

world cup 4

## **Foster Turns On Verbeek**

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Thirty-six hours on from Australia's defeat by Germany, some of the media comment risks turning ugly.

There's legitimate concern, understandably, about Pim Verbeek's tactical approach in that game. As Craig Foster and Les Murray noted on SBS TV, the way Australia played to get there is not the way they played in their opening match. Furthermore, Verbeek has not been tactically tested at this level and it's fair enough to put some searching questions to him. In his defence, Verbeek has quite reasonably pointed out that Australia was outplayed by a better side, that the first two goals conceded were down to on-field errors rather than the game plan, that a likely penalty for Australia which might have made some sort of difference was not given and that Cahill's red card then changed everything. Nonetheless, his game plan was flawed and Ricki Herbert's plucky New Zealanders underlined this in their match against Slovakia last night. Playing their natural game, with great self-belief against a far better side, they managed an admirable draw.

Foster is SBS's chief football analyst and on the day of the defeat he was advocating strong moral support for the Australian camp. A day later he seemed to have moved to a more strident position, one which risks causing problems. He took it a step too far on SBS 2 last night calling for Verbeek's marginalisation and, if necessary, arbitrary dismissal. It was almost a personal attack and from a normally measured, objective commentator it was a surprising outburst, suggesting the possibility of partiality. More to the point, though, it was entirely unhelpful to the situation the Australians find themselves in.

It's questionable whether SBS was editorially justified in reporting unsubstantiated "rumours of a rift in the camp" in the tournament news segment. Foster himself went on to say he would have sacked Verbeek outright straight after the German game; that the players should now take matters into their own hands; and that a supervising committee of Australian "experts" should step in to approve Verbeek's every move. This is the stuff of kangaroo courts, of course, and would make the coach's position impossible. He would be quite within his rights to claim breach of contract and sue Football Federation Australia up, down and sideways. Foster's suggestion, moreover, that "...it's time some Australians took over" is a statement which some may construe as unwise if not divisive. It certainly sits oddly on a multicultural channel which counters racialism at every turn; and it won't help the FFA when they advertise for Verbeek's replacement.

The concern felt by Australian football supporters and officials will not be helped by this sort of ill-considered outburst. The channel's coverage generally, including Foster's knowledgeable analysis, is excellent though it sometimes seems in danger of believing its own publicity. As a reputable commentator Foster is entitled to air his views, even if they're uncomfortable for Verbeek. But they can be aired with a measure of restraint and an eye on team morale. By all means pose the searching questions, and if Verbeek ultimately fails Australian football then let the dirt fly and the lessons be considered. But let's not forget it was a committee of Australians (the FFA) who appointed Verbeek in the

first place and if he does fail, they are responsible. Making him a scapegoat now, after one poor game, is the last thing he or Australia's players need.

This column noted on June 14 the substantial question marks against Verbeek's tactics in the German game. No-one, moreover, doubts the sincerity of Foster's passion for Australian football. He would probably make an excellent national coach himself, come to think of it. But this is dangerous territory he's stepping into. "If necessary, Verbeek can walk", he said last night. In the final analysis, though, it's the coach's responsibility to see the job through and, within reason, on his own terms. Verbeek must respond to the concerns over his tactics; but unless he starts speaking in tongues and training with a square ball he's entitled to ask for support, not moral condemnation.