

world cup 7

## Groups Stage, Rounds 1 & 2 - Retrospective

June 22 2010

After two rounds of group matches several things are clear. Some of the favourites are out of contention. A couple of surprise packages might go a lot further than expected. And FIFA has no intention of introducing any level of accountability at all to its players or paying customers.

It's also clear that despite the early lack of goals, there's some sizzling football to come in later rounds, when everything changes. Switzerland's and New Zealand's unexpected success are welcome and overdue. Paraguay and Chile seem worthy representatives of South American strength and flair. Brazil and Argentina are ... well, Brazil and Argentina: quite superb, so far. **Chile** looked like the find of the tournament in their 1-0 opener against Honduras, but much less sharp for the same result (which should have been 3-1) against Switzerland. Their attacking style gets them into too many offside positions but their progression is likely and they're worth keeping an eye on, especially if Sanchez can be persuaded to pass the ball in front of goal more often. **Paraguay**, too, may be worth some smart money at this stage; and Uruguay have lifted both their game and their manners.

European football at last, and at its best. That's what **Portugal** turned on yesterday in wave after wave of artistic brilliance in a 7-0 hiding of Korea DPR. Like Brazil, Portugal can simply go up three gears whenever they apparently feel like it, although Brazil often doesn't unless it needs to. Portugal did, and did it for the joy of it, and although one felt for the Koreans, who in so many ways have shown how the game should be played, Portugal suddenly looked like worthy Final contenders, and who'd want to take it from them?

Pre-tournament favourites, **Spain**, look much less convincing. Even with some delightful attacking football, conceived deep in midfield and executed with Latin elegance, their finishing was patchy and 2-0 should have been at least 6-0 against Honduras. They'll need to finish much more confidently to retain a quarter-finals hope, on form so far.

Pride restored but another man down, **Australia** finally showed what it could do in the Ghana match, and regained the support of the Australian fourth estate. The flood of patriotic relief was described unkindly but accurately by the Sydney Morning Herald's Richard Hinds as the media's standard "diggers from the trenches" test of sporting valour; and it was put firmly into context by Ned Zelič on SBS TV. "If they'd played like this against Germany, they wouldn't have dug such a hole for themselves to climb out of now".

The resentment towards Pim Verbeek, much of it unfair, is dealt with elsewhere (*see world cup 3 & 4*). Verbeek was entitled to field a defensive formation against Germany but it was *too* defensive, didn't work and could have been changed at half time. Against Ghana, Australia attacked and but for Kewell's dismissal may just have been worth three points. Cahill returns for the last game against Serbia and so they're a chance, though the hole Zelič was referring to is Australia's total reliance on results elsewhere. Comments from SBS's Craig Foster and others about "...the heart, the courage, the fighting spirit, the true Aussie grit...", although terminally boring are understandable if

they don't miss the real point. The side didn't go to South Africa to colour in the media's comic strip notion of national identity. They went to win, and sooner or later you've got to put balls in the back of the net. The Sydney Morning Herald's Michael Cockerill was much more realistic when he observed that it's time for Harry Kewell Inc to start performing for his country.

**England** has a big problem and it's called Fabio Capello. Whether or not it was wise, or even right, for John Terry to openly air the team's concerns about Capello's arrogance, they are there. There is simply no other reason why a team promising so much on paper and on form should play as if it were afraid of the ball for two matches in a row. It would be nice for the tournament if they find form but at this point England can no longer be considered a serious tournament favourite. Capello, a good coach in a club environment, where his headmasterly emphasis on discipline finds its natural habitat, has questions to answer from English fans for applying it so rigorously in the national arena (even though that was apparently his brief). Get rid of him, and find another Alf Ramsey.

Beckham, perhaps?

**France** has blown it about as completely as it's possible to do and the "karma" emails from Ireland have been uncompromising. In neither of their games have they looked a shadow of Didier Deschamps's great 1998 Cup winning side, going down 2-0 to Mexico and sharing a tepid 0-0 draw with Uruguay. Now, there are claims some senior players may even refuse to play in today's third group match against South Africa. That's unlikely, but if it does occur it'll be the greatest sporting prima donna act of all time and will put French football back decades. Many say they've had it coming.

The **USA** looks for the first time like a genuine possibility for a quarter- and even a semi-finals berth. This side has been steadily improving under Bob Bradley and when they say, quite seriously, that they expect to play in the Final and win, you know they mean it. It's not just American self-belief (and that should never be underestimated) – they have the skill, strategy and stamina. Their comeback in round two against Slovenia was heroic and the denial of their third and winning goal by Mali's referee Coulibaly as deplorable as FIFA's subsequent refusal to even discuss it. With two points in the bag, that decision might just fire them up in the final group game against an Algerian side that looks beatable by all except England. USA probably won't go all the way, but watch them closely because you just never know. Good to see.

**Switzerland** looked very good in accounting for Spain in round one, when they turned counter-attacking football into something much more entertaining and convincing that it usually is. But against Chile yesterday they were pretty ordinary, although hardworking and organised. They deserve a break but will probably struggle if they get to the round of sixteen.

The **Africans** are surely the big disappointments of 2010. Expected to do so well on their own continent, very little really sticks in the memory after two rounds of matches apart from the violence of Côte d'Ivoire against both Brazil and Portugal. This is the side reported by BBC World Service as having asked FIFA if they could bring their witch doctors with them. The North Koreans deserve to take something back with them to Pyongyang and they'll be trying hard to knock the Ivorians over. With France on the

psychological ropes, South Africa suddenly look a chance later today and who could say they didn't deserve it? For the rest of the Africans it's a surprisingly lacklustre showing.

South African camerawork and television direction is quite simply superb, exemplified by soaring wide overheads and imaginative close up cutaways providing delightful and often thoughtful atmospherics. There was the tiny sparrow, feathers fluffed against the cold, scraping a meal by the side line and oblivious of the atmosphere around him; the slow motion close-up of a thumbs up from a Cameroonian striker to his supplier of a long cross; and the sharp as a tack replays of offsides and interesting footwork. As Martin Tyler said, with fine English understatement, "this TV coverage is very, very acceptable".

On form to date, the best last four would seem to be Argentina, Brazil, Portugal and Germany, with Chile and USA as possible smart money bets. But anything can happen in the elimination stages and many groups will have tense final matches, starting with A and B today.