

A Butterfly on the Football Field

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Забить гол: to score a goal

In honor of World Cup 2018, I thought I ought to offer the basics of football slang. Here the key word is “basics.” Decades of living next to a stadium — the roar of the crowd, the traffic, the mounted police, the rowdy fans, the loud celebrations, and the tendency to use any courtyard as a public toilet — have forever spoiled the sport for me. But I have picked up a few phrases over the years that I’m happy to share so that you know what the fans are screaming about.

Besides, the slang is really fun.

Since this is the World Cup, let’s begin with the mascot: an anthropomorphized blue-eyed wolf named Забивака. Забивака is a cute word for a scorer, from забивать/забить гол (to score a goal). The mascot was created by a student at Tomsk University and beat out a tiger and a cat in a nation-wide vote. I’m not sure who dreamed up the name, which threw me off at first — I misheard it as “забияка,” which is a bully. Забивать can also mean to beat or kill, which are probably not the best connotations for an international sporting competition. But he is a cute little guy.

Now to the game. In the bleachers, fans seem to be in one of two states: either ecstatically happy or insanely enraged. Happy is easy to understand, since it is expressed by Ура! Ура! Ура! (Hurrah!) or Оле-оле-оле! (Olé, Olé, Olé!). The first came to the Russian language from an earlier form of German a couple centuries ago. The second arrived a few decades ago from Spain via television. Members of several major language groups will feel right at home.

When a player has done something right, happy fans shout: Молодец! (Brilliant!) If the whole team does something right, they shout Молодцы! (stress on last syllable, Way to go, guys!) When the fans are really stoked, they shout Волна! (wave), calling for the vast human mass to undulate across the stadium.

Unhappy fans are another matter. They are most likely to be unhappy about the quality of the refereeing. As far as I can tell, the refs are always terrible, unfair, and probably politically suspect unless they rule in favor of your team. Otherwise you scream Судью на мыло! This

literally means: Turn the ref into soap, and apparently has been shouted at matches since the early Soviet period, that is, when people still knew how soap was made.

When you hear fans — болельщики — talking about the game, it doesn't sound much like a sports match at all. They talk about household items, like мышелов (mouse-trap); авоська (string bag); банка (jar); and домик (little house), and then apparently discuss their backyards where there are огород (garden); розы (roses) and бабочки (butterflies).

It turns out that мышелов (mouse-trap) is the goalie, who is in front of the авоська (string bag), which is slang for the goal netting. Банка (jar) is actually the bench, and домик (little house) is the spot between a player's or goalie's legs. Забить в домик is to score a goal through the goalie's legs. Сесть на банку (literally, to sit on a jar) is to be sent to the benches.

Огород (garden) is poor-quality pitch, роза (a rose) is a fan scarf, and бабочка (butterfly) is when the goalie has butterfingers and lets the ball slip past him.

From listening to my fan friends, I've learned that ударить по воробьям (hit the sparrows) and зажечь свечу (light a candle) are Very Bad Moves, but it took a while to figure out that the first is a shot that goes wide and the second is a shot straight up in the air. /Best of all is попасть в девятку (to hit a nine), which is a shot into the top corner of the goal.

All together now: Ура! Ура! Ура!

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