

world cup 6

Right On Cue, FIFA Fouls It Up

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Every four years, without fail, FIFA pulls something out of the bag to degrade the world's great festival of football. But this time around, they've got almost everything wrong.

The \$2.99 plastic horns, named after something soothing and humane in Zulu, are a pest. President, Sepp Blatter, flatly refused to even consider the storm of protest from players, officials and coaches saying the trumpets were part of the local culture. Drinking beer from two litre glasses is part of the German culture but it didn't happen in the 2006 stadia. The French didn't take chickens to games in 1998. FIFA's unqualified enthusiasm for everything associated with Africa's gifts to humanity is tedious and smacks of political correctness. The one-note trumpets just happen to bear the logo, of course, for a global beverage which doubles as a useful restoring fluid for old coins and hub caps.

The horns haven't turned out to be quite the irritant for television viewers which many expected, but the players cannot hear their coaches, each other or – quite often – the referee's whistle. Mexico's Dos Santos continued to press forward after missing an offside whistle against France and a less discerning ref might have carded him. As if that weren't bad enough, players are finding it hard to kick the new ball too, which FIFA imposed on the tournament after extremely limited trials in a tiny number of countries. It, too, is named after something inspiring in Zulu which is unlikely to translate as "flies straight and true". Fabio Capello, who should know, calls it the worst ball he's ever seen. Where is the flood of goals promised by Adidas? The *Jabulani* ball was visibly inferior by half time in game one when it wasn't too late to replace it. But, of course, the advertising contracts were well locked down. What an insult, then, to players and consumers to place such considerations ahead of footballing quality.

FIFA may believe it doesn't need good consumer relations since it has no competitors for control of the world game. Unfortunately, though, it needs all the PR it can get. The widespread perception is that the sport's controlling body has come to represent all that is wrong with the modern game's domination by big money. It's hard to imagine a more complete mismanagement of a tournament, despite much pleasing football.

Well wait, there's more. What makes everything infinitely worse is the culture of denial that has become the FIFA norm. The "veil of silence", as Martin Tyler described it today, surrounding the extraordinary decision by Mali referee Koman Coulibaly to deny the USA's Edu a winning goal, makes the point perfectly. Coulibaly, who is officiating at his first World Cup (in his first language of French) refused the goal on the basis of a foul by a US player but declined to name the player. He's now gone to ground and neither he nor FIFA is saying anything. Today's Washington Post is reporting, moreover, that the respected Scottish coach David Moyes, believes he missed or overlooked two clear US penalties. Commentator Ally McCoist agreed. "The Americans have every right to be very aggrieved indeed. The goal should have stood", he said during his commentary on the England – Algeria game.

Coulibaly also awarded a yellow card to the USA's Robbie Findley for a handball which actually came off the side of his face. There have been other refereeing howlers – there

always are – but Coulibaly's are the most telling so far in 2010 and hold the real possibility of denying a rightful Round of Sixteen place to the USA. America is one of the fastest developing nations in the world. They pulled out all stops to secure what would have been a deserved 3-2 win, after being down 2-0 at half time.

Referees cannot always be perfect and we mustn't expect them to be. But it's totally unrealistic to place the best players from thirty-two countries on the world's biggest stage and then have their matches controlled by referees with no big tournament experience, simply to keep regional officials happy. However many refs are required, they should be the *best ranked* refs in the world.