

world cup 11 – The Semi Finals

The Semi Finals

july 7 & 8 2010

Two games to pit European organisation against South American finesse; and European organisation against European finesse

Semi Final 1: Netherlands vs Uruguay

Netherlands 3 - Uruguay 2

When there's everything to play for, knock out matches at this level will always produce an equalising effect between teams of differing abilities and odds. Especially when the competing teams are both improving, when both have gone further than expected and when one has nothing to lose. Arjen Robben came in on fire for the Dutch; the Uruguayans fired themselves up by what his countrymen portrayed as an "act of national heroism" by Luis Suarez in handling the ball away from goal in their Quarter Final. In the anthems, Uruguayan faces showed delight and excitement. The Dutch expressed purpose with a hint of apprehension.

In the end, The Netherlands were stronger but for large periods of play Uruguay looked right in it and even at the end their striking stoppage time goal held the possibility of late drama. How would the Dutch have handled extra time, one wonders, if Uruguay had managed one more. Forlan was already off, so who knows?

The first semi final in Capetown began entertainingly though key players were missing from both sides. In their "first real test of the tournament" (Ned Zelic, SBS TV) Uruguay acquitted themselves well, settling immediately though the Dutch were unlucky not to score in the third minute when Kuyt's shot from Muslera's clearance went high. Pereira's cheeky attempt to chip Stekelenburg in the sixth did the same. "Well, we've seen them sail into the net like that from distance before", said commentator, John Helm. Not with this ball, we haven't.

In an evenly balanced first fifteen minutes Uruguay were sharp and created as many attacking chances as the Dutch, matching them for organisation and impressively tight in defence. But when Kuyt and Robben momentarily swapped flanks in the eighteenth the value of the unexpected was proven; van Bronckhorst was allowed too much space to turn in midfield and hammered an astounding shot into the far top corner of the net from probably thirty-five metres. It gave The Netherlands an edge, perhaps reinforced by anger over an unintended but dangerous high boot into the face of de Zeeuw by Caceres. Van Persie and Robben combined well to make Uruguay's defence suddenly only partially visible.

Uruguay might have had a penalty towards the end of the half when van Bronckhorst elbowed Cavani, unseen by all the officials; and soon afterwards Cavani spoiled a concerted South American attack by trying to do too much himself. In a good spell of Uruguayan pressure Stekelenburg remained untroubled until Forlan replicated the game's first goal, from a slightly shorter distance, with a long and equally devastating swerving shot which the Dutch keeper really should have dealt with. Sneijder's superb chip over the entire Uruguay defence, for the head of Kuyt (wrongly ruled offside), deserved a second Dutch goal in stoppage time. 1-1 at the break.

Uruguay made the Dutch backline look a mess again, five minutes into the second half, and continued to pressure with the pass of the match in the sixty-fourth minute, from Perez on the edge of his area along the left flank and falling at perfect speed into an empty space alongside the Dutch area for Cavani to gather. Robben also continued to be highly industrious. "Everyone can see Robben's left turns coming – it's just that no-one can do a thing about them", said SBS's Paul Dempsey. This was splendid football all round, the match swinging again towards The Netherlands by the hour mark. Sneijder, a little weasel, was everywhere and deserved his deflected goal in the sixty-ninth minute though van Persie was offside.

A third three minutes later effectively capped a period of sustained Dutch pressure; Kuyt's perfect cross gave Robben an age and an acre of space to equally perfectly place the ball, in off the base of the upright, in the Uruguayan net. 3-1 and Uruguay's passes began to go nowhere, though they didn't ease up on the work rate and Pereira's brilliantly taken goal following a set piece, with ninety seconds of stoppage time left, briefly offered hope. 3-2 after too much stoppage time allowed by Uzbek referee Irmatov, who otherwise had an excellent game.

The match was played in good spirit for the most part, with one of those nice moments of professional empathy between Heitinga and Forlan early in the second half – though the Dutch, while never matching the dramatic skills of the Germans or Italians, still go down too easily. And van Bommel, despite his incomparable mid-field playmaking, brings an unseemly malevolence to much of his work. Frankly, he asks for it – and he got it with a yellow card, much too late, in the last minute. Those who have suggested the Dutch have abandoned their commitment to "total football" may now be taking stock. Though falling short of the flair of Cruyff's era, this side has played splendid football. They're a worthy finalist.

*Semi Final 2: Germany vs Spain
July 8 2010*

Germany 0 - Spain 1

Paul Dempsey set it up best on SBS 1. "Germany, renowned for the method, have been producing the magic, while Spain have been ruthless in surrendering their art to grind out the results". Germany had blended all the finest attributes of European football, added the knowledgeable David Zdrilic. Minus Müller through suspension, this was still a side capable of bringing superstars like Rooney and Messi to their knees, continued Ned Zelic. Top comments and this was always going to be a thriller. Whatever the historic connotations of Germany's national anthem, it was a beautiful and stirring piece of music to open a truly grand occasion and the match we'd all been waiting for. German faces during the anthems displayed grim purpose; the Spanish had quiet belief written all over theirs.

A cautious, subdued start from both sides served only to underline from the start the promise of huge drama. Confident early defence from German captain Lahm announced that "...you'll have your work cut out to get round us". Seconds later, Spain did just that, almost scoring when Pedro saw half an opening, Villa saw it too and ran for the inch perfect pass. Neuer also saw it and got there just in time to collect, in only the sixth minute. German counter attacks seemed, for the moment, uncertain and disjointed as Ramos on the right did great work to press home Spain's early psychological

superiority. They should have scored in the twelfth after a corner, when Iniesta made space to push in a good cross with just too much pace for Puyol to keep his diving header below the bar.

By the quarter hour mark, denied real possession, Germany sensibly went on doing what they do best, waiting for the counter attack with heads well up. Equally patient and well in control of the game's pace, Spain continued to find and prize open German defensive gaps. A German counter attack in the twenty-third minute lacked their typical clinical cohesion and was well dealt with by Puyol. This tense pattern continued past the half hour mark with Spain in control, making chances but unable to finish them. It surely couldn't stay like this much longer.

In the thirty-first Trochowski, on for Müller, let go a long shot that needed saving by Casillas. It was Germany's first real attempt on goal and generated a period of both sustained German pressure and exciting end to end action. Spanish talent was exemplified in the forty-third minute when Villa turned exquisitely and stepped easily through three defenders to put a pass across midfield that was worth more than the corner it led to. Nil all at the break. "Germany just can't find their rhythm", said Zelic. "Spain look the goods but they haven't found that killer touch", noted Zdrilic. "What a stormer this is", concluded Dempsey.

More of the same except that the pace and tension sharpened immediately in the second half. In the forty-ninth Pedro, superb throughout, set up Alonso for another long range blast just wide of Neuer. Schweinsteiger's reply a couple of minutes later was finished unconvincingly by his midfield, and the first tiny doubts took hold. Pedro's cracking fifty-seventh minute shot after nice build up play was well saved by Neuer and needed to be. The ensuing scramble resulted in a low, fast cross from Iniesta that Villa couldn't quite reach but perhaps should have. Suddenly, Spain was right on top, as the hour mark approached, raining attacks from left, right and centre into the German defensive zone. Klose fired off a difficult volley in the Spanish goalmouth, too high in the end after an awkward cross. Thrilling stuff from end to end. Spain making so much space, but would their inability to finish lead to desperation? The psychology of the game was as riveting as the football. Germany stayed cool and alert in defence, watching like hawks for chances to break. A superb move begun by Özil and continued by Podolski gave Kroos (on for Trochowski) a blitzkrieg half volley in the sixty-ninth, well saved by Casillas.

But when it came, it was at the other end and a fair reward for the run of play so far, despite Spain's increasing tendency to start falling over a bit lightly (Ramos and Iniesta especially). A corner and a bullet of a header from Puyol, riding high over the lot of them, gave Neuer no chance. 1-0 in the seventy-third and "...one might be enough", said commentator Dave Woods.

Del Bosque then pulled off a master stroke by bringing on Torres, giving something back to this gifted player not quite in starting form, and driving another psychological nail into rising German anxiety at just the moment when the game itself would lift Torres to full match fitness for the Final. It was inspired coaching strategy and Torres would have had a goal on a plate immediately had not Pedro made his only error of the game and held possession instead of passing.

Ten minutes to go and not quite enough for Germany, though they came close once or twice. Neither side deserved to lose this game. A German spirit crafted by Jogi Loew and the progressive German football authorities was solidified by the team's memory of the late Robert Enke. They wanted it for themselves, but also for him. They *were* the side that had to be beaten, and they were.

Have Spain finally beaten their own demons?

The Final
20.30 hrs

july 11 Netherlands vs Spain
(Aust tv coverage from 03.30 aest july 12, SBS 1)