

World Cup Mascots

Sixty years of racial stereotypes and cute animals

There are few things more pointless to football fans than World Cup mascots. Yet for every tournament they turn up as branding on merchandise in your local supermarket, and often as cuddly toys themselves.

Although the World Cup started in 1930 it was not until 1966 and the World Cup in England that some smart marketing people realised that there was money to be made from creating a mascot for the tournament.

The father of all World Cup mascots was Willie at the 1966 England World Cup. He was a lion, the very symbol of all things British (despite being a foreigner). He wore a football outfit in the colours of the UK flag – something that would annoy the Scots and Welsh today.



Willie was designed by Reg Hoyer, an English commercial artist who also illustrated several children's books by author Enid Blyton. The use of the lion as mascot was also a tribute to his son named Leo. The character brought great luck to England, which won its first, and so far only, World Cup there. (*ed; that does not mean there was any correlation between the two things – otherwise we'd dress Thomas Tuchel up in a lion's costume*).



As with so many important landmarks in sport the English had invented something that others would copy and better. The tournament mascot proved such a good idea that it was decided to repeat it at Mexico 1970. The mascot at that World Cup was called Juanito and represented a young boy with a Mexican sombrero on his head and wearing the Tricolor outfit. The creator was Juan Gonzalez Martinez, an advertising graphic designer who tried to capture the fun spirit of football with Juanito's carefree image, but instead simply created a lazy racial stereotype of Mexicans.

It was with some trepidation that FIFA awaited to see the design West Germany would use for its mascot for the 1974 World Cup. An initial proposal from Hugo Boss involving black leather outfits was rejected.

In the end a design from Horst Schäfer was chosen, featuring two boys called Tip and Tap wearing the German kit. His idea was to represent a union between West and East Germany. However, this failed since one was not wearing hideous polyester clothes or a pioneer scarf it could not be representative of East German youth.



Note how Schäfer has cunningly given the boys Adidas-branded boots to wear.....



1978 saw the World Cup being played in Argentina. Given that the vicious military junta ruling the country were not noted for their PR skills the development of a cute mascot was a particular challenge for Argentinian artists (*ed: especially when they've had their fingers broken during interrogations*). In the event cartoonist Nestor Cordoba came up with a jolly gaucho in the Argentine national colours, nicknamed Gauchito. Presumably his holding a whip is a tribute to the military regime.....

If there is one image I do not associate with Spain it is fat orange men. Yet that is what Spain chose for their mascot for the 1982 World Cup. Designers María Dolores Salto and José María Martín Pacheco chose the citrus fruit – christened “Naranjito” - in order to avoid the commonplace of the bull as a symbol of Spain. Plans to use a similar image as the USA mascot in 2026 were vetoed by President Trump.....



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1986 saw the World Cup return to Mexico. And, having clearly learned nothing about the image that they wanted to show the world of their country, the hosts again opted for a sombrero-themed mascot.

This time artists Segundo Perez and Emma Rosa Ramirez Valle combined the big hat with a jalapeño pepper – Mexico’s sole positive contribution to world cuisine – to produce Piqué (*ed: he looked very different when he played for Barcelona*).

Imagine the shock and surprise of the artists when Piqué became the butt of racist insults. Who could have possibly predicted that?

The next World Cup was in Italy. As expected, the hosts demonstrated what stylish design looks like even for something as mundane as a mascot. Ciao was a stylised footballer made of cubic shapes in the colours of the Italian flag with a ball instead of a head.



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It was created by Lucio Boscardin, an artist who said in several interviews that he got the inspiration while queuing in a car at a traffic light. It was the green, yellow and red lights mixed with the Italian flag that led him to come up with the idea for Ciao.



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At USA 1994 there was a return to the animal mascot. It was a dog called Striker wearing the red, white and blue colours of the United States National Team. The design was pleasant enough, but given that it was done by Warner Brothers Studios – the creators of such great cartoon characters as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig and roadrunner – then one could have expected better. I’d have liked to see a Pepé le Pew skunk mascot!!

For the 1998 World Cup host nation France employed a panel of philosophers to capture the essence of France. The result – the work of graphic designer Fabrice Pialot – was the ugliest-looking bird called Footix. Less of a cockerel and more of a cock-up.....



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The 2002 World Cup was the first to be divided between two countries, South Korea and Japan. So this meant that there would be, er, three mascots.....?

Apparently, the three characters were computer generated. All I can say is that it must have been a really shit computer. The three “things” were given the names Ato, Kaz and Nik (obviously) but I cannot even be bothered to figure out which one was which.

In 2006 we are back in the now unified Germany. This World Cup is where the German public finally felt no inhibitions about showing postwar national pride. However, it is doubtful if any of the pride extended to the World Cup mascot. Called Goleo VI (a combination of the words Goal and Leo the lion – how clever!!) it was supposed to be lion, for nothing is more symbolic of Germany than a lion. Personally, I think it looks more like a bear, or Chewbacca



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It's 2010 and the World Cup is in South Africa. With the springbok one of the nation's symbols then you'd think this would be a natural choice for World Cup mascot. But no – the South African Federation chose a leopard as Mascot. Its name was Zakumi, which came from the fusion of 'Za', short for 'South Africa' in the Afrikaans language, and the word 'Kumi', meaning 'ten' in various local dialects. Zakumi was the idea of Andries Odendaal, a Cape Town designer.

Until I researched this I genuinely thought that Zakumi had been a lion and that the spots on him were simply acne.....



Brazil also chose a typical animal as the mascot of the 2014 World Cup. It was a three-banded armadillo, a breed endemic to north-eastern Brazil, called Fuleco from the union of the words 'futebol' and 'ecology'.

An interesting fact is that the armadillo is a natural carrier of leprosy. Sadly, Sepp Blatter was not gifted one during the World Cup.....

When it came to picking a mascot for the Russia 2018 World Cup it was inevitable that they would choose a vicious creature, namely a wolf, christened Zabivaka, whose name literally means 'the one who invades Ukraine' – yet none of us saw that coming.....



For Qatar 2022 the organisers chose as mascot La'eeb, which is a supermarket shopping bag caught on the wind – representing the needless waste of oil-based resources that a World Cup in Arabia promoted.

And that brings us up-to-date. For the 2026 World Cup there were discussions about having a single mascot but since the only common theme that all three countries could relate to is fentanyl then the idea of a junkie as mascot was quietly dropped.

Instead it was agreed that there would be three mascots – one for each host country, thus tripling the marketing possibilities. They are “Maple” the moose, “Zavu” the jaguar and “Clutch” the eagle. Finally we have a mascot for Mexico that does not include a sombrero!!!

Already these images are featuring on various pieces of tat being flogged as “World Cup Memorabilia” and, closer to the date, expect McDonalds to be selling Clutchburgers with Zavu fries and Maple sauce.



And there you have it – 60 years of tat. Personally, I think the Italia 90 mascot is by far the best.....