

'Football is Faster than Words'

Friday 27 June 2008, by [Christoph Biermann](#), [Lothar Gorris](#)

In the run-up to the Euro 2008 football tournament, Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk discusses his life as a soccer fan, the expression of Turkish nationalism in the sport and how the sport has made Turkey part of Europe over the past 50 years.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Pamuk, will you be watching the Euro 2008 matches?

Pamuk: Of course. And I will have trouble coping if the Turkish team loses. It would be too demoralizing. When Fenerbahçe Istanbul played against FC Chelsea in the quarterfinal of the Champions League, I turned off the TV at the second halftime because they were behind. It was sad to watch as our players were forced to give up the ball, as if they were children.

SPIEGEL: Are you a fan?

Pamuk: I was in my childhood. What took place in our house would certainly be described as fanaticism today. One uncle supported Galatasaray Istanbul and another was a fan of Besiktas, while my father and our side of the family rooted for Fenerbahçe.

SPIEGEL: Did your father take you to the stadium?

Pamuk: Yes, quite often, in fact. But the big moments that I remember are not the goals. The image that I remember most of all is of the Fenerbahçe players storming into the stadium before kickoff. They were called the canaries because of their yellow jerseys. It was as if they, like canaries, were fluttering into the stadium out of a hole. I loved it. It was poetry.

SPIEGEL: Why Fenerbahçe?

Pamuk: It's like religion. There is no "why." I can still recite the entire lineup of the 1959 Fenerbahçe team like a poem. Of course, it has something to do with identifying with my father. We always sat in the main stands next to the VIPs, who looked like capitalists from a Bertolt Brecht play. Throughout the match they smoked cigars, a sign of great wealth at the time, and because a breeze from the Bosphorus was constantly blowing into the stadium, the smoke made my eyes tear up. During the match, they would insult the players the way a business owner insults his dim-witted workers. I thought it was terrible.

SPIEGEL: Why? That's what happens in a football stadium.

Pamuk: They weren't insulting them the way a disappointed fan does because they were no hero worshippers, as I was. Sometimes they even talked about business during the match, and I had the feeling that it offended my heroes.

SPIEGEL: What did your hero worship look like?

Pamuk: I collected bubblegum trading cards that I am now trying to sell on eBay. Every Monday, I would cut articles about Fenerbahçe out of the paper. In fact, my entire childhood consisted of looking at photographs in which the viewer sees the ball behind the line, looking through the goal net, and the poor goalkeeper in front of the net.

SPIEGEL: Did you play football yourself?

Pamuk: Never in a club, but I did play on the streets of Istanbul, before and after school.

SPIEGEL: Were you any good?

Pamuk: I don't want to be too modest. I had talent, but I was never a particularly muscular person. Fantasizing about playing was more important to me than actually playing. These childhood fantasies shape our patterns in life, and I was a football hero in those fantasies. In my daydreams, I kept imagining a scenario in which Fenerbahçe was playing a European Cup match and I, a child, was brought in at the 89th minute. Of course, I would shoot the winning goal.

SPIEGEL: The German cultural critic Klaus Theweleit once wrote that football opened the “gate to the world” for him.

Pamuk: I understand that, but in my case football opened me up to community. First with my brother, who is only 18 months older than I am. Using marbles on the carpet, we reenacted entire Turkish championships or European Cup matches. One of us would pretend to be a radio reporter, describing what was happening on the carpet to an imaginary audience. Each marble represented a famous player, and when my brother was the reporter and used an incorrect name, I would make him aware of his mistake — gesturing silently, anxious not to disturb the millions listening on their radios.

SPIEGEL: What was so important about the radio?

Pamuk: It was the medium that brought us this game. Radio reporters taught me to listen to something and imagine something at the same time. In the late 18th century, Goethe traveled to Italy, where he saw Leonardo da Vinci's “Last Supper.” At the time, people in Germany had heard of the painting but had no visual concept of it. He returned to Germany and wrote about it. There is a Greek term for this called “ekphrasis,” or expressing an image in words. Football reporting on the radio works the same way. Of course, it's also clear that the reporter always lags behind the event itself and therefore constantly has to edit his words. Football is faster than words.

SPIEGEL: Have you ever thought about writing about football in a literary context?

Pamuk: The stadium, of course, is a stage on which a drama is unfolding — entirely the way the ancient Greeks envisioned it — and on which a single scene represents an entire world championship. But football is a visual affair, while literature is verbal. This complicates things. Besides, I don't like this journalistic approach — that is, stories about Mafia involvement in football or the like — because I believe in my fairy tale and prefer not to know how corrupt football really is. But it was supposed to play an important role in my novel “The Black Book,” which came out in 1990. One of the book's characters is a man who is combing through the Istanbul of the early 1980s, searching for his wife. In the original version, he hears on the radio how Turkey is losing against England in a home game, as the English keep shooting more and more goals. In the 1980s, Turkey lost two important qualifying matches 0:8 against England. The English players taunted our players on the field, and the English papers poked fun at the fact that we didn't even have a real green lawn for the first match in Istanbul. For me, these defeats were a metaphor for the condition of the country and the feeling of humiliation. I eventually cut these passages because the book kept getting thicker. But I regret it today.

SPIEGEL: What does Turkish football say about the condition of the country today?

Pamuk: The former Portuguese dictator (Antonio) Salazar also used football as a tool to control his country. He treated the game as opium for the masses, as a way of preserving the peace. It would be nice if it were that way in our country. Here football is no opium, but rather a machine to produce nationalism, xenophobia and authoritarian thinking. I also believe that it isn't victories but defeats that promote nationalism.

SPIEGEL: How so?

Pamuk: Nationalism stems from catastrophes, whether they are caused by earthquakes or lost wars. In his novels, Tolstoy writes about how the war against Napoleon helped shape the Russian identity. A 0:8 loss

against England is a similar catastrophe.

That's true, but then the players on the national team, after failing to qualify for the 2006 World Cup in Germany, attacked the Swiss players. It was unethical and unacceptable, especially the way the Turkish papers wrote about it afterwards. They blamed the Turkish team's failure to qualify on the referees and all sorts of conspiracies. Horrible. Nowadays, Turkish football serves the cause of nationalism, but not of the nation.

SPIEGEL: Turkey will play a World Cup qualifying match in Armenia this fall. The debate over the Armenian genocide (more...) will likely weigh heavily on the match. What do you expect will happen?

Pamuk: Turkey will win because the team is far superior from an athletic standpoint. I hope that's what happens. Of course, if the Turks lose they'll be able to say: It's not so bad. The Armenians are people, just like we are! Is that sort of an attitude possible? No, I'm not that naïve.

SPIEGEL: What can one learn from football?

Pamuk: A lot. For example, that there are other countries and people of different skin colors, people who are our equals and whom we should respect. Football can teach us that although a team's individual players may be weak, it can still be successful if it uses common sense. Or that we should not attack anyone physically when we suffer a depressing defeat. And one more thing: If French President (Nicolas) Sarkozy says that Turkey is not part of Europe, we can say that Fenerbahçe, as an international club, has been part of Europe for 50 years.

SPIEGEL: But the Turkish national anthem is still played before Fenerbahçe's league matches.

Pamuk: My childhood proved to me that there could be no enjoyment of football without community. But it becomes difficult when this community is having problems with its identity. That's when we experience all possible forms of nationalist exaggeration. And there are many of those in Turkey today. Our relationship with the European Union has not been resolved, nor has our relationship with the Kurds.

SPIEGEL: Has football alienated you?

Pamuk: I still support my club, but it must be through some sort of Pavlovian response I have when I see the colors of Fenerbahçe. Even though national trainer Fatih Terim is an ultra-nationalist, I will of course support the Turkish team during the European Championship, just as you will support the German team. But am I a fan? No.

SPIEGEL: What happened?

Pamuk: I became more and more of a writer in the 1980s, and I also lived in the United States. Suddenly I was no longer aware of who had won the Turkish Cup. Besides, Turkish football was very bad. It was no longer a matter of worshipping heroes, but losers. For example, the goalkeepers played a special role for us until well into the 1990s because, given the superiority of the opposing teams at international matches, it was always up to them to save the nation. Finally, enjoyment of football is part of the social context, and I have lost my faith in this social context.

SPIEGEL: Albert Camus once said this about his days as a goalkeeper: "All I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football."

Pamuk: Oh, come on. That may have been true in Algeria in the 1930s, but today it's naïve. Morality is probably the last thing one can learn from football today.

Interview conducted by *Christoph Biermann* and *Lothar Gorris*

[Source](#)

ABOUT ORHAN PAMUK

Orhan Pamuk, born in Istanbul in 1952, is Turkey's best-known writer. His books have been translated into 40 languages. Because he criticized Turkey's handling of the Armenian genocide issue in a 2005 interview, he was charged with "insulting Turkishness." The case was later dropped.

Sources

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