

Play Beautiful

Soccer in Brazil isn't so much a sport as it is a religion

Text by KEITH GORDON

Canada loves its hockey and produces some of the world's best players. The same goes for New Zealand and rugby, or the Dominican Republic and baseball. But there is perhaps no stronger connection between a nation and a sport than that between Brazil and soccer. Ever since the country won its first World Cup in 1958, the Seleção (Brazilian national team) has won the tournament a record five times. Teams from Europe and beyond bolster their squads with Brazilian players. The country even has a national philosophy to describe its style of play: Joga Bonito, which means "play beautiful."

Names like Zico, Socrates, Roberto Carlos, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, and Romário are recognized around the world, while Pelé remains the greatest player of all time. Today's best Brazilian is Neymar, the world's most expensive player after his \$263 million transfer from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain (that doesn't include

a salary of more than \$50 million per year, before accounting for sponsors).

Brazil is still trying to wash away the memory of World Cup 2014, where the Seleção was a heavy favorite on its home soil. But a shocking 7-1 loss to Germany in the tournament's semifinal turned what was supposed to be a national celebration into a nationwide period of mourning.

It took a full two years for the nation to recover, thanks to the efforts of the youthful Olympic team that won the gold medal (also on home soil in Brazil) by defeating Germany on penalties. Neymar, who missed the 7-1 beatdown in 2014 with a back injury, scored the winning penalty to secure Olympic gold and restore his nation's sporting honor. Now back in his rightful place atop the soccer landscape, the national squad is looking to secure its sixth World Cup title in Russia in 2018. History is in their favor.



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Neymar, the most expensive player in the world, is one of a long line of Brazilian soccer royalty