

world cup 13 – The Final

## **The Final**

*july 12 2010*

### **Spain 1 - Netherlands 0**

Until midway through the second half, when it marginally came to something approaching life, this was a wholly forgettable game and hardly worth reporting except for the occasion and the incident. There was little enough football and it was an unseemly close to a fine tournament. Always destined to be a glorious contest or a complete dud, the full extent of the boredom turned out to be the only real surprise. A clash of organisation and flair, with two teams playing differing interpretations of the 4-3-3 formation, should have produced a thriller. But whilst two sides were on the field only one was really playing football and the Dutch lost much of the goodwill they'd earned in earlier games. In truth, the play-off for third and fourth yesterday was a better and more honorable match, played by two more deserving sides.

Van der Wiel and de Jong returned for The Netherlands, Torres didn't start for Spain. Yorkshireman, Howard Webb (who is also English), had excellent governance of a difficult game, except for one major late error. The balance of sympathy was evenly divided at the kick-off marginally tilting towards Spain on sentiment, perhaps. Whichever side lost, their demons would run wild again.

The first half was a contest of yellow cards, devoid of much real football although Spain applied attacking pressure early on with the Dutch applying physical pressure in its place. Villa and Ramos had early chances; Robben was effectively closed down and didn't find his pace until late in the ninety minutes and extra time. Kuyt had an early shot on goal but it was too weak. Ramos surged, as usual, on the Spanish right and forced a desperate clearance from Heitinga in the twelfth minute.

"The Dutch fans will be very concerned at the moment" said SBS commentator Craig Foster. Although the sense of occasion and drama so vividly evoked by European commentators like Martin Tyler was missing from this SBS commentary, it didn't matter much because there was so little of it anyway; and Foster's detailed technical and player knowledge added another dimension of interest. As time went on his comments earlier in the tournament about boring Dutch football seemed less and less unfair; and his detailed knowledge of the Spanish front line, with all their strengths and weaknesses, was a nice bonus.

By the end of the game it seemed as if the entire Dutch team had yellow cards and most of them came early. Van Bommel, unsurprisingly, walked a tightrope throughout, dropping Puyol in the thirteenth minute and earning his yellow in the twenty-first for a characteristically unpleasant challenge on Iniesta. "The Dutch haven't had to deal with this defensive pressure", said Foster, "and they're struggling to do so". A yellow for Puyol himself in the seventeenth, for a late challenge on Robben, led to a free kick and a fine strike from Sneijder. Ramos was unlucky to get one for a 50/50 encounter with Kuyt. "Spain are getting the ball and trying to play", Foster observed. "There's just no room for Dutch options". De Jong's yellow for imprinting the pattern of his studs on the chest of Alonso deserved a straight red but referee Webb trod a difficult line between putting them all on notice and allowing at least the chance of some football. His leniency, when it showed, was well considered.

With half time approaching the balance of sympathy meter was swinging wildly away from the Dutch. Mathijsen and van Bommel mis-kicked in front of goal. Spain were still creating incisive breaks and shooting chances but a late Dutch flurry culminated in a good shot from Robben saved by the diving Casillas. Nil all at half time. Back in the studio Paul Dempsey, as usual, got to the heart of the matter. "This is not an anti-Dutch crusade but surely we're entitled to a football match in the World Cup Final?" he said. Fair point. "They're playing the way they've played throughout the tournament", Ned Zelic replied. Not *quite* true – we saw much better from them in the Quarter Finals.

Spain should have gone one up early in the second half but Puyol mis-timed his header badly from a corner and then Capdevila failed to strike the ball that ran on to him. Van Bommel's push in the back on Alonso inside the area might have produced a penalty. The yellow cards continued; van Bronckhorst in the fifty-fourth and Heitinga in the fifty-sixth for a nasty foul on Villa. Irritation was distilling into anger that such an occasion should be sabotaged like this and the sympathy meter was off the edge at the Spanish end. The Dutch plan was now clear, noted Foster. "They could have come out and made Spain play but instead they're relying on frustrating Spain and just forcing set pieces". Poetic justice was done in the sixty-first minute when Casillas made a superb save to deny Robben in front of goal. It was well set up by the Dutch, in fairness, but by now you just didn't want this to be their day.

The game became scrappy, violent and tedious with both sides at fault. Villa put a shot two metres out from goal over the top in the sixty-ninth. The attacking Elia came on for Kuyt with twenty minutes to play and when the Dutch decided to play some football at last the heart seemed to go out of Spain, with chances still being conjured by Xavi and Iniesta but no-one up front to do them justice. Extra time became a certainty when Ramos, with space and time, put his header from a corner high over the bar from six yards out.

In the ugliest incident so far, for its poor acting as well as its out and out malice – van Bommel was the predictable instigator – the Dutchman's challenge on Iniesta caused the Spaniard to fall, roll in pain and then get up immediately. Van Bommel then ran into his back and fell into a rolling dive himself. It was like Play School. "If Iniesta knocks you over, you've really got a problem", Foster observed dryly. Iniesta brought a moment of brightness in the eightieth, weaving to the edge of the six yard box. He would surely have scored but for Sneijder's superb tackle under the greatest of pressure. A nice moment of understanding between the two, well caught by the splendid South African TV direction, added something, at least, to this match.

The Dutch should have won it in the eighty-second – and you probably would have reluctantly given it to them – when van Persie's neat flick from his head put Robben through with enough pace to beat Puyol, only to see his shot saved once more by Casillas. But Robben, whose skills have been a tournament highlight, once again blotted his copybook with a running verbal attack on Howard Webb for failing to give the foul he was sure he'd earned. All his sublime control seems to have gone to his feet, with none left over for his mouth. Replays showed it was marginal, but Casillas went for the ball and Robben played for the foul. Yellow card for Robben. Fabregas on for Alonso with four minutes to go. Nil all at full time, but it might have been 1-1 if Ramos and Robben had taken their chances.

More of the same in extra time with missed chances at both ends prevented by supreme goalkeeping skills by both Casillas and Stekelenburg. The Netherlands upped the pressure, whilst Iniesta took far too long in front of goal in the eighth minute, looking for a pass instead of a shot. At least the game was opening up a little and the balance of sympathy meter swung back just a touch towards the Dutch, mainly because of Spain's attacking weakness.

In the final fifteen del Bosque brought on Torres, probably too late though the striker was stretchered off late in the game with an injury that may kill off Chelsea's interest in a £70 million move from Liverpool. There were no complaints from Heitinga when he retired with a second yellow for a professional foul on Iniesta. Soon afterwards, the moment arrived when Torres set up Fabregas delightfully in front of goal for the Arsenal captain to flick to Iniesta, who almost took too long to shoot hard and low on the volley to Stekelenburg's right and into the corner of the net with four minutes to play. Game over.

This was not just a poor football match, it was a betrayal of the occasion and the Dutch must shoulder most of the blame. Reluctantly, one felt some sympathy for them at the end – Spain's goal came almost immediately after Webb awarded a goal kick instead of a Dutch corner, his only real mistake but a critical one. The Netherlands's 'total football' approach of the 70s served them much better. "Dismay for the Dutch", said Dempsey, "but maybe they buried themselves today. They lose in a World Cup Final for the third time". "A win for the way the game should be played", concluded Foster, though others played it better in 2010 than Spain, now European and World Champions.