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Edited by David Leonhardt

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UPBEAT AUSSIES

Australia's Odd World Cup Optimism

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Justin Wolfers

The Socceroos, as the Australian national soccer team are known, enter the World Cup ranked by FIFA as the 62nd-best team in the world, the lowest standing of any of the 32 teams that earned a slot. They've also been dealt the toughest possible draw, facing not only the reigning champions and runners-up in their group, but also highly rated Chile. No wonder oddsmakers give the Aussies less than a 1-in-2,500 chance of winning the tournament.

Yet one in nine Australians polled believe that their team will win the World Cup, according to a study of public opinion in 19 countries conducted by YouGov for The Upshot. And among those Australians in the study who made any kind of prediction — more than 40 percent did not pick a winner — nearly one in five chose the home team. Aussies believe more in their ragged underdogs than the citizens of top teams like the Netherlands or England believe in their national teams.

What explains this extraordinary optimism?

It could be memories of the 2006 tournament, which began with Australia's first win in a World Cup match and was halted only by one of the worst refereeing decisions in the history of the World Cup. (Yes, I'm Australian.) No Australian fan will ever forget the courage the Socceroos showed in that match, holding the eventual tournament winners, Italy, to a scoreless draw for 93 minutes. With seconds left in the match, Italy left back Fabio Grossi flopped somewhere in the vicinity of the Australian Lucas Neill's already-fallen body. It was an artful dive, and it led to a penalty kick that was duly converted, as well as the end of a fairy tale.

In Australia's collective memory, we were at least the equal of the team that eventually held the World Cup trophy aloft: Every game the Azzuri won after that could have featured the Australian's green and gold strip. Maybe the biggest puzzle in the new study of public opinion about this year's World Cup is that only 2 percent of the Australians questioned claim to be rooting against the Italian team above all others.

So that leads me to a second, more mundane explanation. We Aussies are relative newcomers to soccer. Ask a large part of the Australian population about who'll win the World Cup — even if you specify which World Cup you mean, as this study did — and a fair number may start thinking about the Cricket World Cup or perhaps the Rugby World Cup. And we win those all the time. Indeed, I reckon there's a pretty good chance that we'll win the World Cup soon. Just don't ask me which World Cup.

Justin Wolfers is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan. Follow him on Twitter at @justinwolfers.

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