

world cup 5

## **Foul Play From The Usual Suspects**

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FIFA's Fair Play Code is a bit like a Quality Assurance accreditation. If you put up enough signs with enough ticks in boxes it makes it happen, doesn't it? Unfortunately, no. Foul play remains the standard for too many World Cup regulars.

Little has changed for serial divers, Germany. They've learned well from the ham acting of Jürgen Klinsmann who used to look as if he was trying for a good start in the Olympic 100 metres freestyle, falling and hurling himself forwards at the slightest touch. He's taught his compatriots well. Özil gained an 11<sup>th</sup> minute yellow card for a dive with precisely zero contact with an Australian defender. Bastian Schweinsteiger, too, goes down in agony on little more than a sideways glance. Why, when the German game is so awe inspiring, do they need such deception? The fact that with a minute to go and a 4-0 lead over Australia, Cacau (naturalised Brazilian though he is) took an outrageous dive for no clear advantage suggests the Germans, like Italy, probably just can't help themselves.

Why is it so easy to like so much about Italy and its people, and yet take so little pleasure from their exquisite football? The answer's easy. They combine flair, brilliance and convincing diving with the additional spice of gratuitous aggression. Camoranesi's blatant stamping on the feet of round 1 opponents Paraguay was a case in point and perhaps was to be expected given his early grounding in Uruguayan and Argentinian club football. Italian diving with accompanying simulated agony, which I've watched with increasing distaste since the mid sixties, has refined itself over four decades into a genuine dramatic art form (*see World Cup 1*).

An impressive example came early in the Paraguay match when de Rossi distributed the ball to his right and then fell forwards outside the penalty area clutching his leg as if suffering a multiple fracture. For this blatant attempt to secure an unmerited free kick in front of goal he received no yellow card despite the fact that almost a metre of daylight was visible between him and his closest opponent. Unsurprisingly the shattered leg healed instantly. In the same game, captain Fabio Cannavaro accidentally slipped over on a damp playing surface half a metre from the closest Paraguayan and rolled around in such mock agony you'd have thought he was having a leg amputation without anesthetic. Perhaps it's just a Juventus thing but despite the beauty of Italian football, how can a side like this be supported?

## **Variety – The Spice Of Life**

Whilst the Italians have always alleged injuries to the lower leg area, Brazil continues to prefer its rich tradition of facial pokes and fingers in the eye. Portugal's Ronaldo, never averse to a good dive himself, perhaps had cause to grumble at the way he was consistently felled by Côte d'Ivoire players. But he made sure he got a couple of good tumbles in early just to make the point, one of which resulted in a yellow card for Côte d'Ivoire's Zokora who seemed to make little if any contact. Older South American offenders, Uruguay and Argentina, seem on first showing to have turned over a new leaf. Who can forget the 1966 quarter final (if you're old enough) and Argentina's brutal physical tactics culminating in the send-off (with escort) of captain Antonio Rattin? Later teams did little to improve the nation's sporting integrity – witness Diego Maradona's

outrageous and unpunished 1986 quarter final handball into the net against England. But Argentina now seems to play a cleaner style of football and in their first game against Nigeria they were noticeably attentive to injured opposition players.

Uruguay also have a lot of previous, including a vicious assault on Australian Col Curran in 1974 at the Sydney Sports Ground which kept him out of the country's first ever World Cup appearance. I was there and it was cynical in the extreme. Three players surrounded Curran, the referee was intentionally distracted and Curran was openly felled with a chop to the neck. He was hospitalised and temporarily paralysed. But in 2010 the Uruguayans, too, seemed to be a reformed and gentlemanly side in their scoreless opener against France. Good to see. France itself owes its presence at this tournament entirely to the second most cynical handball in the game's history by Thierry Henry, which kept a more deserving Ireland out. A standard piece of weak FIFA dissembling ensured no sanction was applied to Henry, who essentially said "Yes, I did it, but the ref didn't see it, so that's alright". French luminaries like Zinedine Zidane and Michel Platini sadly backed him up in varying degrees.

Shirt pulling is equally a stain on the game and was allegedly addressed with gusto in the last World Cup. Guess what, Sepp. Nothing happened. The blatant Japanese shirt tug on Emmanuel Eto'o, near the sideline and in full view of the linesman, went unpunished.

### **How Football Should be Played**

Despite all this there have been heartwarming moments of real sporting affection like the warm encounter between Didier Drogba and Cristiano Ronaldo and a similar one between Japan's Honda and Cameroon's Eto'o. And what a pleasure, whatever you think of their politics, to see how Korea DPR performed in their opener with Brazil. This is how football should be played: no spitting, no diving, no creeping throw ins, no histrionics, no arguments – and often a smile and a handshake for a fallen opponent. They look amazingly fit (they probably get half the country's protein ration) and were impressive in pulling one back against Brazil.

Why, though, when the serial offenders are generally the finest teams, whose skills we should be relishing with joy, do their players need to dishonour the game by cheating? And how can FIFA possibly argue that a few Fair Play signs have made this repugnant problem go away? The only conclusion to be drawn is that FIFA's concern has as little substance as the mock injuries. If Thierry Henry's handball against Ireland was missed by the referee, then let him play on. But if FIFA can consider applying a retrospective additional penalty to Tim Cahill, why can't they do the same to the real cheats? "Thanks for coming tonight Monsieur Henry. The match result stands, France goes through, and you're banned for five years. Close the door on the way out, would you". That would fix it, Sepp.

### **maradona's 'hand of god' goal 1986**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbbsytHDp2o>