



THE ART OF TIFO

IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION, AND PERFORMING FANDOM IN FOOTBALL/SOCCER

Jeffrey W. Kassing and Lindsey J. Meân



PETER LANG

Tifo refers to the artistic renderings that supporters at football/soccer matches perform. This can involve large banners, coordinated mosaic displays, and pyrotechnics. Originating in Europe, the tradition has spread across the world and to other sports. Tifos vary in size, content, and execution, but all emerge from the desire supporters have for signaling and displaying their collective community, specific identities, and extensive devotion to their clubs. Fans fashion tifos to communicate publicly about identity, sense of place, past success, politics, and heated rivalries. Their assorted content makes tifos a distinctive form of fan-generated communication. Traditionally, supporters display tifos only momentarily before football/soccer matches. Yet they have become increasingly complex, sophisticated, and competitive—requiring dozens of people to create them, financial investments usually from fans to procure the materials needed to finance them, and on-site, in-stadium coordination to display them. These factors contribute to a unique, complex, and globalized form of fan communication that captures not only the obvious and intended messages of tifos, but also demonstrates the effort and devotion needed to execute them. This book examines the history and evolution of tifos, their social significance for clubs, places, and communities, the identities and associated affiliations they discursively perform, and the explicit and implicit symbolism they contain. Given the demanding practices surrounding the development and execution of tifos, and their overall captivating nature, this book should appeal to a broad audience including students and scholars working in sport as well as fans of it.

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The Art of Tifo



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For Q, who brought soccer and art home.
And for John, who grew football into a family tradition.

“I found I could say things with color and shapes
that I couldn’t say any other way—things I had no words for.”
Georgia O’Keeffe

“Football is the ballet of the masses.”
Dmitri Shostakovich



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Preface

Some years ago, when our daughter first began playing club soccer, we organized an outing to see an upcoming match featuring the U.S. Women's National Team, which was coming to our hometown. To get the girls excited about the game we introduced them to the tifo tradition. This entailed buying white bed sheets, stitching them together, and outlining a design. The design featured two banners. The first had the club's name on top (i.e., Inferno) and a giant red heart in the middle, with flames surrounding the heart. The second simply said, in blue font USWNT. It was intended to signify that these girls and their club loved the USWNT. The weekend before the match we hosted a tifo painting party at a local park and the girls completed the banners coloring them in black, red, orange, yellow and blue. We then took the tifo to the game and displayed it, unfortunately without too much fanfare. Nonetheless the girls learned about tifo as a means of demonstrating commitment and support for your favorite team.

Because the tifo included two pieces, we were able to repurpose the larger banner and use it at championship matches for the team. Supported by a large frame constructed out of plastic piping, a small army of parents would hoist it up on the sidelines just before kickoff to inspire the girls. Thus, it appeared several times in the local Phoenix soccer scene, often catching curious glances from opponents and their fans. Years later, a pregame conversation with an assistant referee revealed that she remembered our club because of the "giant sign" we used

to display. So while the original two-panel tifo failed to garner much attention, the subsequent one (featured in the image below) made an impression.

To those unfamiliar with choreographies conducted at football/soccer matches, the spectacle of tifo is captivating and memorable, their origin curious, and the preparation behind them mysterious. This book aims to expose the tradition to a much larger audience, while recognizing and celebrating those who pour their time, energy, and devotion into producing choreographies and displaying tifos.



Partial View of the AZ Inferno Soccer Club Tifo

Source: Author.

History, Origins and Evolution of Tifo

The word tifo means typhus in Italian, a disease characterized by emotional outbursts. In the 1930s, newspapers likened fanatical supporters and their emotional displays to the symptoms of typhus. Over time the term simply came to denote fans and the phrase ‘fare il tifo’ (or ‘doing the typhus’) the active support for their respective clubs (COPA90 Football, 2017). The word subsequently referenced in-stadium displays by ardent supporters. Tifo is often used synonymously with the term choreography, with both connoting organized, pre-planned public spectacles at football matches and soccer games. But tifo also refers to a specific form of stadium display—“handmade, large-scale, and colorful banner displays” (Andon, 2017, p. 165). These are widely “acknowledged throughout the world as helping to create atmosphere and propelling players and teams to perform their best before big matches” (p. 166). And they serve as a means by which supporters can show their unadulterated adoration for their respective clubs “in a grand and material sense” (p. 166). As such, for fans, tifos are a powerful form of visual rhetoric that “use colors, shapes, and images to communicate messages in unique ways” (p. 166). Thus, tifos are an important element of fandom, notably for the performative dimensions of fan culture and the identity claims supporters make (Doidge et al., 2020; Henderson, 2018; Kossakowski, 2017).

Choreography or tifo refer to a class of stadium actions that can include choreos, pyro, flags, small banners, and larger tifo displays or a combination of

these elements (COPA90 Football, 2017; Doidge et al., 2020). *Choreos* occur when supporters hold up various colored tiles (i.e., small individual-sized squares or rectangles) to form specific images. This ensues when a predetermined pattern inscribed in the distribution of the tiles becomes evident after they are collectively displayed in unison. These are popular in some of the larger clubs and stadia in Europe (e.g., Barcelona, Inter Milan and Real Madrid). Increasingly, choreos have been produced by clubs rather than by fans. Yet they still require the collaboration of fans and spectators for their execution. *Pyro*, short for pyrotechnics, refers to the (typically illegal) use of flares and smoke bombs in stadia in many parts of Europe, often in tightly choreographed and organized displays. It is, for example, highly prevalent in Turkish football which has cultivated a reputation for being a tough destination for other European teams in inter-continental competitions (Irak & Polo, 2018). Aware of this tradition, supporters of Russian outfit FC Zenit Saint Petersburg welcomed Turkish club Fenerbahçe with a noteworthy pyro display in February of 2019 for a Europa League fixture (Costa, 2019).¹ Zenit supporters stretched for hundreds of yards along both sides of the snow-encrusted boulevard leading to the Krestovsky Stadium as the visitors' coach arrived. Flames engulfed the Fenerbahçe team as it gradually made the climb uphill as successive supporters lit flares just before the coach passed. This fiery display was impressive not just for the pyrotechnics involved, but also because it extended well beyond the confines of the stadium. This is somewhat unusual given the unwritten expectations governing what constitutes choreographies.

The operating rules for tifos subscribe that traditionally they must be displayed briefly in stadia before matches (although in some cases they get displayed during games), be designed, created, and funded by supporters, and that they avoid corporate sponsorship or promotion. Moreover, they usually take months or weeks of planning to produce and execute, being crafted anonymously and in intense secrecy, to avoid compromising the element of surprise (Dirty South Soccer, 2018). Additionally, they tend to be reserved for pivotal moments like season opening or closing games, cup matches, or important rivalries. While tifo displays can consume entire stadia, especially when they involve large-scale mosaics, it is more customary for them to emerge from behind the goal in the curva or kop end of stadia where the most fervent supporters typically reside (Kennedy, 2013).

An Obscure and Untold History

The history and appearance of tifos has not been well documented. This is perhaps due to their ephemeral nature—disappearing from view before matches, rarely

reappearing, and usually being destroyed after use. This coupled with the fact that they predate the modern digital media landscape contributes to the lack of information available about when and where they first surfaced and how the tradition spread. Despite a poorly documented past, the tifo tradition has accelerated and amplified in the twenty-first century due in large part to the capacity to document, catalog, grade and preserve tifo images worldwide. These same forces have elevated the power and significance of tifo as a mechanism for identity performance and as a site for social and political commentary—themes revisited later in the book.

Tifos originated in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s and spread across the football/soccer playing world (COPA90 Football, 2017). According to some, supporters of Italian club AC Milan birthed both the ultras tradition and the custom of stadium displays. The first large-scale tifo banner, which covered the Curva Sud (the section which came to be associated with the club's ultras culture), appeared in 1984 and featured black and red horizontal stripes and the words "FORZA VECCHIO CUORE ROSSONERO" or "COME ON OLD RED & BLACK HEART" (COPA90 Stories, 2019a). In 2017, FC Barcelona commemorated the club's first mosaic display, which featured in a clásico matchup against archrival Real Madrid in 1992. A simple design by today's standards, the tifo created by 20,000 fans at the north end of the stadium included the club nickname 'BARÇA' (FC Barcelona, 2017). In the ensuing 25 years the club produced 69 mosaics, with the majority at the club's home ground (Camp Nou), but also at other locations in Europe where the team contested European competition finals. The commemorative post asserts that "Barça were the first club in Europe to take the mosaic idea to another level with regards to size, the first examples dwarfing the smaller examples that were common in Italy at the time." (¶ 2). The club's choreographies have grown over the years to include more than two dozen that have covered the entire stadium, the first appearing in 1994 (MARCA, 2015)—with a mosaic comprised of the club colors that borrowed a line from the club anthem, which read "Blaugrana al Vent" (Blue and Scarlet in the Wind). While the original mosaic was attributed to the Almogàvers supporter group, the club assumed responsibility for organizing mosaics in 1999.

A Global Phenomenon

Although tifo displays historically emerged in Europe, they can be found in India (Bandyopadhyay, 2020; Roy, 2019), Asia (Swaby, 2015a), Africa (Koundouno, 2019), North and South America (Bachman, 2019; Edwards, 2013a) and Australia (A League, 2015). Across the globe they tend to be far more prevalent at

professional club matches, but can be seen occasionally at international ones too. For example, Brazil fans displayed a large tifo, shaped and painted to represent the Brazilian national team jersey, before a World Cup match in Durban, South Africa in 2010.²

While there are some common elements, choreographies vary geographically. In South America tifos are much larger and less complex by comparison to those found in Europe. The practice in countries like Argentina, Uruguay, and Colombia is to fill stadia with massive tile mosaics or oversized single tifos that may stretch across large sections of the stadium. The mosaics tend to be simplified in terms of the imagery and colors, most often being two-colored—incorporating the important symbols of the club and respective colors. These are commonly augmented with smoke bombs, flares, fireworks, streamers, confetti, and flags to create a thoroughly charged environment. For reference, Sale Campeón (2016) compiled 5 of the best choreos by supporters of Atletico Nacional based in Medellín.³ In each, the entire stadium is awash in the club colors of green and white, achieved through large mosaics and accompanying colored smoke bombs.

In Indonesia, large and fervent ultra groups associated with clubs like PSS Sleman and Perses Solo FC (Fuller, 2017; Fuller & Junaedi, 2018), have developed a somewhat unique approach to tifos (Gibran, 2016).⁴ They use traditional choreo tiles with fans each holding certain colors. However, whereas mosaics tend to be motionless in other parts of the world, in Indonesia they are imbued with frenetic movement. This can involve moving the tiles from side to side in unison so that the entire mosaic appears to be moving back and forth, moving the tiles up and back so that the entire mosaic appears to be pulsating, or pulling the tiles in and out of view quickly so that the mosaic appears, disappears, and reappears in quick succession. The effect is three dimensional versus two and televisual in that it forms a moving whole from pixilated parts.

There is an interesting tradition with Sevilla FC in Spain, whereby an elderly man known as the grandfather (abuelo) has become a recurrent character in tifo displays. This is somewhat unusual as tifos generally remain independent of one another thematically and artistically. According to a thread posted about tifos produced by the Biris Norte group of ultras (AltaNorte, 2019), he first appeared in 2005. He returned in 2006, appeared twice in 2007, and again in 2014 after a several-year hiatus, then resurfaced twice in 2015 and again for appearances in 2016 and 2018. Intriguingly, abuelo became a good luck talisman for the club on the road, appearing across Europe before each of the cup finals that the club claimed. He was depicted planting a flag with the caption “We are large” in 2006 (Eindhoven, the Netherlands), proudly holding the club flag with the caption “So much glory so much football” in 2007 (Glasgow, Scotland), riding a Vespa moped

in 2014 (Turin, Italy), holding a trophy and the club crest in 2015 with the caption “True Love” (Warsaw, Poland), and reaching for yet another trophy in 2016 with the caption “The Champ is Here!!!” (Basel, Switzerland).⁵

The Evolution of Tifo

While choreos and pyrotechnics are inherently animated, the traditional tifo banner is by comparison static. However, that has not prevented innovative fans from developing means to animate or narrate their tifos by bringing them to life through other features. This can take the form of combining elements, introducing movement, or adding panels. The examples that follow show how these practices have contributed to advancing traditional tifo displays.

The biggest club rivalry in Portugal, known as O Classico, occurs between Porto and Benfica. The recurring match is politically and socially charged, with the working class, industrial northern city of Porto (the second largest in the country) pitted against the powerful and wealthier southern capital city of Lisbon. With mutually derogatory names like the “alfacinhas” (little lettuces/Porto) and the “tripeiros” (tripe-eaters/Benfica) characterizing the animosity between supporters, the rivalry invokes the famous saying in Portugal: “In Porto, they work. In Lisbon, they spend money” (Alves, 2018). In September 2015, at Porto’s home ground Estádio do Dragão for the first match of the season between these two foes, the Portistas (Porto fans) unveiled a tifo that featured a portrait of their club emblem the dragon. The large terrace-covering dragon’s face, intimidating in its own right, became even more emblematic of the ferocity fans hold toward their arch rivals when the eyes of the dragon ignited into flames (an effect created by using flares). Shortly thereafter blue smoke emitted from a smoke bomb through the mouth of the dragon (Duffy, 2015).⁶ The coordination of flares and smoke used to animate the tifo banner certainly made it more spectacular, and significantly, more menacing.

Tifos also have been enhanced with the inclusion of moving parts. This was seen dramatically in the Copenhagen Derby between Brøndby and Copenhagen in May 2014. As the sound of bomb sirens filled the stadium, the Copenhagen ultras put on an unforgettable theatrical display. It began with a two-part tifo. Midway up the terrace was a large tifo that spanned the entire width of the stand. One end depicted a canon armed by several soldiers, the other an image of the opponent’s stadium. A second panel stretched the same length along the bottom of the terrace. It read: “The order has been given—shoot down the enemy”. The sound of cannon fire echoed through the stadium as a black cannon ball emerged and traveled

along the white background toward the opposing stadium. The cannonball was connected to a long pole, dragged along the terrace by a fan who moved above the tifo from one end to the other before hurling the cannonball upon the stadium. A part of the original tifo immediately dropped away revealing a new image of the stadium damaged and in flames. The entire process repeated a second time with another cannonball traveling toward the stadium and a second sheet dropping to reveal the entire stadium shelled and on fire. At the same time black smoke emerged from smoke bombs placed among fans below the tifo, adding to the sensation that cannon fire had destroyed the opponent's stadium. Finally, the whole tifo came down to reveal a hidden layer. This one read, "COPENHAGEN IS OURS!," in large white lettering against a bright blue background (the club colors). Taken together the entire tifo included two separate panels, moving parts, pyro enhancements, and the reveal of three separate layers. Needless to say, it captured considerable attention upon its unveiling, with one pundit stating: "When tifo becomes theatre it takes on a whole new level of awesome" (Rosenblatt, 2014).⁷ Despite the addition of theatrical components and the fanfare those generated, the fundamental performance of threat, war, dominance, possession, and ownership remain significant displays of fan identity, club loyalty, and rivalry.

In a less noteworthy but similar vein, Dusseldorf Fortuna displayed an animated tifo in August 2013. In their effort, the main tifo was raised from the pitch level up in front of the stand. Once fully displayed it showcased the skyline of the city. A few seconds later, a subway car emerged at the bottom of the tifo, apparently moving as supporters walked it out from the side. It stopped underneath the cityscape. Then two hooded graffiti artists appeared and began to spray paint the subway car. They painted typical graffiti lettering that read "ULTRAS."⁸ It took a full four minutes for this step to be completed. By comparison, this choreography lacked the dynamism of the Copenhagen one, but predated it and was one of the first to involve some form of animation. It failed to gain much recognition, though, likely due to the lack of dynamism, but also perhaps because the club was playing in the second tier of the Bundesliga.

In a more recent example of animation, and extension of tifo innovation, German club Borussia Dortmund displayed their nickname (BVB) in an ethereal spectacle of dissipating letters. The famous Yellow Wall stand known as a bastion of noise, support, and amazing choreography produced the display (Bundesliga, 2019). For the season-opening UEFA Champions League group stage match against Barcelona, the Yellow Wall did something magical by many accounts (Bacon, 2019; Lawless, 2019). Designated fans launched handfuls of bright yellow confetti perfectly delineating the shapes of the letters BVB across the entire stand. The yellow confetti outlined the letters, which were made up of fans occupying the

spaces not covered by floating confetti. As the confetti burst into view the letters quickly emerged, seemingly out of thin air, before melting away and washing down the steep stand as the confetti dispersed—leading the live broadcast commentator on BT Sport to say, “And look at that,” before adding, “They’ve always got something new in that Yellow Wall. None of that happens by accident. Weeks of planning goes into everything they do.”⁹

These comments reveal the type of invention that has become customary for Borussia Dortmund and the Yellow Wall. This is because they have long been touted for their striking tifo displays. Indeed, they provided an early example of an animated tifo that became a worldwide sensation (Wright, 2011). This tifo appeared during a league match against Wolfsburg in May 2011. Before the match fans used tiles to make the shape of a yellow headstone. Then from the center of the headstone something emerged, spilling out and spreading from the middle. The emerging form continued to wriggle into being until the tifo took the shape of a large smiling skull adorned with a BVB cap. While the skull emerged, a sign was lifted from the pitch that stretched across the bottom of the headstone, held by two skeletal hands on each side, which read “BORUSSIA DORTMUND”. Once the tifo was on full display AC/DC’s rock anthem Thunder began to play loudly on the sound system. Then the team name dropped from the tifo to reveal a second layer that read “UNTIL DEATH.”¹⁰ This final sequence comprised a powerful and explicit assertion of loyalty and commitment to the club, reinforcing the dedication evident in the very creation, organization, and performance of tifos.

In another example of innovation and dedication, French club Saint-Étienne added a clever dimension to mosaics in a 2015 match against Marseille. In this instance fans in the kop end of the stadium wore ponchos which featured different club colors on the front and back. This allowed the ultras to turn around and change the colors of the mosaic from white lettering on a green background to green lettering on a white background, which read ‘KOP NORD’ (i.e., Kop North) designating the ultras end of the stadium.¹¹

Multi-panel designs have proven to be an important advancement in tifo displays. Multi-panel tifos help build narrative exposition in a way that static singular tifos may not. For example, consider the multi-panel tifo displayed by the American Outlaws (a U.S. national teams supporter group) in Columbus, OH during a key World-Cup qualifying match in 2013 (Andon, 2017). This multi-panel tifo effectively constructed a narrative that revisited the mythology of Dos-A-Cero (i.e., the ‘two-to-one’ score line that has become unusually common in US/Mexico matchups) and the role that Columbus, OH played in cementing that myth. Over a six-month period 100 volunteers contributed to creating this tifo which contained six panels in three different sizes that were featured in two stages.

Accordingly, the first stage included five separate panels, four (two on each side of the goal) stretching upwards from the stands and another lengthwise across the stand. The first three larger upright panels each contained a blue and white profile silhouette of a key player from previous matches against Mexico held in Columbus. These three players had strong connections to Columbus, having each played there professionally in the domestic league. They included Brad Friedel, Brian McBride, and Frankie Hejduk. Each banner also contained the year of the match at the top (2001, 2005, 2009), with smaller lettering reading “DOS A CERO” just below, and the respective name of the player at the bottom. The panels remained intentionally consistent “as the story moved chronologically from left to right” (p. 167) until the final one. This panel contained an image of the USMNT coach at the time, Jurgen Klinsmann, the current year 2013, and wording at the bottom that read “NEW HEROES.” This final panel was designed to suggest that “the magic and mystique of Dos-A-Cero” would be brought forward in the 2013 performance. The lengthwise panel underscoring these read: “HISTORY + HEART + HEROES = ”. The second part of the overall display involved a single large panel hoisted behind the goal. It contained an eagle and an appropriation of the seal of the United States with the wording of the seal modified to read: E Pluribus Unum USMNT (Out of many, one USMNT). Reading from top to bottom, “COLUMBUS” appeared above the eagle, “OHIO” on a striped-shield covering the bird’s torso, and “HOME” in large lettering below the image. Taken together, the imagery and language signified the intimate connection between the city and the success of the USMNT. The combined elements also completed the sentimental equation forwarded from the previous panel. That is, the addition of history, heart, and heroes produced home.¹²

Combining elements like movement, animation, and multiple panels allows supporters to extend significant, historic, or mythic narratives considerably. For example, in 2019 supporters of Indian club East Bengal designed and displayed a history-book tifo comprised of six pages that celebrated the club’s accomplishments over time. Underneath the book a long banner read “LET’S TURN THE PAGES OF HISTORY.” This first panel, representing the cover, depicted a player in the club kit running with a lit torch, which carried the heading “1920 THE JOURNEY BEGAN”—the year denoting the founding of the club and the torch a referent to the club crest. In the club’s early years the British-run Indian Football Association capped the number of native Indian teams allowed to compete in the top league, which meant that clubs like East Bengal who had earned promotion could be denied access regardless (Bandyopadhyay, 2018). In response, club officials and supporters carried lit torches as part of a protest march. The torch-in-hand became a significant symbol for the club, features on its current crest, and fittingly

figured on the cover of the club's history-book tifo. After initially displaying the cover, supporters peeled back the top panel moving from left-to-right, to reveal a spread of two separate panels on the following pages. The panel on the left showed a single player in the club kit holding a trophy in one hand above his head and read "1942 1st MAJOR TROPHY," whereas the panel on the right depicted players in a match with the heading "1970 IFA Shield WIN." This match was historically significant because it marked the first victory by an Indian side after independence against a foreign team (i.e., PAS Tehran FC from Iran) and because it took a late goal in injury time to prevail over the heavy favorites. A subsequent turning of the pages presented two additional side-by-side panels. The one on the left included an outstretched hand with five raised fingers, signifying an historic victory over their main rival, accompanied by the caption "1975 EB 5-0 MB" (shorthand for East Bengal 5, Mohan Bagan 0). The right-side panel included several players hoisting a cup with the heading "2000-2001 FIRST NFL WIN" (referring to the club's first Indian National Football League championship of the modern era). The final panel, representing the back cover, showed a player with his arms raised holding the Indian Flag. The accompanying text on top said "2003 ASEAN CUP WIN" (referencing the club's first international competition trophy since the turn of the century), while additional text in the bottom right corner stated "AND MILES TO GO...". The club's official Twitter account proclaimed that the innovative history-book tifo was likely the first of its kind (East Bengal FC, 2019), and at 10,000 square-foot, also set a record for being the largest in Indian football history (Yoesting, 2019).¹³

While the advancements noted herein exclusively concern how tifo banners and mosaics have evolved, there has been modest development regarding pyro. Inherently dangerous and occasionally leading to injury, pyro is unquestionably the most controversial aspect of tifo. Consequently, flares have been banned at many stadia but still remain prevalent. For example, in 2019 Germany's Bundesliga clubs "were ordered to pay a combined total of €1,056,525 (\$1,166,926) in fines for their fans' use of flares, smoke bombs and fireworks." (dw.com, 2020, ¶ 4). This could change with the advent of lower-temperature burning flares invented by Danish pyrotechnician Tommy Cordsen. The product (Tifontaine) produces smaller, less heat-intensive flames and emits less smoke compared to traditional flares. As such, they can be used more creatively in choreographies. For example, the aforementioned Brøndby supporters incorporated 200 Tifontaine flares into their choreography to outline the year of the club's founding. According to Sarah Agerklint, chairwoman of the team's fan club Brøndby Support, this was "completely legal and everybody was safe"—leading inventor Cordsen to comment, "it worked even better than I thought" (COPA90 Stories, 2019b). This effect would be impossible