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Jersey Swaps, a Ritual With a Story

By BILLY WITZ

The United States had lost to Brazil, 1-0, in the 2003 Confederations Cup, but when the final whistle blew that night in Lyon, France, the American defender Gregg Berhalter walked off the field with a memento from a tough night.

In his hand, Berhalter carried the jersey he had exchanged with a bucktoothed Brazilian midfielder who would become known worldwide, Ronaldinho.

When Berhalter recalled that night recently, it was with a heavy helping of wistfulness — and not for losing the ball that led to the game's only goal. A few days after the game, at a hotel in Paris, where Ronaldinho was then the well-known star for Paris St.-Germain, Berhalter sent his dirty clothes out to be cleaned. Into the bag, he absentmindedly tossed the iconic yellow and green Brazil jersey.

"Needless to say, it never came back from the laundry," Berhalter said with a knowing smile. "I wasn't too smart."

The exchanging of jerseys at the end of a soccer match is a longtime ritual that is well established in the sport, even as it has evolved. With each swap — like the ones that take place after games in this World Cup — there is usually a story.

Often the tales are personal, speaking to a player's standing in the game or marking a chapter in his career.

As for the jerseys themselves, sometimes they are washed, sometimes not. Sometimes they end up being given away, auctioned off, framed for display in a player's home, boxed up in storage, or — as Berhalter learned — who knows where?

“It’s just a sign of respect,” said [Clint Mathis](#), who scored for the United States in the 2002 World Cup. “You’re out there trying to kick each other and kill each other, but when the game’s said and done, it’s back to being friends.”

The gentlemanly ritual is believed to have begun in 1931, when France beat England for the first time. The French players were so ecstatic they asked the English players if they could have their jerseys as keepsakes. The English obliged.

It was not until 1954 that exchanges took place at a World Cup, according to [FIFA.com](#), but one of the more memorable moments in the ritual was an exchange that did not take place.

In 1966, England defeated Argentina, 1-0, in the quarterfinals, but the play was so vicious that when England’s manager, Alf Ramsey, who had referred to Argentina’s players as animals, spotted one of his players exchanging jerseys with an Argentine, he stepped in and yanked the jersey away.

That image remains as much a part of the rivalry between the countries as [Diego Maradona’s Hand of God goal](#) and [David Beckham’s red card in 1998](#).

“Ramsey’s intervention was hugely symbolic,” said Ellis Cashmore, a professor of sociology, media and sport at England’s Staffordshire University. “Exchange rituals are freighted with cultural functions, such as reinforcing social solidarity, affirming friendships and perpetuating economic partnerships.”

There are few friendships affirmed when the United States and Mexico play, which explains why jerseys are rarely exchanged in that rivalry. In the 2002 World Cup, the United States shocked Mexico, knocking it out of the tournament in a rough-and-tumble match.

“Especially after that game — I don’t think one jersey was exchanged,” Berhalter said. “There was a lot of bad blood in that game. That was one time when sportsmanship really didn’t take a priority.”

Cashmore compared the exchanges to kula, a system of ceremonial gift exchange that he said precedes formal trading in the Trobriand Islands in the Southwest Pacific. Kula “kept what might otherwise have been fractious relations peaceful,” Cashmore said. “Shirt exchanges have comparable functions.”

Over the last two decades, soccer has evolved from strictly sport to, Cashmore said, a division of the entertainment industry. Players like Beckham, [Lionel Messi](#), [Cristiano Ronaldo](#), Wayne Rooney and Ronaldinho are worldwide brands as much as they are soccer stars.

Thus, some jerseys can be more than keepsakes — they can be commodities. The Brazil jersey worn by Pelé in the 1970 World Cup was sold in 2002 by the family of the Italian player he had traded with for \$310,000.

Nigel Spill, a sports memorabilia dealer in Los Angeles, said a game-worn jersey of a player like Messi, the reigning world player of the year, would be comparable to what a [Derek Jeter](#) jersey would fetch, easily into five figures. “It’s not an innocent jersey swap anymore,” Spill said.

Indeed, when Nadir Haroub of Tanzania received what could be a valuable jersey when he traded with the Cameroon star Samuel Eto’o after a World Cup qualifier in 2008, the Tanzania Football Federation threatened to force Haroub to pay for a replacement jersey because it could not afford one. Eventually, the federation relented.

When the [Los Angeles Galaxy](#) played Barcelona and [A. C. Milan](#) in exhibitions last summer, many of the Galaxy’s younger and less-well-compensated players schemed about trying to get the jerseys of Ronaldinho and Messi. Similar conversations took place among players on the United States team in South Africa, the American left back Jonathan Bornstein said.

Still, there is an etiquette to the jersey swap. Typically, players who trade either know each other — perhaps they are club teammates — have battled over the same area of turf or just happen to be near each other when the game ends. Even those who are eager to snag a particular shirt try to be discreet.

To Bornstein, all the accounting that takes place in shirt swaps also affirms where a player fits in the increasingly global game. “There’s definitely a totem pole of status,” Bornstein said. “It lets you know where you are on the totem pole.”

In South Africa, Bornstein was a rather anonymous player, one from [Major League Soccer](#) rather than one of the top European leagues, and participating in his first World Cup.

But when the United States played Honduras earlier this year in an exhibition, several Honduran players sought him out afterward to trade jerseys. His last-minute goal against Costa Rica last November clinched a rare World Cup berth for Honduras, and he [remains](#)

popular in the country.

“On the other hand, there are a lot of players around the world whose jerseys I would like to have, but maybe they don’t know who I am,” Bornstein said.

Chris Birchall, who played for Trinidad and Tobago in the 2006 World Cup, exchanged jerseys with the well-known players Roque Santa Cruz of Paraguay and Kim Kallstrom of Sweden. But when his tiny nation played England — where Birchall was born and raised — there were few players willing to trade, he said. Instead, he kept his jersey and had his teammates sign it.

“I don’t know whether it was to give it to friends or family or if they thought it might be worth something if they won the World Cup,” Birchall said. “I come from England, so it would be nice to have one from the Gerrards or Rooneys.”

But as players climb the totem pole, or simply age, it seems as if the jerseys themselves mean less.

Eddie Lewis, a former United States midfielder, had a Ronaldinho jersey, which he picked up during the 1999 Confederations Cup. But he had forgotten about it until he was going through boxes when his family moved.

Bornstein, 25, is not yet cool to collecting. He kept his jersey from the Algeria game, the first he played at the World Cup, and had it signed by all his teammates. He has jerseys dating to high school. In all, he has close to 30 jerseys he has traded for since he turned pro.

Where does he keep them?

“A space saver bag,” Bornstein said, though one day he hopes to frame them and decorate the man cave in his house. “I do wash them. I don’t want the stench of the other player. Actually, I thought about that this morning. I have to wash the Australia jersey.”

A fine idea, as long as he remembers not to send the laundry out.