Something changed – or perhaps was revealed – in the United States during the last month. Many millions more Americans watched the World Cup soccer tournament in English and Spanish than ever before. True, with the World Cup’s end, many are arguing, as usual, that Americans pay attention only every four years – and only when the US is playing. But this time something was different: Americans continued to watch even after the US team was eliminated.

Indeed, on a weekday afternoon in the middle of summer, nearly 15 million Americans tuned in to the Brazil-Germany match in the semifinal. That is more than the usual viewership for ESPN’s Monday Night Football, the biggest regular television draw for fans of American football.

Almost every young person at my organization, New America, found ways to watch the US games in the early rounds. My apartment mate explained that everyone in her office, in the US Department of Education, had used the excuse of a birthday party to watch the US-Germany match. On the Tuesday afternoon when the US played Belgium in the knockout round, every bar in Aspen, Colorado, was packed.

Of course, Aspen is one of the country’s wealthiest communities, and perhaps not representative of the US as a whole. But US television showed an enormous crowd of fans in Kansas City following the US-Belgium match on a large outdoor screen. It was not quite the equivalent of the final match between Italy and France in 2006, when virtually every small Italian town turned out to watch on the main square; but Americans all over the country spent the month ducking out of work and into sports bars.

America’s growing embrace of soccer reflects some important ways in which the US has “joined” the world. For starters, both the US team and the US audience for soccer derive their growing strength from immigrants – many from countries where the sport is a national passion.

For example, in Washington, DC, almost all taxi drivers are newcomers to America. When my driver was Ethiopian, as often happened, we would commiserate over the national team’s defeat by Nigeria in a qualifying round, then celebrate the US defeat of Ghana, and end by agreeing that in four years, or certainly in eight, the US team would be among the world’s best. In almost every case, my driver would tell me that his children were playing in local youth leagues.

These immigrants are not only providing homegrown soccer talent for US teams; they are a core part of the expanding US audience for soccer worldwide. Dan Levy, lead writer for the US sports website The Bleacher Report, points out that most commentators define “American soccer” as the number of Americans who watch American players in US league play.

Obviously, that is a ridiculous metric. US tennis fans watch tennis wherever it is played all over the world, and the US audience for golf does not plummet when a tournament is played in the sport’s birthplace, Scotland. More Americans watch soccer in the European and Mexican
leagues, in English and in Spanish, than watch baseball and ice hockey, traditionally considered two of the “big four” US sports (along with American football and basketball).

For the US, in particular, the World Cup is a great equalizer. My mother is originally Belgian, though she has been a US citizen for over 50 years; I still have an uncle, aunt, and cousins in Brussels. During the US-Belgium match, emails flew fast and thick across the family network, with lots of friendly rivalry.

My mother claimed divided loyalty, because Belgium, after all, was “the David against the mighty Goliath.” Her three American children all weighed in simultaneously, pointing out that in soccer it is the US that is the underdog. Where else can the US experience what it is like to be a small country on the global stage?

Like viewers around the world, Americans rooted for their team together, regardless of their domestic differences. At a bar in Aspen, where the only open seat was at a table with an older man and his son-in-law (who welcomed me and offered to put my beer on their tab), we cheered and groaned whenever the US got close to scoring a goal or missed a kick. In the periodic short breaks, we sounded each other out enough to find out that we were definitely in opposing political camps.

Given the current state of polarization in US politics, I think it is likely that in most other settings, my tablemates would not willingly have bought several rounds of beer for someone who spent two years working at the State Department for Hillary Clinton. Here, though, we were cheering not for our political side, but for our national side. As our team maneuvered the ball down the field, politics fell away.

That happens at the Olympics, too, of course. But the Olympics is a smorgasbord of sports, each with its core of devotees, who often cheer on their favorites at the same time, but separately, in different arenas. And, more often than not, what we are witnessing is individual achievement – the deeply concentrated agility and courage of the downhill racer or the finely disciplined movements of the gymnast – rather than true team effort.

The World Cup allows all of the supporters of one country to come together at one moment for one game between two groups that must, like them, become more than the sum of their parts. It actually feels incomplete to watch the World Cup alone. At the end of the game, amid regret over the loss to mighty Belgium but convinced that the US had played a great game, my new friend said: “We need much more of this.”

US exceptionalism remains alive and well, of course. I suspect that we will always call the world’s game “soccer.” But now we love it, and it is our game, too.