

Why Does Every Soccer Player Do This?

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Goals in soccer games can be few and far between, which helps explain the delirious nature of most scoring celebrations. Some players yank off their jerseys or drop to their knees and glide across the turf in glee. They all often end up at the bottom of a pile of jubilant teammates.

Then there are the players who are presented with a goal-scoring opportunity and, for whatever reason, fail. When this happens, they all do the same thing: raise their hands and place them on their heads — apparently the universal gesture to signify, How in the world did I miss that?

If you've followed the World Cup this summer, you've most likely seen it dozens of times, by players from every position and every country.

Lionel Messi has done it, and so has Cristiano Ronaldo. France, Belgium, England and Croatia have all advanced to the semifinals, but their players, too, have struck the disappointed pose. It has nothing to do with soccer and everything to do with the human psyche, according to zoologists, psychologists and others who study such things.

The gesture signifies that “you know you messed up,” said Jessica Tracy, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia. “It’s going to tell others, ‘I get it and I’m sorry, therefore you don’t have to kick me out of the group, you don’t have to kill me.’”