

world cup 10 – The Quarter Finals

The Quarter Finals

July 3 2010

Netherlands v Brazil Uruguay v Ghana Spain v Paraguay Argentina v Germany

Day 1

Three continents in action on day 1 and the possibility of an upset in one game and an intriguing contest in the other. First, the upset.

Brazil 1 - Netherlands 2

The only surprise in the realisation that Brazil isn't the unstoppable force it's supposed to be is that people are surprised in the first place. On the scale of ill temper, Brazil's achilles heel, this match started at *Grumpy Plus* and went downhill from there. The Dutch must have sensed their opportunity very early on at Port Elizabeth.

The niggle began immediately and Arjen Robben was often involved. His place in this match was central and the Brazilians went for him from the outset, though he gave plenty back over ninety minutes – rather more cleverly than his opponents. Brazil started aggressively and the Dutch were very cross about it. Very cross indeed. But they still found time to be busy on both flanks through Robben and Kuyt. Brazil showed they weren't impressed and decided to save on fuel by going straight to the higher gears they usually save for the final humiliations. Robinho's seventh minute goal looked like a breeze but was offside; but a minute later he picked up a long through ball from Felipe Melo that cut the Dutch defence in half and finished off with one touch. Here we go, we all thought.

The Dutch immediately lifted to *Double Grumpy Extra* but never looked like losing focus and once again one sensed something going on in the deeper levels of this game's psychology. Shortly afterwards, Heitinger's sly kick (or was it?) right in front of the referee earned him a yellow but stirred up Brazil, with Bastos again putting Robben down. The football was becoming lovely, the game itself getting nastier.

Robben and Juan went close to scoring for their respective sides and Kaka's splendid shot, from a neat back heel, tested Stekelenburg. Brazil were looking good, injecting measured doses of style and cutting the Dutch defence into neat slices like sandwiches at tea time. Still, though, the Netherlands looked capable of scoring and Robben's crafty "false corner", when he tapped the ball marginally out of the quadrant for Sneijder to deal with (intending to fool the Brazilians that the corner hadn't been taken) was an indication of their resolve. Maicon's thunderbolt from the wide outside edge of the area, the last kick of the first half, foretold more Brazilian menace to come.

By early in the second half it was becoming easier to dislike the Dutch, with van der Weil earning a yellow for a clear dive well away from his opponent. And Kaka's brilliant control of an airborne ball, flicked forward in an instant, was a glorious and typical piece of Brazilian skill. Sneijder's long shot, going wide, looked tame by response. Bastos should have had a second yellow for a cynical foul on Robben and the Dutch equalizer, seconds later, seemed fair enough – an own goal (but predictably claimed by the Dutch) from Melo's head, as he and Cesar failed to communicate at all.

Instantaneously, with thirty-five minutes to play, the flower of Brazilian flair looked ready to wilt before the machine of Dutch organisation. The “signs of growing confidence” (said commentator Gary Bloom) were transformed into a goal when Kuyt flicked on from a Dutch corner for Sneijder to head home the second at sixty-eight minutes.

Brazil lost it – both their cool and the game– at that moment. Their reaction swung the balance of sympathy, as well as football, the Dutch way and if referee Nishimura had awarded deserved red cards to Kaka and Alves for lashing out without provocation, Brazil could have been down to eight men. Both sides nearly scored again with attempts in the final minutes from van Persie, Sneijder and Kaka. Brazil’s football was superb but the Dutch were better, out playing, out fighting and out psyching them. The wonderful Dunga sadly steps down. Melo’s own goal was Brazil’s first in ninety-seven matches, and then he got sent off – a sad end for him and Brazil but they were well sorted and (attention Craig Foster) the Dutch are looking anything but boring.

Uruguay 1 – Ghana 1 (Uruguay 4-2 penalties)

Uruguay (whose engaging national anthem has an introduction that lasts longer than the main singing bit) was drawn against a Ghanaian side which had Africa behind it. Nelson Mandela said so. And if that were not enough to sanctify the match, it was also being played (noted commentator John Helm) “in the presence of Sepp Blatter”, president of FIFA. Well, you’d think it would be, really, wouldn’t you? It was a Quarter Final, after all. Good of him to turn up, I s’pose. The great man, sitting in his booth in haloed down-lighting, might have been John Houseman’s ‘Global CEO’ in the film *Rollerball*. Will FIFA get a corporate anthem written in time for the 2014 World Cup?

These were two unlikely quarter finalists, although Uruguay have been quietly impressive throughout. They settled quickly with Diego Forlan looking menacing immediately, while Ghana took most of the first half to find a rhythm. And while the Africans looked fluid and confident the South Americans looked sharper, with the first shot on goal at the ten minute mark – a narrowly angled shot from Suarez that needed saving by Kingson. Soon afterwards, Kingson seemed very uncertain dealing with a Forlan set piece but his keeping would go on to play a vital role in this match.

It was good to see the new spirit which Uruguay brings to its football. Despite some hard play, including a number of correctly awarded free kicks against them, there was never really a reason for a yellow card, though they acquired several from “whistle happy” Portuguese referee Benquerenca (Perez, in the second half, was one such undeserving Uruguayan). The South Americans nearly scored in the seventeenth with a deflection from a Forlan corner which would have been an own goal – again, neatly saved by the Wigan keeper. While Ghana looked capable, Kingson again had to save from Suarez in the twenty-fifth. “Why wouldn’t Forlan be up front for the set pieces?” asked Helm. Well, whilst not *quite* in Beckham’s class, in terms of set piece accuracy, he’s not far off it – although one or two of his corner kicks were rather flat.

By the half hour mark Ghana had a head of steam up and Vorsa rose above Lugano to head just wide from a corner; and a Ghana counter attack saw Gyan shoot just wide. They continued to push Uruguay with better passing and as half-time approached Muntari headed wide soon after Uruguay’s inspirational captain Lugano went off injured. Boateng, too, put a spectacular sideways scissors kick over the bar in stoppage time. And then, from nearer the centre spot than the goal line, Muntari conjured one of those

African goals which even from long range look goal bound from the moment they leave the boot. 1-0 at the break.

In the second half Ghana pressed immediately. Uruguay wanted a penalty when Cavani expertly collected a long ball from midfield and went down, but there was no foul by Vorsa and the contact was outside the area. They seemed shaken by the turn of play but quickly reasserted themselves with Forlan's superb equaliser from a set piece kick that had Kingson going the wrong way. If it was Forlan's swerve, it was magnificent. If it was the Jabulani, it was unforgivable. We'll never know, but the game was abruptly alight. A period of supreme skill from both sides followed with no reward for either. Chances at both ends were punctuated by scrappy, anxious moments and Suarez was yet again thwarted by Kingson in the seventy-first minute and should have scored. "It's anybody's game", said Helm with fifteen to go. 1-1 at full time.

To their credit, both sides played thirty minutes of extra time wanting to win and only fatigue got in the way. The highest of dramas awaited, with thirty seconds to go, when Suarez fisted the ball off the line in a goal mouth scramble and was sent off. It was there for the taking for Ghana but Gyan's spot kick hit the cross bar. And so to penalties. "Some of those Ghana heads have gone down" observed SBS's Paul Dempsey but Gyan's courage in stepping up for the first was huge. Ghana's couldn't hold their nerve, though. Muslera saved shots from Mensah and Adiyiah and although Pereira put his over the top for Uruguay it was a 4-2 South American result. Uruguay go through, without Suarez, and Ghana are left with the pain of coming so, so close to being Africa's first ever semi-finalist.

Day 2

The big one has arrived. Germany against any side good enough to get this far was going to be good – but against Argentina's flamboyant skill the powerhouse of Europe would need to lift once more. Paraguay looked an unlikely winner over a nevertheless unpredictable Spain.

Germany 4 – Argentina 0

A friend said to me yesterday that Argentina are a bit like Manchester United – you'd like to support them but it keeps coming back to the bloke in charge. Mind you, he added, it's not that easy with the Germans either. Ice cool they stood for the anthem. Ice cool they stayed, pointedly separate from Argentina, during the "Say No To Racism" group shot. The 'balance of sympathy', as in yesterday's classic, would find its own direction as the game unfolded.

The Germans delivered the opening hit in the first minute with Klose bringing down Mascherano from behind with a vicious kick to the left ankle, though the Argentine clutched his knee by mistake. Argentina responded in kind immediately to concede a free kick in the second minute. Schweinsteiger's cross, a graze off Müller's head, goal. Are you listening, amigos? The Germans were "razor sharp ... swarming all over Argentina" said chatty (and refreshingly un-PC) John Helm at the microphone. With Argentine defensive weakness evident early, the Germans were marauding like dogs off the leash. Messi made an immediate reply with a blistering counter attacking run but it took the Argentines until the second half to settle if, in fact, they ever did. Despite inventive moves worthy of a result, their opponents' pincer-like passing continued, snapping and snarling thorough a disorganised Latin defence.

In midfield, Teves looked off form from the start and, in fact, he and Messi were simply kept out of the game by a side that always seemed to have two extra men on the field. Over ninety minutes, it was Higuain and Di Maria who came closer to scoring. In the twentieth minute Germany roared out in a counterattack from defence with a seven men charge. It was terrifying. Two minutes later Messi did put Teves through but Neuer fell to reach it first. Müller set up Klose in front of an open goal but he shot high. If Germany's later goals had not been such sitters, Adidas would have had some serious questions to answer in this match. The Jabulani, time and again from the world's very best, sailed high over the bar. How could FIFA have allowed this abomination to wreck such a game – such a tournament? This column foreshadowed that risk on day one but it has turned out to be far worse than we could have imagined.

It was clear Maradona had some work to do to reorganize his defence, but equally clear that he didn't seem to see this. While Argentina slowly made their way into the game, the risk was always that Germany, with one more goal, might run away with it and put the outcome beyond the reach of Teves and Messi. Müller was perhaps unlucky to get a yellow card for an accidental handball in the thirty-sixth; and Argentina's superb goal from the free kick that followed, though ruled offside, suggested their playmakers could probably look after themselves and make a game of it, if the leaks were plugged at the back. Still Maradona did nothing, though the backline had been regularly and brutally pillaged by half time, when the 1-0 score might have been 5-2.

Still no Argentine changes after the break, apart from Demichalis's hairstyle. Though Argentina pressed hard and convincingly in an untidy first five minutes, the first half pattern would inevitably reassert itself if nothing was done to contain Germany. In fairness, perhaps this was simply not possible but in any event it did – except that into the bargain Germany also went up a notch. With more cynical fouls from the Germans the 'BOS' had begun to swing towards Argentina and Higuain was unfortunate to be offside in the fifty-sixth minute with only Neuer to beat. Still we hoped for something to even things up. Neuer went through a busy spell, but more often than not good passes found only empty spaces in front of goal. More goals seemed likely and one felt after all that it would be Maradona's reliance on the divine that would decide this match.

With the boss now considering attacking changes, his defence was still asleep at the wheel in the sixty-sixth when a pitiless Teutonic penetration gave the ball to Podolski, who flicked it to Klose to tap in unchallenged from half a metre. With a better chip (and he had the time), Podolski himself might have made it three a minute later. But they strolled a third, very similarly crafted, in the seventy-third, and that was that. The rest of the Argentine team joined the defence in going to pieces though Messi, heroically and characteristically, kept going till the end. This was to be his tournament and he tried and tried and showed no bitterness when his gorgeous football yielded no goals over five games. He remains the finest there is but Germany's new young lads might have something to say about that in the near future. They wanted four – why wouldn't they? When it came, from the German left flank once again for an effortless first touch volley to give Klose his second, it was another 'light training run' with Argentina put to the sword. The look on Messi's face was tragic.

The BOS seemed unclear at the end, as did the boss. Germany played far the better football and Maradona got it tactically very wrong, with no indication that he really understood this. He'll have to pay the price for that because this was a fine side that lacked only the ruthlessness in finishing and the defensive strength it once took for

granted. Still, the question remains. When Germany can be so philosophically (and admirably) brutal in style, why do they need to be so physically ugly too? Klose's violent first minute kick on Mascherano; Müller's ludicrous dive on the merest of contact with Di Maria. The two decade long focus on German youth football is paying wonderful dividends but the baggage that seems to have come with it is not acceptable.

They do seem to like this 4-0 scoreline, chuckled Helm. Ein, Zwei, Drei, Fear. This is the side that will have to be beaten

Spain 1 Paraguay 0

On form so far, Paraguay looked less than half a prayer against Spain, with very few goals and an ordinary outing against Japan. Spain, too, looked full of finesse but still, somehow, unsure of themselves. In a World Cup Quarter Final, where anything can happen, it very nearly did.

Paraguay came in with a refreshed and more attacking front line, including the excellent Valdez, and it showed immediately. They looked confident from the start and full of attacking potential. So did Spain, though Paraguay were so keen to get at the ball they hounded Spain continuously and kept them, if not on the defensive, then certainly below par and less than settled until almost the end of the game. Ramos looked sharp on the right from the first whistle but Paraguay looked to have him contained, with Riveros particularly effective. Ten minutes in and we might just have a game here. "This is not going to be a comfortable night for Spain", suggested commentator David Woods, after Valdez nearly caught Spain's keeper Casillas taking too long to clear a ball on the ground.

Paraguay have been a delightful South American 'value-add' for several World Cups and well worth the attention they've received in this one. The 2010 squad lacks, perhaps, the creative technique of past sides but lacks nothing in confidence and controlled passing. For all their energy, Villa and Ramos were well contained before anything promising really got going and a searching long ball from Xavi to Torres was calmly and elegantly dealt with under pressure by Paraguay's defence in the twenty-fourth minute.

By the half hour mark, Torres was showing signs of serious match fitness at last; and Xavi's wonderful turn and first time volley from long range went marginally over the bar with Villar beaten off his line. "They're being hustled, the Spanish, but they mean business", said Woods. Paraguay's defence seemed vulnerable for the first time when David Villa burst diagonally across midfield and passed to Torres, whose first time flick across the front of goal from the edge of the area would surely have produced a goal made in heaven if there'd been a Spanish finisher.

It would have been a game changer, but Paraguay continued undaunted. Valdez cut through Spain's midfield and supplied Morel who placed an almost perfect cross just ahead of Santana. Valdez scored a cracker himself in the fortieth but it was disallowed in a contentious but probably correct offside decision. The ball was played in with Valdez onside but Cardozo offside and although Cardozo didn't touch it on its way to Valdez, sparking suggestions the goal might have stood, Cardozo was close enough to have been the intended recipient. Still, it was a stormer of a finish and a warning for Spain. Valdez cut Spain's defence to shreds again, just before half-time, but finished poorly from distance. Nil all.

Valdez continued to keep Spain alert in the second period and it continued from end to end until an eight minute period of high drama that began in the fifty-second minute. Cardozo was blatantly dragged backwards by Piqué and you'd never see a clearer penalty. But Cardozo's spot kick was saved by Casillas, with later replays showing Spanish encroachment. Play switched immediately to the other end where Alcaraz did very little, really, to cause Villa's headlong Klinsmann-esque tumble in the area. Technically, and marginally, it was *probably* the correct call – but Alonso's first shot, which found the net, was ordered to be retaken because of Spanish encroachment. His second was saved by Villar and the rebound fell to Fabregas, who probably was fouled by the diving Villar and might have had another penalty. Drama of the highest degree and on balance Paraguay would have felt hard done by.

With ten minutes to go, Iniesta showed why Wayne Rooney thinks he's the best player in the world. Cutting through Paraguay's defence with exquisite and seemingly effortless artistry, he passed to Pedro whose shot came out off the upright to Villa, who then hit the same upright. Villa's shot rebounded onto the other upright and finally deflected in and Spain had the game at that moment, with seven minutes to play. Casillas denied Santa Cruz (on for the injured Valdez) in the last minute and Villa almost got a second on the break. The South Americans will feel cheated by refereeing inconsistency when they see the replays of the encroachment on Cardozo's penalty. But thanks, Paraguay, you've added something special to this tournament, again. Spain edged it, again. The contest with a rampant Germany has the makings of an unforgettable semi-final if Spain can find just a touch more penetration.

The Semi Finals

2030 hrs

july 6 Uruguay v Netherlands

july 7 Germany v Spain