeed these were spread among a large number of events, both played by Americans and touring teams from the UK. It may be that at this point British teams were trying hard to spread the game in the US, as they had across much of the rest of the world, and that these efforts were bearing some fruit, only to be interrupted by Britain’s entry that year into World War One.

The spike in 1980 coincides with the highpoint of the NASL, a professional league that operated in the US between 1968 and 1984. In terms of attendance the league peaked in 1980 with 5.5 million tickets sold, while peak coverage on network TV was in 1979 and 1980 when 9 and 8 games respectively were shown on ABC. About this time the league started to get into financial difficulties and finally collapsed in 1984. During the 1980s the “soccer”’s share of mentions declines, only to revive significantly with the hosting of the 1994 FIFA World Cup.

The 1980 peak share of “soccer” in the New York Times also coincides with the peak share of the word in the London Times, while the share declines in both newspapers in the 1980s. The difference is that the share has not shown signs of recovery in the London Times, while it has in the New York Times.

¹² The digital online archive was accessed via the University of Michigan Library. Word searches were conducted on a year by year basis.

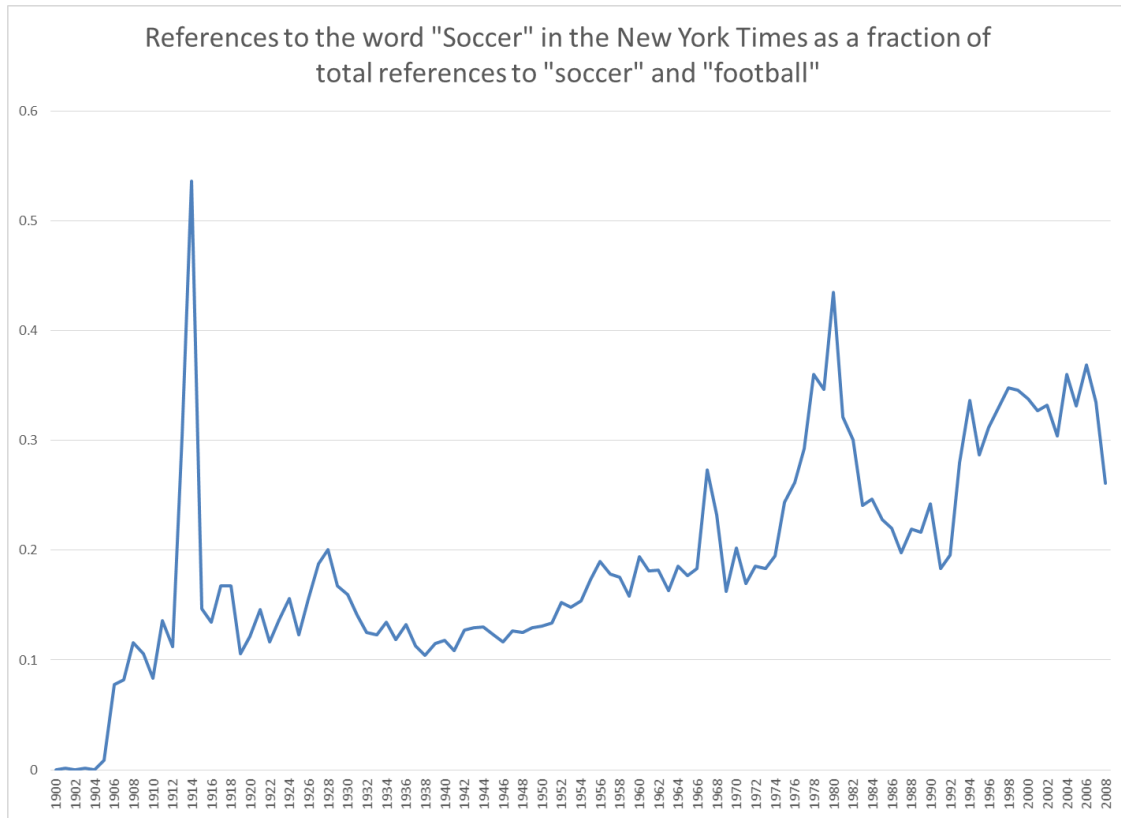


Figure 4

Table 2: "football" and "soccer" in the New York Times

Decade beginning	total articles containing the word "football" or "soccer"	fraction of articles containing the word "football" or "soccer"	"soccer"/("soccer" + "football")
1900	8583	0.010	0.050
1910	19729	0.017	0.228
1920	43310	0.019	0.158
1930	62852	0.023	0.128
1940	41678	0.017	0.123
1950	44578	0.015	0.159
1960	53649	0.016	0.195
1970	63410	0.018	0.243
1980	80443	0.030	0.261
1990	66615	0.039	0.288
2000	54031	0.034	0.329

(ii) A Football Compendium

A Football Compendium by Peter Seddon was first published in 1995, followed by a second edition in 1999.¹³ The book describes itself as “a bibliography of all books and serials published in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland about the game of association football” in all its aspects. The source for identifying these publications is the British Library, which is the copyright library for the UK and publishers are legally required to deposit one copy of every title they issue. The book is divided into 14 sections, dealing with history and development, club histories, personalities, UK Cup competitions, the international game, watching the game, theory and practice, football as business, literature and arts, reference books, wit and humour, hobbies and pastimes, films, music and sound recordings. For many of these categories publications seldom include either the word “football” or “soccer” (e.g. literature and the arts), some would only include the word “football” (e.g. club histories, since the official name of most clubs is “X football club”, but “soccer” is never used in the official club name) and some refer to genres that are relatively recent (e.g. of 93 publications on the business of football, only 9 were published before 1980, and two before 1970). Thus in only four sections is there a high proportion of publications containing either word and which include significant number over the entire 20th century – personalities (mostly player biographies and autobiographies), theory and practice, reference books and wit & humour.

Figure 5 and Table 3 shows the share of publications with “soccer” in the title between 1900 and 1998 (the last year covered by the compendium). Figure 5 shares some similarity with figure 3, and indeed the correlation coefficient is 0.6. In both cases “soccer” is seldom used before the second world war, its usage rises sharply after the war, peaks and then has declined ever since. One difference is that the peak in the use of the word soccer is about twenty years earlier in UK publications than in The Times, and by 1980 is in very marked decline.

Football biographies and autobiographies are particularly interesting in this respect. Famous personalities are likely to be sensitive to the choice of name, given the intense scrutiny of the lives and actions of these individuals. Given the antipathy to the word “soccer” in the UK today, it might surprise many people to know that many of the most famous personalities of the 1960s and 70s used the word “soccer” in their autobiography. Thus Sir Matt Busby, the celebrated manager of Manchester United in the 1950s and 60s entitled his autobiography “Soccer at the top”. One biography of George Best, the most famous player of the era, was titled “George Best: the inside story of soccer’s super-star”. Jimmy Hill, one of the most influential figures in the development of English football entitled his autobiography as a player “Striking for Soccer” in 1961, while the autobiography of John Charles, a great player of the 1950s was titled “King of Soccer”.

¹³ Peter Seddon, *A Football Compendium: An Expert Guide to the Books, Films & Music of Association Football*, second edition (London, The British Library, 1999)

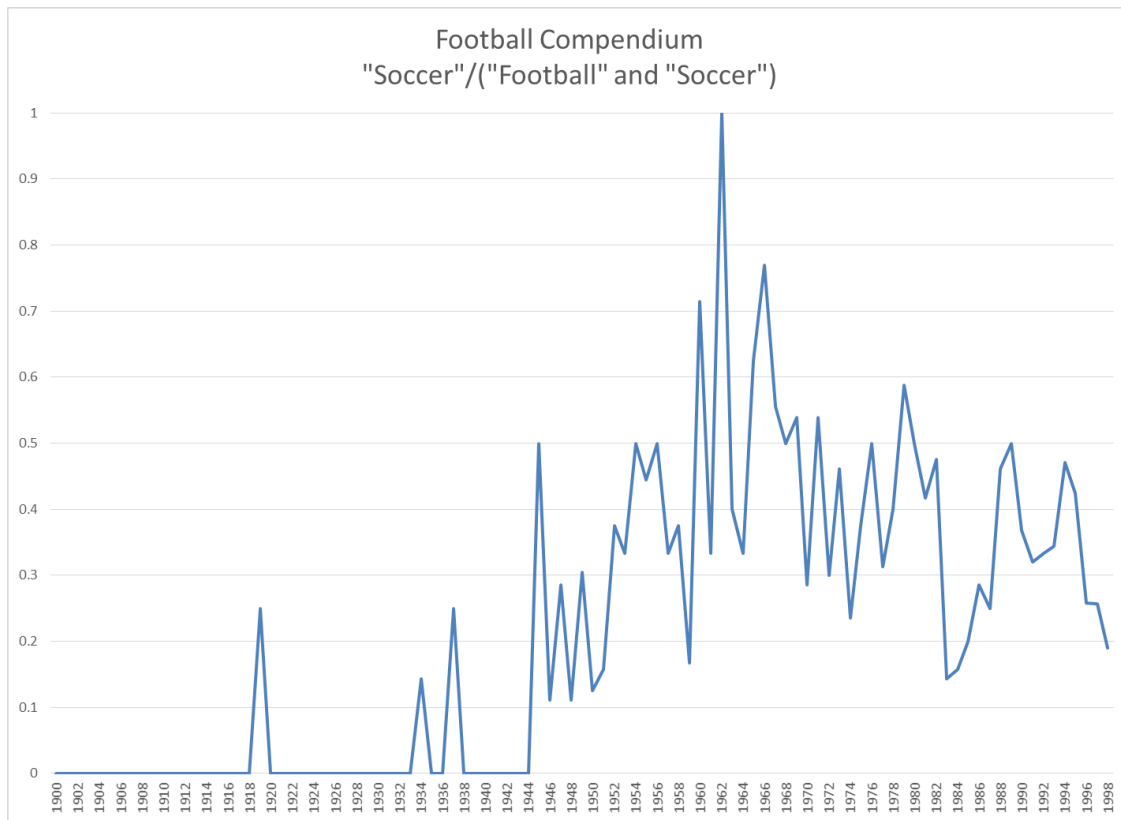


Figure 5

Table 3: “football” and “soccer” in publications listed in the Football Compendium

Decade beginning	Total publications	% of publications containing the word "football" in the title	% of publications containing the word "soccer" in the title
1900	40	0.800	0.000
1910	20	0.700	0.050
1920	40	0.850	0.000
1930	41	0.756	0.049
1940	81	0.605	0.160
1950	134	0.470	0.187
1960	174	0.241	0.316
1970	242	0.388	0.252
1980	392	0.298	0.163
1990	627	0.289	0.137

Another kind of publication which illustrates the widely accepted usage of the word “soccer” is a genre known as “Boys’ Annuals” which flourished between the 1950s and 1980s and were aimed at the market for young boys, often given as Christmas presents (women and girls were largely discouraged from showing an interest in the game in the UK until recently; indeed, between 1921 and 1971 the Football Association banned women’s games). Of 75 publications listed between 1949 and 1995, 29 contain the word “soccer” in the title, compared to 32 that contain the word “football”. Indeed, “soccer” seems to have survived somewhat longer than in other genres, consistent with the idea that it was a juvenile alternative to the more formal name “football” and therefore remained acceptable.

(iii) The Guardian, The Independent and Time Magazine

Two further sources confirm the trends described thus far in Britain and the United States. WebCorp is a large and up-to-date database of electronic text corpora and covers two broadsheet British newspapers, The Guardian and The Independent from 1984 to the present day.¹⁴ A search for frequencies of the words “football” and “soccer” shown that the use of the former has grown dramatically in the last three decades, while use of the latter has stagnated (figure 6). Thus in 1984 there were 1,010 mentions of the word “football” in the two publications, rising to 18,114 by 2012, an eighteen-fold increase. By contrast the use of the word “soccer”, while increasing, had only risen from 226 to 716, about three-fold. Hence the percentage of references to the game using “soccer” fell from 18% to under 4%.

By contrast, the online database for Time magazine running from 1923 to 2006 shows a significant relative increase in the use of the word “soccer” (figure 7).¹⁵ Unlike the other publications discussed here, there has been relatively little grow in the use of the words over time. Thus in 1923 football was mentioned 67 times, and soccer not once, while by 2005 football was mentioned only 54 times, while soccer was mentioned 28 times. Nonetheless, it is clear that the soccer’s share has grown since around 1980, and in several years has actually achieved more mentions than football.

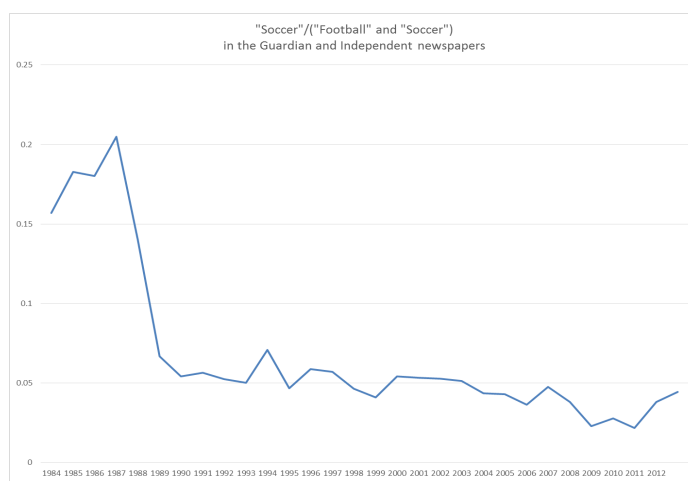


Figure 6

¹⁴ Accessible from <http://www.webcorp.org.uk:8080/index.html>

¹⁵ The Time Archive was accessed via the free service provided by Brigham Young University at <http://corpus.byu.edu/time/>

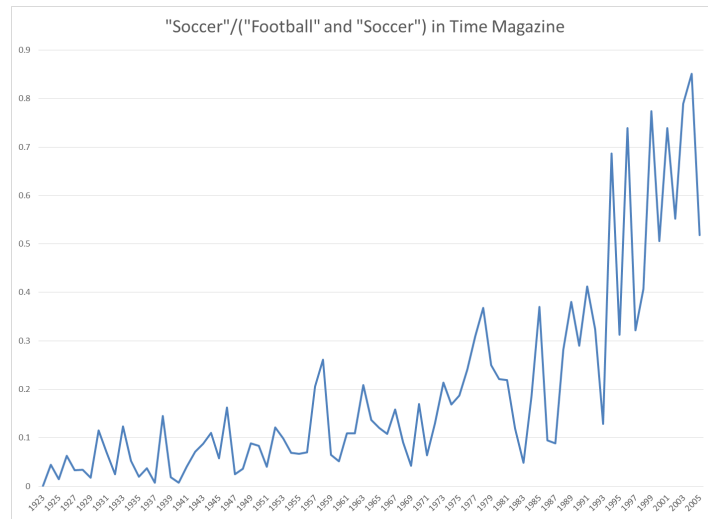


Figure 7

4. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has discussed the widespread antipathy outside the US to the use of the word “soccer” to describe the game that is otherwise generally known as “football”. The purpose of this paper has been to place this observation in the wider context of the use of the word in British and American publications since 1900. The following conclusions seem warranted

- (i) “football” is a venerable word in the English language, which described a variety of medieval pastimes, and which was adopted to describe several different formal codes in the last half of the nineteenth century, including Association football, Rugby football (Union and League versions), Gaelic football, Australian Rules Football and what Americans typically call football and the rest of the world calls “American football”
- (ii) “soccer” appears to be a coinage from England at the very end of the nineteenth century, thought to be associated with upper middle class students at elite universities, notably Oxford and Cambridge. It was quickly adopted in the US as a way to distinguish it from gridiron, and was widely in use in the US in the first decade of the twentieth century
- (iii) While “soccer” was a recognized term in Britain, it was not widely used in publications in the first half of the twentieth century. However, after the second world war the word came to be used much more frequently in publications, and at its peak somewhere between 1960 and 1980 it seems to have been almost interchangeable in Britain
- (iv) Since 1980 the usage of the word “soccer” has declined in British publications, and where it is used, it usually refers to an American context. This decline seems to be a reaction against

the increased usage in the US which seems to be associated with the highpoint of the NASL around 1980.

The main purpose of this article has been to illustrate the trends in usage. It is possible to offer some speculations in explanation of these trends. One key difference in the usage of “soccer” in Britain and the US seems to have to do with social status. In Britain the word seems carried both an elitist connotation – the language of the ruling class – and an air of informality. It was, possibly, just a little too colloquial in the first half of the twentieth century for use in high-brow newspapers such as *The Times* of London or to be used in the title of a book. In the US it seems to have had a more democratic flavor – everyone used it – and more easily shifted from a colloquialism to a proper name because of the utility of distinguishing it from the other “football”.

The interesting juncture, then, seems to be the rise of the word “soccer” in Britain after 1945. Possibly this reflects a more relaxed society in post-war era and a move toward more informal modes of expression. Another possibility is that American soldiers stationed in Britain during the war made the use of the word more popular- at this time Americans and American culture was generally admired and their mannerisms copied. Indeed, the popularity of American ways and more informal modes of expression may well have reinforced each other. The evidence presented here suggests that the word “soccer” in Britain was often associated with more informal modes of expression, and often used in formats deemed suitable for children.

Whatever the case, this relatively recent history seems now largely forgotten, and outside of the US the word seems to be in decline. With soccer growing in popularity in the US and the rest of the world stridently insisting that the word is football not soccer, it would appear that some kind of resolution will eventually be required. Perhaps some historical perspective might help.