By Michael Madill

There is a countdown clock on the official website for the 2010 World Cup. As I write this, the clock is passing one hundred fifty-four days, four hours and thirty-seven minutes. I can hardly wait. What’s the World Cup? Who cares? Typically American questions. You see, we don’t really get the World Cup here. That’s because we don’t really get football. Not the real kind, anyway.

Football is played with the feet. That’s why it’s called football. The ball is round as balls should be. The game is simple. It’s played in every country in the world. In this country, the collision of armored refrigerators who grapple for an oblong inflated pig’s bladder with their hands every autumn weekend is a mire of rules, diagrams and instant replays. It’s more like rugby. Attempts to interest the rest of the world in our version always fail. There might be strategy involved in American football, but it will never be much to look at.

    When the rest of the world plays football – which petulant American sports enthusiasts insist on calling soccer – they play The Beautiful Game. It consumes towns and captivates whole nations during a nine month season each year. Its stars are local, national and international heroes who are possessed of a mystique that Terrell Owens will never, ever know. They are an assortment of louts and nice guys such as you will find in any sport – a popular saying calls football ‘the gentleman’s game played by thugs’ – but when they perform at peak on the field they become artists. The nearest thing we have here is basketball.

Every four years, the world outside the United States stops for a few weeks in the summer to watch thirty-two teams of the best players from thirty-two nations duke it out to determine a genuine world champion. That’s why it’s called the World Cup.

This year it takes place in a country as far south as New York is north. A place that exports four hundred million liters of wine a year. A place where ten per cent of the population kept the other ninety per cent locked in a brutal racist government called apartheid for half a century. A place that produced three Nobel Peace Prize winners and two winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature in a generation. A place where football is taken very, very seriously.

South Africa is as big as two Texases and is home to fifty million people, just like two times Texas. Most of those people are black and poor, and most of them won’t live to see forty-nine years old. Yet the country boasts a five hundred billion dollar economy, the biggest in Africa, which turns out trucks, diamonds, all that wine and hi-tech innovations like mobile phone banking.

It has a Gini coefficient of around 66, giving it the biggest gap between rich and poor in the world after Namibia. In spite of these contrasts, or perhaps because of them, cultural diversions are especially important. Anyone who follows the Cape Jazz scene – the ‘Cape’ comes from Cape Town, South Africa’s culture capital on the Cape of Good Hope – knows that South Africa has its own very popular brand of jazz. And, of course, there’s football.
If you visit the townships – poor areas of mostly non-white residents that abut big South African cities like Johannesburg, in which black and Coloured (an official race type) residents were forced to live under *apartheid* – you will find people of all ages playing football in any available open space. If they are lucky they will have a proper ball, maybe even an official shirt from their favorite team. If they are not so lucky they will be knocking around with anything which rolls, wearing whatever is to hand.

If you visit the leafy suburbs a few miles away you will find affluent white and non-white kids playing for their school team in new uniforms on well-watered pitches. Everyone plays, even if their favorite sport is rugby – very popular among white South Africans – or cricket. In this way, South Africans love their football like most other Africans.

Where it gets a little rough, though is in its connection to gang violence, which other African societies don’t share. Here, South Africans seemed to have learned a lot from their European friends, especially the English, to the north. Bill Buford’s book *Among the Thugs* will tell you all about them.

In the South African version, enterprising supporters of some team organize gangs to beat up supporters of rival teams in order to increase the prestige – and thus local political leverage – of the gang’s backers. Most stop there. Some, though, direct these gangs to bigger political ends like punishing supporters of the wrong politician at election day or threatening violence over undesirable policies.

The most famous exponent of this is Winnie Mandela, former wife of the sainted South African president. Her group of thugs was called Mandela United, after the iconic English Premiership team Manchester United. She used them to intimidate everyone from the local butcher to her business rivals to – it is rumored – her husband’s political opponents in the ruling African National Congress. Here we call this organized crime. That’s what they call it in South Africa, too, and it is threatening to disrupt the World Cup.

Labor unions there are already holding up construction of key facilities in a dispute over pay and working conditions, and they seem to have a point. Beneath these protests is a seedier layer of vague threats of violence – using football gangs and other muscle – to steer the awarding of contracts for construction and hotel concessions to supporters of President Jacob Zuma or the chief ministers of states where the facilities are built. At stake is around thirty billion Rand (the South African currency) or over four billion US dollars. What wouldn’t you do to get a big share of this?

Fans are mostly oblivious, though. As long as the matches are played and televised well, the rest of the world will turn a blind eye to the nasty business of the biggest sport in the world.