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Culture Shock!

Welcome to the Fiorentina versus Roma soccer game.

A loud crack, followed by an explosion caught my attention. I looked over my right shoulder and saw a cloud of smoke billowing out from a bright red and yellow flame a mere 15 feet away. A man, in broken English, yelled "Roma like terrorist! Bin Laden is coming, run!" While pushing through the crowd, moving away from the billowing smoke and "so called terrorists", I knew that these events had never occurred at a sporting event I attended in the past, and I wasn't sure if they were typical or atypical of an Italian sporting event.

My decision to study abroad was based on a desire to open my mind to new experiences. The richness of the Italian Renaissance history and culture made Florence, Italy my destination. I began to make a list of the sights I wanted to see, events I wanted to experience and places I wanted to visit. David, the Sistine Chapel, the Alps, Venice, the Mediterranean Sea and *Italian Soccer* all made the list.

A large part of my life has revolved around competitive athletics. I have participated in a variety of sports; softball, basketball, golf, and volleyball, for different teams, clubs, and schools. I have been a spectator, watching everything from football to soccer. I have spent hours watching life through the lens of sports, athletic competition, spectators, fans and athletes. I was looking forward to seeing and experiencing my first Italian soccer game, comparing and contrasting it to my own personal experiences. Soccer had been referred to as Italy's baseball the counterpart to the All-American Baseball. I expected to feel relatively at home as a spectator of the game.

Warnings about the intensity and seriousness of the competition did not register as unusual or markedly different from my own school spirit and feelings about *The Badgers*. I figured an Italian soccer game couldn't be more exciting than Marquette University's trip to

the final four in 2003, when they beat three of the top five teams in the nation, or the University of Wisconsin's victory over Ohio State in football last year, when thousands of drunken, and riled up fans pushed their way over me and onto the field, or the high school basketball sectionals in 1995, when a gun fight broke out and we were all put on lock down, in the side gym for safety. From fanfare or how to act during the game, to the intensity within the stadium, I felt confident about what to expect and how to handle the situations encountered at an Italian sporting event.

The images and expectations I had constructed before attending the Fiorentina soccer game were based on the American cultural expectations of American athletics. From the process of procuring tickets to the pre game rituals, fanfare, security, and the stadium atmosphere itself, my eyes were opened to a new and different way of doing things. I had my knowledge of these American sporting events to construct what I thought the Italian sporting event would include. I never fathomed how far the actual game of soccer would fall outside of my little construct.

Beginning with the ticket procurement process, the Italians make it easy to attend games. They not only use Internet sites for schedules, scores and tickets but they sell tickets at local tobacco shops in each town. Our small Community of Sesto Fiorentino, has three shops that sell tickets to Italian soccer games. The price for tickets are steep, however, women are able to purchase tickets at a cheaper rate than men. Is this because women are more desirable fans to have in the stands and the lower price is an incentive for their attendance or is this a sign of sexism in Italian culture? Either way women's tickets cost less than men's tickets for the same event, saving me five Euros.

Before I headed out the door to walk the two blocks to buy my discounted ticket, I thought it would be good to ask, my house fellow, Jason where to sit. He had been living in Italy for over 5 months now and had attended several soccer games himself. He told me to

purchase seats up high, but to steer clear of *La Curva*. Jason said this section was caged in, and there were often fights and an occasional death or two. I thought he was kidding. I pictured a section similar to the student section at a University of Wisconsin Badger sporting event, loud, crowded and a bit annoying. After my two-block hike to the tabbcaio I found out that the cheapest seats were in *La Curva*. Being on a budget, I paid 16 Euro and took the chance of being trampled or killed.

The night of the game I was excited. Seven of us decided to skip dinner and experience Italian tailgating. The weather was rainy and cold, so I piled on the layers, heck I'm from Wisconsin and have sat at Lambeau field in December, watching the Green Bay Packers play when the wind chill was 15 below zero. The good old number 28-bus came to the usual jerky-stop and we all piled off as fast as we could. We used the view of the stadium lights, overhead, to find our way through the narrow streets. When we arrived at the stadium, it looked as I had imagined, large with bright lights and barricades encompassing the oval.

There were many people dressed in the Fiorentina colors, red and purple, all around us. We circled the stadium to take in the sights, smells and scenery. We stopped at several different merchandise stands to find the cheapest yet warmest scarves to add to the layers we already wore. I purchased a purple and white striped scarf with the Fiorentina crest on the bottom and immediately felt like I was rooting for my own team. Florence is my temporary home, so this was my team. A few of the girls were looking at sweatshirts with Italian words printed on the back. Several people tried to explain the meanings of the words but no one could translate the gist of them. The girls bought the sweatshirts anyway, having no idea what they meant.

The stadium supplied separate food vendors on every corner, selling outrageously priced hamburger and hotdogs. Being a vegetarian, I passed on the meat and looked for

anything else: the deli sandwiches they sold with cheese and tomato cost over 10 euro so I opted for popcorn, which I miss terribly at the villa because we have no microwave!

When we were warm and full we headed to the entrance, where we were stopped by 50 police officers dressed in riot gear. They were escorting several chanting younger people into the stadium. A man next to us explained these were Roma fans and they were being escorted to their seats by the police so as to not start fights. Hearing this got us extremely anxious and excited, we just wanted get inside the stadium and take out seats. Luckily, we were able to walk right through security with food, umbrellas and without having our purses checked. This was something very new and unusual to me for previous experiences at Wisconsin have kept me waiting in line for lengths of time to have a thorough search before entering the stadium.

When we got past security there were loud chants, really loud chants, I mean the chants you hear and then want to turn around and run in the opposite direction, coming from above us. We took a chance that this was just excitement, and followed the crowd out from the ground floor and onto the bleachers immersing ourselves in the noise. The field was bright green with white lights all around. In the mist of these uneasy chants, I felt oddly like I was home, seeing the field and players running around. The concept of me being at a sporting event brought back many fond memories from Wisconsin and my upbringing as a spectator/athlete. The loud noises and bright lights were ellipse by my short recollection of American athletics.

My daydream was quickly interrupted but the fans behind me. It turned to look at the stands and I saw red and purple scarves, flags, and banners everywhere. The fans were singing and chanting several songs and the air was filled with energy. There were also flashes of yellow and red flames jumping across the stands. These lights were flaming torches! We looked at the bleachers and saw what appeared to be funny looking toilet-seats--

white, plastic and curved like oval cups--they were what we were to sit in or on for the game. Good thing the fans stood the whole game because I would have felt weird sitting on a toilet for three hours. My glance then spanned the crowd and fell upon a large metal cage. This cage was filled with people dressed head to toe in maroon and yellow. The people had signs, flags, and torches of their own, chanting Roma! Roma! Roma! I stood back and gasped at the 1500 or so Rome fans that looked like animals all locked up in that metal cage. Jason was right, there was this enlarged and enclosed cage, but at least we were not the ones locked up. Surprisingly there were several empty seats next to the cage, which were extremely close to the field, so we quickly snatched them up. We did not even question why this whole section was empty.

About 30 minutes before the game, the pre game show began. There were loud explosions everywhere, there were familiar sounding chants and songs, vaffanculo being one most Madisonians should know and love. There were fireworks across the length of the stadium, and torches and smoke bombs in each section. Every spectator seemed to have firecrackers and foghorns. My ears were ringing within 10 minutes of standing in the bleachers. The noise level was louder than any I have experienced at a college event. This was an atmosphere, to which the number one rated college spectator campus, Wisconsin, the one I'm accustomed to, couldn't begin to compare.

Warm ups began and each team was announced. Roma ran out and we booed and swore. There were also some odd hand and finger gestures being made. I still cannot figure out if they are sexual, profane or political, but I enjoyed the passion that was put behind the motions. My team, Fiorentina, came out and the chants reached their peak. I thought the atmosphere could not become more intense, and then the loud explosions started. Cracks, whistles and what sounded like, huge bursts of energy all grew stronger and stronger. The flying fire soon followed. Yellow, white and red flames filled the area over head. The

torches came closer and closer until there was an incredibly loud crack, followed by an even louder explosion that roared in my ear. I turned to look over my right shoulder and saw a large cloud of smoke billowing out from a bright red and yellow flame 10 feet away from me. The next thing I heard was a man's voice, in broken English, yelling, "Roma like terrorist! Bin Laden is coming, run!" As soon as that comment registered in my mind I pushed through the crowd of people, away from the billowing smoke and "so called terrorists". For a brief time I was not sure that this was not a terrorist attack. Being in a foreign country in the midst of the 9-11 healing, I did not take this phrase lightly. I was definitely startled. At least my friends were there and we all reaffirmed to each other that things were going to be all right and it was just a soccer game, so we quickly relocated our seats.

When we were resettled several feet over, away from the fire, *a bit* nervous and shaken up, we thought the worst was over or at least subdued. Nevertheless, the flames kept coming. A flag 15 rows in front of us caught fire. At one point, it looked as if people were playing catch with these bright balls of fire. While this all was taking place the police simply stood and watched. One cop just stepped away from the flaming flag and kind of laughed. I was amazed such danger was allowed at a nation's athletic event. What good was the riot gear if they were not using it? The cops in the front between the cage and Fiorentina fans smoked cigarettes as if this was normal and nothing out of the ordinary was occurring. This absolutely blew my mind, or opened it up to consider a different construct for athletic events etiquette.

After what seemed like forever, the game finally began but I could not keep my eyes on the field. I kept watching overhead for flying fire or jumping out of my shoes from the loud explosions. The guys in front of me served as a buffer, keeping me from falling forward when I jumped, fell or became startled by the noises. These guys were so high they probably

didn't realize the good deed they were doing. Weed was passed around throughout the stands, and the fans did nothing to hide or sneak the blunts. It seemed as though everyone had it and or shared it. I was handed a blunt but passed it right back. This was not what I expected a soccer game to be like. This did not associate with any personal experience that I had, this was a free for all.

I guess we scored first because everyone around me went crazy. I had no idea we scored because I could not keep my eyes on the field. There was too much danger and excitement in the stands to distract me from watching a nationally ranked team. After they resumed play, the Fiorentina fans lunged at the cage, mimicking, taunting and teasing Roma. Roma scored soon after and retaliated by throwing more flares. A flare landed on the field, but the officials let it burn and seemed to ignore it. I looked behind me to see the scoreboard and double check that the score was tied, but there was nothing on the scoreboard, it was blank. I don't understand why it was there if it isn't used. I would have liked to see who scored and how they scored, something similar to a replay feature used so often in American sports.

Even without knowing the details of the actual game, the atmosphere was amazing energy, excitement, elation and pandemonium at levels higher than I have ever encountered. Due to the weather we left early, something I rarely do, however I was not as interested in the game considering I was not watching much of the field. Before exiting the stadium, we wanted to take a group photo to remember the night. We stood in front of the Fiorentina fans facing the field; we inadvertently became prime targets for firecrackers. Mid photo we were hit with a cracker and we all screamed. The picture is of our wide-open mouths and feet off the ground, a perfect ending to truly capture the atmosphere of the game.

After the exciting and crazy night, when we were nestled safely and quietly in the villa, we asked the Italian professors what the shirts that the girls bought really meant. One

shirt said, “*thank god we aren’t hunchbacks or fans of Milan, the rival*” and the other read something to the effect of being *a Fiorentina super fan*. The girls were thankful these translations ended up being appropriate as opposed to something vulgar or degrading. I also took some time to reflect on the ticket prices and the lack of security measures that were taken. I came to the realization that Italian soccer matches are chaotic, but in an organized fashion. Unlike America, fans will go wild but they know their limits. Yes, these limits were a bit further reaching than what I was and am used to but they were followed. Security did not step in at any time because they knew nothing worse was going to happen. They saw the game as an organized and *safe* gathering that was a normal occurrence during Italian athletic competitions. Reflecting back on the soccer match I now understand that spectators know how far they can go with their antics and that security trusts these spectators.

Taking this concept of organized chaos into consideration, I now have a better understanding as to why females have a greater incentive, price wise, to come to games. Women are looked at as calming or neutral actors in this chaos. While at the game I did not see one woman throw a flaming torch or blow a foghorn. Women are encouraged to come to make sure the events in the stands remain at their limits. The price differentiation is not a form of sexism but rather a compliment to females, stating they are needed and wanted to help control the males. They are the voice of reason in Italian athletics

After exiting the stadium, on my way back to the train station, I was stopped by five different people, because they saw my scarf, a nonverbal sign of fan support, and asked how the game was. The energy, excitement and passion for the game spread outside of the large, oval stadium. This one event was more intense and unreal than any other athletic event I have previously attended. It was nothing like I imagined or constructed in my head. Nothing I have heard at sporting events or concerts compares to what I encountered attending my first Italian soccer game.

