

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

When was the first World Cup?

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Jane 00:20

This is But Why, a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids all over the world, just like you, and we find answers. As I'm recording this episode in mid-June of 2026, there's something really big happening here in the United States and our neighbors, Canada and Mexico. And that is the FIFA World Cup. The Men's World Cup happens every four years, and there's a Women's World Cup that also happens at four year intervals, where athletes representing different countries compete against each other in a tournament of soccer... or should we be calling it football? This year, the men's tournament is happening across 16 North American cities, bringing athletes and fans from all over the world, like this young soccer fan and But Why listener who came to the US all the way from Scotland to catch a game.

Alex 01:14

Hi everyone, my name is Alex, I'm seven years old and I live in Glasgow, Scotland. I'm visiting Boston right now to support Scotland at their first World Cup games in 28 years. Our supporters are called the Tartan Army, and we've made lots of friends in Boston so far. Because of this, Glasgow and Boston are now twin cities.

Jane 01:44

It's true. The mayor of the city of Boston, Massachusetts, and the Lord Provost of Glasgow, Scotland, have started the process to become what are also often called sister cities. The idea behind twin cities or sister cities is to just help foster global peace and cultural exchanges. Sounds pretty awesome. Now, some of you might really like watching or playing soccer, but not everyone is super into the sport or up on all of its lingo. So, this World Cup season, we really wanted to find someone who knows the sport inside and out, so we can learn all about soccer and the World Cup, and we found that someone, her name is Meg Linehan, and she's a sports reporter for a news outlet called The Athletic, which is part of the New York Times. In fact, she's the women's sports lead.

Meg Linehan 02:31

So I basically write about women's sports for a living. So I've covered some World Cups for the women, I've been to the Olympics, but basically I watch soccer, and then I write things about it.

Jane 02:44

I mean, that sounds almost like a fake job. I get to watch soccer, and then, oh, I get to write a little bit. It sounds pretty awesome.

Meg Linehan 02:50

It is. I will say, for everyone saying it's a dream job, the dream part is important, but the job part is important. There's a lot of late nights, a lot of hecticness, that it is a job still.

Jane 03:03

Right. Like, if you go to watch a soccer game, after the game is over, you're either excited or sad, and then maybe you get on the train, or you get in a car, or you walk home. You, that's kind of when your job starts or continues after the game ends.

Meg Linehan 03:20

Definitely, let's say a game ends at 8 o'clock at night. Sometimes I'm still working at 3 o'clock in the morning.

Jane 03:28

I mean, for those of us who wish that somebody would not give us a bedtime, that might sound appealing, too.

Meg Linehan 03:33

That's fair. That's fair. I mean, bedtimes, I will say in sports, if you want to work in sports, bedtimes are very optional here.

Jane 03:40

Meg and I met up at the soccer stadium at the University of Vermont, so we could watch a little soccer while we talked. Members of the semi-professional Vermont Green FC were in the middle of practice that morning, running drills, and at least appearing to have a great time as they worked on improving their dribbling, kicking, and goalkeeping skills in preparation for their next game, it was pretty cool to sit down right at field level and watch them play, especially since their games are usually sold out and it's hard to get a ticket. Meg and I figured we ought to start with some questions about the World Cup, since so many of you are excited about the games going on right now all across North America.

Ace 04:19

My name is Ace, I'm nine years old, and I'm from Denver, Colorado. And my question is, when was the first World Cup?

Meg Linehan 04:28

So, the first Men's World Cup was played in 1930 in Uruguay, in South America, and what was really interesting about that is there's actually no qualification, right? Like, right now teams have to fight to be in the World Cup. Only 13 teams showed up, only four made it over from Europe, but they actually had to take boats from Europe to get to Uruguay for this tournament. And Uruguay won the first one. They beat Argentina. The US did go to this World Cup, and they finished third. So historically, our best ever result was at the first World Cup in 1930. Now the first Women's World Cup was 1991 but it wasn't actually called that. It eventually became the Women's World Cup by 1995.

Jane 05:10

And the Men's World Cup and the Women's World Cup are not played at the same time.

Meg Linehan 05:14

Correct. So we're in a Men's World Cup right now in the summer of 2026. The next Women's World Cup is going to be in Brazil in 2027 but the US is planning on hosting the Women's World Cup in 2031 along with Mexico, Jamaica, and Costa Rica.

Jane 05:30

Oh, so not quite the same setup as right now, where we have Mexico, Canada, and the United States hosting the current World Cup,

Meg Linehan 05:36

And that's because Canada actually already hosted the Women's World Cup in 2015.

Jane 05:41

Cool, and right now, when we think about the World Cup, can you describe just how big and all-encompassing it is? This is a really huge deal across the world.

Meg Linehan 05:51

Right. And this is actually the first time that the World Cup has been at 48 teams, so it's gotten even bigger, right? So that first World Cup in 1930, only 13 teams, before this, it used to be, you know, 32 but 24 you know, they build it out, now we're at 48 teams, so it's, you know, 16 host cities, it's 1000s and 1000s of people, and these stadiums, too, are giant, so you think about all of the National Football League stadiums that they're using, I mean, 80,000 people at a game, right? So it's just, it is one of the biggest sporting events in the world. It's right up there with the Olympics, for sure.

Jane 06:27

And I don't know if those of you who are listening are watching the World Cup, but it's not just like get the stadiums ready in terms of painting the lines so that it's for soccer and getting people in the stadiums and getting the teams ready. There are even people who have been working for years on the grass to make sure the grass is perfect and that it seems the same in every stadium. It's a huge endeavor that again, if you think you want to go into professional sports, there are a lot of different ways, you could even be a grass scientist and be involved in professional soccer.

Meg Linehan 07:00

There's all of these positions that I think people don't really understand the impact the very game itself. It's not just writers up in the press box or camera people on the sidelines, it is, you know, medical staff, it's the people who grow the grass, it's all of these things for sure.

Orla 07:18

My name's Orla, and I'm five years old, and I live in England, York. And my question is, How's the World Cup trophy made?

Meg Linehan 07:33

So, there's actually only one World Cup trophy. They don't make a trophy every winner of the World Cup, there's one. It lives in Switzerland, in between the tournaments. It was actually sculpted by an Italian in the 1970s. It is pure gold. It's worth over \$700,000 and the real fun trivia about the World Cup trophy is there used to be one before, for the 1930s until like 1970s. It looked totally different. It was stolen in Brazil in the 1980s. It's never been found, so it's that's like one of the big soccer mysteries of the modern age.

Jane 08:13

That's wild. And is there a different trophy for the Women's World Cup and the Men's World Cup?

Meg Linehan 08:18

There are two different trophies. So, but again, FIFA, who is the organizing body behind both World Cups, keeps these trophies, so like they will take them every once in a while out on tour, but if you're a player, the only time you really ever get to hold it is when you're winning it at that tournament. It's a very, you know, you think about the Stanley Cup, right, where the hockley players get a day with the trophy, and they'll put their baby in it, or they'll put cereal in it. That's not happening with World Cup trophies. Let me tell you.

Jane 08:49

That's kind of sad. I would imagine if I was maybe the team captain, that I could keep it in my room and look at it when I woke up for a few days, and then pass it on to somebody else. But not so much.

Meg Linehan 08:57

Not so much.

Jane 08:58

Let's talk a little bit about the sport of soccer, and some questions we've gotten, and one of the ones that we've gotten again and again and again in the 10 plus years we've been making this show is why is this sport called soccer in the United States and Canada, and sometimes in other places, and it's called football everywhere else.

MacKenzie 09:19

My name is Mackenzie, I'm 10 years old, and I live in Massachusetts. And my question is, why is soccer called football in other countries?

Ronin 09:28

Hi, my name is Ronin. I live in Massachusetts. I'm five years old. Why do in America people call soccer soccer, and in other countries they call it football.

Lucy 09:43

My name is Lucy. I'm seven years old. I live in Los Angeles, California. And my question is, why do we call soccer not football? Because we play it with our feet.

Meg Linehan 09:54

Okay, so soccer is actually a British term, and I don't know if the Brits love to admit this. The thing is, it's their word, and part of it stems from the fact that there were actually two games that were happening in England at the start of soccer, and it was rugby football, and soccer was distinguished as association football. So, we don't actually know how soccer formed as a word. We know it was some kids in Oxford in the 1800s who took maybe the "soc" part out of association, even though it doesn't sound like that, and turned it into soccer, because...

Jane 10:28

And Oxford is a famous British university.

Meg Linehan 10:30

Yes, so because they also called rugby sometimes rigger, right? So it was this sort of affectation of a word, and so that you had rigger and soccer to distinguish the two things, but what happened was this was a word that came over. I mean, soccer's always been popular in the United States in some form since the 1900s even before, because we had a whole bunch of immigrants coming in who had played it, and so soccer became the dominant word here, and then all of a sudden in the modern era the Brits decided they didn't like it anymore,

Jane 11:02

Right. So we can blame the Brits for the word soccer, but now the Brits want to call it football, which is fine, and the rest of the world has, by and large, adopted football, which is kind of an easier word to translate into different languages as well.

Meg Linehan 11:15

Totally.

Jane 11:16

But then there is a game in the United States that we do call football; other parts of the world would call it American football. Francis in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina, wonders why we might call something like that football if most of the time the players aren't kicking the ball at all. Why not call it something more accurate, like handball, Francis wonders. By the way, handball is already the name of another sport, but here's how Meg suggests we think about it.

Meg Linehan 11:45

Don't think about necessarily playing it with your feet, but it was actually to distinguish between something like polo, which is played on horses, versus rugby or soccer, which is played on foot, standing up on the ground, so it's played on foot rather than with your feet, so football technically you play standing up on the ground, that's all there is to it.

Peyton 12:06

Well, my name is Peyton. I'm seven years old, and I live in Minnesota. Who invented soccer?

Michael 12:13

I'm Michael from Brooklyn, New York. I'm six and a half. My question is, how did soccer get created?

Meg Linehan 12:23

Humans have been kicking a ball, basically, as long as we have had feet, and some sort of ball. I think in China, really early days, they would fill something with feathers and kick that around, so there's always been some form of foot, ball, goal, right? It was not ever formalized as a sport until the 1860s, 1870s in England, where again there was this split between rugby football and association football. So that's really where modern soccer, as we know it, comes from, and that's also where rules like, hey, you can't use your hands comes in because rugby football, obviously they're using their hands all the time, but this was to distinguish these two sports as two distinct branches of the same origin.

Jane 13:11

Well, speaking of using your hands, it's not entirely true that you can't use your hands in soccer. There's one position on the field of play that can use their hands. You can also, any player can use their hands to throw in the ball when it's been out of bounds, but a goalie can use their hands.

Elliot 13:27

My name is Elliot. I'm five years old, and I'm from Flagstaff. And why do goalies only use hands while you're playing soccer?

Jane 13:37

Why are goalies the only people who are allowed to use their hands?

Meg Linehan 13:40

That's actually been in the rules since 1870 By 1871 they had really firmed that up. But goalkeepers get to use their hands, basically, honestly, to keep things kind of even, right? Soccer has never been known as a high scoring sport, but if you didn't have goalkeepers, we would probably be seeing score lines more like what we think about American football, right, of 21 to 17, or whatever it is. So, goalkeepers, because they're able to use their hands and catch the ball out of the air, whatever it is, it

helps keep the score a little more even, and especially you think about penalty kick, right, like the highest thing that's an attempt to make it where it's not a guaranteed thing, you know.

Jane 14:22

A penalty kick is given when there's been a foul against the team trying to score inside the penalty area, and one player gets to take a shot at scoring with nobody but the opposing team's goalkeeper defending the goal. Another time you might see penalty kicks is if the two teams are tied at the very end of the match, and then they have overtime and they're still tied. Sometimes the game will end in a penalty shootout to determine the winning team.

Meg Linehan 14:47

So it is very interesting, because also the rules have changed for goalkeepers a lot since that 1870 decision of you can't use your hands. The only one that can is a goalkeeper. It used to be like you could only touch it for two seconds at a time and now, as of 2025 the rule is goalkeepers can handle the ball for up to eight seconds, but you can, you can get penalized if you're holding onto the ball for longer than that.

Jane 15:08

Have you ever seen that happen?

Meg Linehan 15:09

Oh, yes, and that's been that, that can cause drama in a games, you'll get, you know, supporters of one team chanting 1, 2, 3, trying to force the goalkeeper to play faster, so it's a fun, it's a fun subplot, sometimes.

Jane 15:24

you and I are actually sitting at a soccer or football stadium, and we're right now watching some goalkeepers practice. Can you describe a little bit what we're seeing and where we are? Because this is pretty fun to be able to do an interview while we're watching soccer.

Meg Linehan 15:38

Totally, so we're at a Vermont Green training here in Burlington, and the goalkeepers are basically trying to stop shots from within the box, so like maybe 10 yards away from goal, and then also someone is booting the ball in, like it's a cross, and someone might be heading it, so it's really just to be able to figure out how to stop shots from up close and then from really far away, because I mean we've seen it in the women's game, there's a really famous goal for the US Women's National Team scored by Carly Lloyd in a World Cup final from almost at midfield, just sending it so high over the goalkeeper, it's one of the best World Cup goals ever scored.

Jane 16:18

One of the questions I think that sometimes kids, especially as they get started playing, is why is the goal so big? It's too big for one goalkeeper to be able to cover, and sometimes the ball can go just a little bit over your hands, you're even too short for the goal, and you gotta dive. It's such a big goal.

Meg Linehan 16:35

Yeah, I actually played goalkeeper as a kid a lot, and I am not a tall human being, so I would frequently have the ball go in over my head, I think, especially as you get older and you get taller, it's a little bit better, but that's part of the joy of the game, is can you, can you put the ball in a spot on the goal where the goalkeeper just physically cannot reach, right? That is one of the ultimate signs of pure talent in this

game, if it's called either upper 90 or top bins, when you can put it right in the corner of the goal, so no matter how high or how low they dive, they won't be able to get there.

Jane 17:11

One of the most important, if not the most important piece of equipment in a soccer game is the ball.

Oliver 17:17

Hi, my name is Oliver, I'm from Canberra, in Australia, but how do soccer balls get made?

Jane 17:24

How is a soccer ball made?

Meg Linehan 17:26

Yeah, obviously this process has changed a lot since, you know, the 1870s when this game was really being invented. But basically, you can think of it like a balloon, there's a bag inside that's filled with air, and then they surround that with essentially like some thread to keep it in place, they put some padding in, and then there are these panels that go around the edge of the ball, and those can be stitched together, or now you can use heat to basically seal them together. But the World Cup ball, for instance, for the men is really interesting, because when you look at any soccer ball, probably at school, or where you know your youth team, there's all of these panels on it. The World Cup ball only has four panels, and they've done that to try to reduce the number of seams, so it will hit your foot differently, and it will fly through the air more accurately. So they're trying to make it the best possible ball. It also has a sensor inside that can record every time it's touched, its position on the field, how fast it's spinning, even, and they get all of that data in real time, so we, we know everything. It's so, it's so wild to me, as someone who grew up watching this game, and you just be like, oh, now we have all of this information. It's, it's so cool.

Libby 18:34

My name is Libby. I live in St. Albans, Vermont. I'm six years old, and my question is, Why are soccer balls black and white?

Jane 18:41

Soccer balls aren't actually always black and white. The ball used in this year's World Cup, for example, is pretty colorful, with white and red and green and blue patterns. But it's true that when I think of a classic soccer ball, I picture a black and white one, and this actually goes back to a time before most people had access to color television. Soccer balls used to be just kind of all white, but at the 1970 Mexico World Cup, the black and white ball was introduced, and the contrast between the black pentagons and the white hexagons made it easy for fans watching the games back home on black and white TV to follow that little ball around on screen. After the break, we ask Meg to teach us the basic rules of soccer. What positions are there? What's an offside call mean? Stay with us.

Jane 19:34

This is But Why. I'm Jane Lindholm, and today we're talking with soccer reporter Meg Linehan, and listening to the sounds of the women's squad for the Vermont Green FC as they practice. We're talking today all about soccer, and many of you who are listening know all the rules already, but a lot of us don't. So, let's make sure we all know the basics. A soccer match consists of two 45 minute halves with a break in the middle. And the point of the game is to score more goals than the other team by the time the final whistle blows.

Meg Linehan 20:05

So at, you know, the normal adult level, there are 11 players on the field, you've got your goalkeeper, and then what's fun, too, is any coach can actually decide how the 10 field players line up, so you might have four defenders, four midfielders, two forwards whose primary purpose is to score, or you could have, you know, there are all these different formations, that are called. Generally, the whole point is to score a goal, but you have a whole opposing team of 11 players who are trying to stop you from doing that. You can pass the ball, you can shoot the ball, you can dribble the ball, all of these sorts of things, try to advance the ball forward.

Jane 20:42

But there's one rule that confuses even some experienced soccer fans, and it's called the offside rule. At its most basic, the offside rule is about what happens when one team is trying to score, so the team on offense is advancing towards the other team's goal. Now, you can't have someone on your team, if you're on offense, hanging out near the goal without the ball, just waiting for someone to pass the ball to them with no defenders other than the goalie there to play defense. So, the team on offense can't have anyone get the ball if they're ahead of all the defenders. Again, the goalie is usually still in the goal, so technically you need two defenders, a regular player and a goalie, ahead of you before you can play the ball and try to score. Does that make sense?

Meg Linehan 21:28

The general premise is they don't love it when you're trying to score a goal and you're, you have this unfair advantage by being behind the final defender and in front of the goalkeeper, and suddenly magically you get the ball, and there's no one there to stop you.

Jane 21:43

But if you have the ball and you're in soccer or football, you call it dribbling, but it's not like basketball dribbling, you're doing it with your feet, and if you're dribbling all the way up the field, can you have a break away and score on your own as long as you're in control of the ball?

Meg Linehan 21:58

Definitely, and that's one of the best kinds of goals, there is, is when you get to run the whole field, you've got people trailing after you, screaming, and it's you and the goalkeeper, and you're able to put it in that, you know, low right corner, that's come on, that's fun.

Jane 22:11

But you can't kind of be sneaky and have everybody else on the other side of the field or the pitch, and you're hanging back, and you're like, yeah, just throw the ball to me, and then you score with nobody there to try to defend, that's kind of the idea of preventing people from basically kind of hanging back and being sneaky a little bit?

Meg Linehan 22:28

Yeah, we call them poachers, right? You know, that's like you're poaching a goal because you're not actually doing a lot of the work that you actually need to do to score a goal, but it's tough too, right? It used to just be you could try to explain the offside rule of advancing player who wants to score a goal has gotten past the final defender of the other team, and they can't score because of that, right? It's an unfair advantage, but now if you actually go and read that offside rule in the laws of the game, it's like two pages long. There's a lot of very nuanced parts of it, because you could maybe now be standing between the last defender and the goalkeeper, but if you're not involved in the goal scoring play, it actually doesn't matter. So, it's gotten a lot more complicated. So, if you're watching the World Cup at home, you might be a little bit confused about why something is offside or why it isn't. There's there's a lot of rules in this game for what you think would be a very simple game of ball, foot, goal!

Jane 23:24

Alright. So, for kids who are already die-hard fans of the Men's World Cup, what are you most excited about? What should we all be looking for in these games?

Meg Linehan 23:34

Yeah, I just think it's exciting to see the world's best here, but I also just think, you know, what we've seen in the tournament, so far, the games have been so fun and so unexpected, right? And I think that's part of the joy of the tournament is that for as much as people try to predict things, this game really does resist trying to know what's going to happen, right. Anyone can win, for the most part on any day, and so especially as you get deeper into the tournament, and you get to the best teams in the world, it's really, think back to the 2022 World Cup, that final between Argentina and France, you had no idea who was going to win that until the very final moment of the match when it went to penalty kick, so it's just it's a fun, it's a fun sport to watch, especially in a tournament setting, when everything is on the line.

Jane 24:24

If you really don't know the sport at all, or you're just getting started learning, would you say the same thing, or are there other things that we could be looking for that would make the game exciting and cool as we're learning?

Meg Linehan 24:34

I also just think, you know, there's a lot of fun. If you haven't been to a soccer game in person, you might not understand the culture in the stands, right, for the people who are watching the game. I mean, Scotland has gotten so much attention for being one of the best groups of fans. They sing through the whole game, there are flags, you know, there's all of these things that the fans try to do to help their team win. So, even if you might not understand what's happening on the field, I think you can look to the fans who are watching this game for the energy, for inspiration, for, oh, they seem to be having a really fun time. How do I have that fun time at a soccer game?

Jane 25:10

And you don't have to be at a big World Cup game to experience that fun energy and fan spirit. Maybe there's a local team near where you live.

Meg Linehan 25:19

I think Vermont Green really shows that some of that energy, it's really easy to have it at home too.

Jane 25:26

Yeah, because you're a big fan of this team.

Meg Linehan 25:28

I am a big fan of this team. I will wave a flag for Vermont Green at any game I go to.

Jane 25:34

What are some of your favorite chants or cheers that the real die-hard fans are chanting that you can actually say to a kid audience?

Meg Linehan 25:42

Yeah, I will say there is some chants that you know, I think you got to get some parent, parental permission sometimes to come into a supporters group at any game. But here in Vermont, we do one

that's a little silly, where we try to get the rest of the crowd engaged, so we'll tell them to stand up for the boys or girls in green, then we tell them to take hats off, and then the final one is we tell them to take their shoes off and wave their shoes in the air, so shoes off for the boys in green, and we do that for a few minutes, so it's trying to get everybody excited about the game.

Jane 26:06

And do you actually take your shoes off?

Meg Linehan 26:11

I do take my shoes off every single time. I think it's unless it's raining, but even then you take your shoe off, you just gotta commit to the bit.

Jane 26:17

One last thing before we go, Meg wants to remind you that engaging with the sport of soccer does not have to end when the Men's World Cup ends in July.

Meg Linehan 26:25

You know, if you're watching this World Cup, you've got a chance to do it again in 2027 The US women's national team, especially for the audience here in America, the US women's national team is one of the best national teams in the world. They've won the World Cup four times. You know, there are all of these historical games on YouTube, so there's a lot of ways to interact with a sport that is beyond watching a World Cup, whether it's, you know, finding your local team at home, whether it's playing at the youth level, whether it is just going online and finding your favorite player, like Messi or someone like Trinity Rodman, there's a whole bunch of ways to become a fan.

Jane 27:04

Thanks to Meg Linehan, women's sports lead at The Athletic, and a proud Vermont Green supporter, for helping us learn about soccer, just in time to enjoy the remainder of this World Cup season. And thanks to the Vermont Green for letting us come hang out at a practice. That's it for today. As always, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record you asking it on a smartphone using an app like Voice Memos. Then have them email the file to questions@ButWhyKids.org. We will take questions on any subject, whatever you're curious about, but if you can have your adult record you in a quiet area, like not the car, or not when there are a lot of sounds going on in the background, unless they're related to your question, that's super helpful to us. But Why is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette, and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public, and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo, and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. If you like our show, please have your adults help you give us a thumbs up or a review on whatever podcast platform you like to use. It helps other kids and families find us. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!