

The Convergences of Football [aka Soccer] and Project Management: *PM Learning from the World Cup*¹

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My colleague Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez (July 17, 2026) noted in a recent LinkedIn article that the 2026 World Cup is “one of the most complex projects [that] humanity knows how to run.” This global mega-sporting event transcended national borders, languages, cultures and religious creeds. The sport known internationally as *football* [aka *soccer* for the bloody Yanks] converges with *project management* in multiple ways. For instance, both are a global language.

This article stitches together a series of nuances from 2026 World Cup spectacles and shenanigans that parallel many project management situations and offer the reader a rich treasure trove of learning nuggets for the savvy student of Project Management.

The Easy 10%

On major construction projects, the two critical events that garner the most outside attention are the “groundbreaking” and the “ribbon cutting” events. These public spectacles signify the ceremonial start, and mark the beneficial occupancy finish, respectively. In between, many construction miracles happen. Boat owners and construction contractors share the same two favorite days – the day they buy the boat / business and the day they sell it.

For the World Cup, the 104 *football matches* (i.e., soccer games) played by 48 teams from around the world in Canada, Mexico, and the USA over a month + of global competition was the *Easy 10%* (Nieto-Rodriguez). The 90% that the spectators did not see comprised the real project. These daunting challenges included the weather, the distances and logistics encountered traveling between the game venues spanning North America, the FIFA requirements for natural grass pitches (play fields), and the border complications and customs regulations inherent with international travel. Antonio notes that this is the first lesson every project should take from this – “none of this is football, [yet] all of it could have sunk the football” (Nieto-Rodriguez). That is,

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the visible deliverable, be it “the game” or the completed facility, is not where the project triumphs. The project success is rooted in the invisible 90%, including the context, the conditions and the details no one thought to consider (Nieto-Rodriguez).

Norway’s Sports Successes Counters “Winning Is Everything”

The ‘winning is everything’ philosophy persists in American sporting culture. The great legendary coach Vince Lombardi’s famous quote of “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing” makes this important point about sports competition. Diligent and persistent preparation by all individuals working together as a team towards their combined objectives, which results in winning, is the overall goal of sports and other endeavors of team competition. The youth sports system in the United States has radically commercialized the odyssey for budding elite athletes to the professional ranks with hypercompetition, singular focus and peppered with mental and emotional anguish.

The polar opposite [pun intended] of the American sports obsession is the sports philosophy of Norway, a relatively small population with great global success. Norway, by contrast, focuses on teaching the youth sports participants the process and having fun, as opposed to counting wins and losses. Norway performed surprisingly well in match play, which included defeating mighty football crazy Brazil prior to losing to England in the quarter finals. Moreover, Norway performed exceptionally well in the 2026 Winter Olympics. “Maybe there is something to this ‘having fun’ thing” notes Mark Sappenfield (CSM, July 10, 2026). The Norwegian approach follows a “human-centered blueprint [that] considers the player pathway as a human journey not just a sports journey, [with a focus on] understanding how to get the most out of someone” according to Curt Rosenthal, the president of the Sports Wellness Institute in New York (CSM).

The PM Learning Lesson parallels the Norwegian approach to focus on developing good process skills, instilling solid work ethic [effort], taking personal accountability for one’s results [pride], learning to trust one another, and then executing what they have learned. Moreover, the Norwegian sports learning process tracks the benefits of Project Based Learning [PBL]. In both cases, the benefits include helping the participants make friends, learn how to recover from defeat, and experience the satisfaction of hard work and the thrill of victory (Moylan, 2008).

Best Work Can Occur When Focused on the Deadline

Deadlines drive every organization and activity – columns get written, assignments submitted, projects completed, and World Cup football matches played. Deadlines are the antidote to procrastination, cause managers to confront the issue of diminishing returns, set the rhythm of the workplace, and force the co-ordination of project teams and individuals (Bartleby, 2026).

Impending deadlines also can cause major project endeavors to ensue. The flurry of computer projects and information systems improvements throughout the 1990s were driven by Y2K; i.e., the computer system date of 01/01/00. Would the computer clock reset to January 1, 1900? [Actually, the ultra-critical date was Sept. 9, 1999; as in 09/09/99. Ballistic missile silos positioned secretly around the world may read the date as ‘central command control system failure’ as in “9999” and launch as programmed.]

Impressively, deadlines can instigate the best work by individuals and teams when they face the looming Sword of Damocles completion date/time. Many of the lesser World Cup Teams performed above their prescribed “playing weight” and prevailed over higher ranked teams. Likewise, less experienced project teams learn from their mistakes as the project progresses and end up executing superbly well. The PM Learning Lesson – rise to the occasion and surprise the detractors. [The value of making intelligent mistakes will be a topic for a future article by the author.]

Sometimes Nonsense Happens

The behavior of the players from Spain and Argentina during and immediately after the 2026 FIFA World Cup final was defined by high physical tension, a flurry of disciplinary actions, and a chaotic post-match brawl that resulted in formal FIFA assault charges (Wikipedia, 2026). Even the award ceremony witnessed arrogant and obnoxious behavior by the POTUS. This is not the first time nor unfortunately, probably the last, that nonsense happens at the climatic conclusion of the project, which should not sour the whole effort.

The PM Learning Lesson – be humble and gracious in victory, conduct yourself gentlemanly and act stoically in defeat. You can easily be on either side of the winner’s podium.

If you wish to discuss this topic in more detail, please feel free to contact me at
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Best regards,

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