

world cup 2

New Balls, Please, For FIFA

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By twenty minutes into the World Cup opener between S Africa and Mexico it was apparent Adidas has sold FIFA a dud with its new 'Jabulani' ball. Day two confirmed it. The name apparently means something warm and inspiring in Zulu and the makers say it represents design perfection. Well, they would, wouldn't they. Former socceroo, John Kosmina, agrees with Adidas and says the ball will guarantee more goals and so what if goalkeepers are inconvenienced, they'll just have to get over it. Tell that to Rob Green. There are careers at stake here, not to mention the reasonable expectations of the paying public.

Getting over it, in fact, is the problem. There are some who believe the game needs consistency, not more goals; but on Kosmina's own logic it won't just be goalkeepers who struggle with the Jabulani's erratic flight. It'll be everyone. In the opening game, at altitude, the ball too often failed to behave as it might be expected to. Long shots on goal and close range headers went high; medium length passes failed to fall as receiving players anticipated, or ran past them; corner kicks, set pieces and long crosses to the goal mouth failed to fly true, or held up too long; and a long aerial pass from Mexico's Rafael Marquez, known for his long range passing mastery, landed two metres ahead of the receiving player. One of the game's most sublime art forms, the inch perfect long ball, is thus compromised.

Even allowing for the effects of altitude there's a more basic question. It's generally recognised that no-one has been able to improve on the design of the Tango ball, also made by Adidas for the 1978 and 1982 World Cups. Why then does the game suddenly need a new one, unless this was seen as a marketing chance too good to miss? We may not *need* a new ball but if we make one and get FIFA to endorse it, we'll sell lots and lots. Let's give it a warm fuzzy African name and take Sepp out for a long lunch. And FIFA, never very savvy on the strategic front, has bought it hook line and sinker without stopping to ask "Why have you made it swerve? Don't we actually want it to go in the direction it's kicked? Isn't swerve something the players do?"

In both day one games correctly positioned players, including the French goalkeeper in the game against Uruguay, were consistently denied a clean receive when the ball bounced over their heads. In that case, the keeper fell back over the line and should have conceded a corner, which the referee missed. This might conceivably have affected the outcome. The Jabulani is therefore unlikely to spoil the overall spectacle, except for purists, but can clearly influence a possibly critical result. In a similar scenario, Nigeria's Uche was denied a possible equaliser against Argentina with five minutes to go, firing over the top of an open goal when the ball's huge high bounce ensured he had no chance of getting over it. England's Rob Green, though he conceded his own mistake against USA, may well have felt the low shot he failed to save swerved away from him after he'd positioned himself to receive it.

Taken individually, these situations might each have a different cause. But taken together over the tournament's first two days, there are just too many high bounces and shots for this to be written off as errors by players of this calibre. The world's best players, on the world's highest stage, are entitled to play their natural game and paying

customers are entitled to expect to see this. An artificial contrivance introduced for commercial gain may well have embarrassed the tournament.

Finally, let's assume the game *does* need a new ball that behaves quite differently from all previous balls. Why introduce it, untried, at the premier global football event, with everything this implies for tournament integrity? The World Cup hardly needs a promotional boost so if the game itself needs improvement, why not introduce a new ball between tournaments, instead of using the tournament as a vehicle for novelty marketing? That would add to the World Cup. This way risks wrecking it.