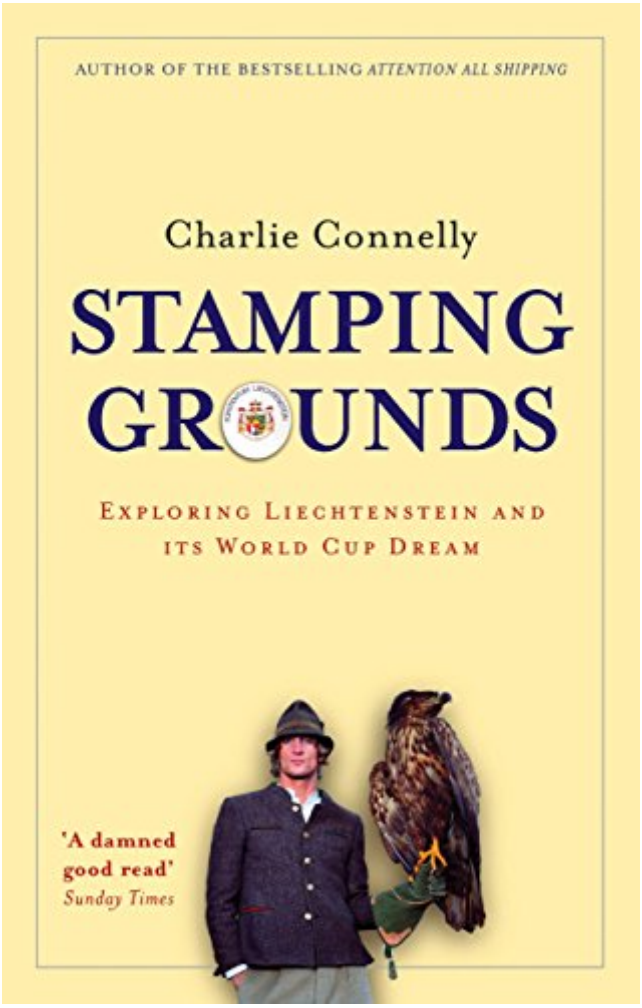
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Stamping Grounds: Exploring Liechtenstein And Its World Cup Dream



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Synopsis

STAMPING GROUNDS follows the Liechtenstein national football team through their defeat-strewn qualifying campaign for the 2002 World Cup. Drawn in a group with Israel, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Austria and mighty Spain, it was hard to see the principality's part-time players scoring even one goal, never mind adding to its meagre international points total. So what motivates a nation of 30,000 people and eleven villages to keep plugging away despite the inevitability of defeat? Travelling to all of Liechenstein's qualifying matches, Charlie Connelly examines what motivates a team to take the field dressed proudly in the shirts of Liechtenstein despite the knowledge that they are, with notably few exceptions, in for a damn good hiding.Sampling the delights of Liechtenstein's capital, Vaduz, such as the Postage Stamp Museum, the State Art Museum and, er, the Postage Stamp Museum again, Connelly provides an evocative and witty account of the land where every year on National Day the sovereign invites the entire population into his garden for a glass of wine.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Not exactly a book I would typically picture myself reading, but when I discovered that someone had spent a lot of time tromping around one of the small nations in the world following a team that rarely even scores a goal, I figured I'd give it a shot. Mr. Connelly weaves a great tale through the culture

and people of Liechtenstein as well as discussing how football interacts with the day to day life. Although most of the players he talks to have retired, it is interesting to read about them and then see where their careers took them.

A quirky combination of travelogue and soccer aficionado essay, this book succeeds and fails in fits and starts. The premise is fairly straightforward, Connelly decides to investigate the state of soccer in the nation that is the laughingstock of the sport in Europe: Liechtenstein. Basically, he's interested in the process by which a country of around 30,000 people fields a team to compete against sides loaded with international superstars in the quadrennial European and World Cup qualifying rounds. Armed with little more than a 50-year-old guidebook to the country and an enthusiastic email response from the country's tourism agency (er, agent), he sallies forth and installs himself in a guesthouse in the capital.Naturally, Connelly provides the requisite potted history the the wee place, which is delivered in the straightforward prose seasoned with quips and asides that has become the default style for travelogues ever since Bill Bryson started making the bestseller lists. Sandwiched between Austria and Switzerland, Liechtenstein has been a sleepy collection of valleys and villages until the last thirty or so years, which has seen it emerge as a financial services powerhouse with a phenomenal standard of living. In a relatively brief amount of time, Connelly manages to make a number of contacts who are all too willing to show him the splendors of Liechtenstein. Alas for him, this often involves strenuous hikes...As nice as everyone is, the real focus of the book is on football, and the national side's journey through the qualifying rounds for the 2002 World Cup. Best known as a doormat for opposing sides (one win against Azerbaijan, two draws against Ireland and Hungary, 35 losses and six goals scored in international play), they showed glimmers of improvement in the Euro 2000 qualifiers two years previously. For this campaign, the team features a mere six full professionals (most of whom play in the Swiss leagues), and the remainder are semi-professionals who play in the Liechtenstein league and hold day jobs. Given the superstardom accorded to national team members in other countries, it's rather amazing to read about the center midfielder who must choose between representing his country and pursuing his career in banking, or the sweeper who must miss a match due to his grape harvest! It makes for a very nice change of pace from the usual ego trips and gazillion dollar signing bonuses and salaries one normally associated with international soccer.Liechtenstein. is placed in a group with Spain, Israel, Bosnia, and Austria, and Connelly does his best to wring as much drama out of the matches as possible. Of course, the issue isn't whether they will qualify or not, but whether they will win a game! Unfortunately like many, if not all, books about soccer, the flow of a game just doesn't translated

well to the page. Once he gets to the matches, one desperately wishes for videos of them to watch before turning back to the book. Because the national team is such small fry, Connolly's given all access to the players and the manager, which allows one a real insiders view. Unfortunately, they all tend to repeat the same cliches about what an honor it is to be able to represent their country, and how amazing it is to play against such superstars, and how they just want to do their best. After a while, this gets a bit tedious, but Connelly does his gamest to keep things interesting with such peripheral figures as Liechtenstein's number one sportswriter, who manages to write three pages of sports news every day! And toward the end, there's a mini-controversy revolving around the one true star, "Super" Mario Frick, a forward who manages to make it into the Italian Serie A. On the whole, it's maybe a touch overlong, but if you're looking for a book about soccer that isn't tainted by the big money that revolves around the game now, this is a good one. And I guarantee it'll make you root for all those little guys in international competition, I know I'll be looking for the Liechtenstein scores next qualifying round.

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