

world cup 8 – the au reservoirs

les yeux irlandais souriants

june 25 2010

Groups A - D

group a

It could have been worse (or better, depending on how you look at it). Thierry Henry might have missed an open goal, or put a penalty wide, or been wrongly sent off. South Africa might have got their vital third goal on a disputed penalty. But in the end, it was pretty ghastly for France – a point and a goal from three games, and the email from Dublin was ecstatic. “There is a God after all. An offside goal and penalty in the defeat by Mexico; an arm in South Africa’s first goal; and a ref’s error in Gourcuff’s send-off for foul play. Amen”.

South Africa tried so hard and deserved to go through, with two second half chances missed, one arguably due to the Jabulani. Like Australian coach, Pim Verbeek, Carlos Alberto Parreira will wish he’d played a more attacking formation earlier. It’s sad to see them go and they might have taken much more from this tournament but their second half against France was a joy to watch. Well done Bafana.

Uruguay’s 1-0 win over Mexico saw them both advance.

group b

Greece, the surprise 2004 European Champions, defended well. It’s what they do best, really, and it was good to see them find confidence in their second game after the first up shredding by South Korea. But against Argentina they just didn’t threaten enough despite the courageous efforts of Samaras.

There’ll be a bit of one-upmanship on the Korean peninsula now, as the southerners go through and the northerners are already eliminated with the unlikely possibility of a maximum three points. South Korea accounted for a frankly useless Nigeria which managed only a point from three games. North or south of the border, you have to give it to the Koreans. They try and try and try. Nigeria promised such strength and imagination and delivered neither. At their best, they’re wonderful to watch but they were perhaps the least impressive of all the Africans and Yakubu’s miss from 2 yards in front of an open goal told the story. Not good enough.

group c

Talk about being damned by faint praise. A marginally improved England offered a “workmanlike” performance against a courageous Slovenia (football.co.uk). English flashes of inspiration (especially on the left) perhaps promised something for the next stages; but flashes of mediocrity also allowed Slovenia the chance of scraping at least a draw almost to the end. Slovenia’s Dedic will find an honourable mention in the Cheats Hall Of Fame (coming soon) for his dive with nil contact by Johnson, who was on a yellow card. England through, but with much work still to do, and a grumpy Rooney replaced in the second half.

What a thriller in the other Group 3 game between USA and Algeria. An Algerian win might see them through, an American win would definitely send USA to the last sixteen.

All to play for then, and they did. With Dempsey twice missing an open goal early in the second half, and the Algerian keeper M'Bholi heroic in repelling quality US attacks, it looked for a long time as if the Americans may go out with only two points, after playing some of the best football so far in the group stage. "Suddenly, we're a soccer nation" said Silicon Valley's mercurynews.com, but the tension was unimaginable until Landon Donovan fired home a 91st minute loose ball eight yards out, after Altidore's quality cross into the area. Top of the group and on every test of skill and courage, no more than they deserve. The Yanks might just be comin'.

group d

When I came to Australia in 1969, UK friends said "you're going at just the right time, Australia will be a top ten football country by the end of the 70s". Years of administrative inertia ensured it took until 2010 for the side to reach a FIFA ranking of 20. Much has been made of the Australian fighting quality in this side and the one four years ago which almost sent Italy out of the last sixteen. The gushing nationalism, a bit tedious after a while, does at least have a ring of truth. On their day, if they're allowed to play their natural game, they'll potentially knock off any side in the world. They weren't allowed that luxury early enough, sadly, and to his credit Pim Verbeek has conceded this. Against an excellent Serbia they were superb, but it wasn't enough. They needed a minimum improvement of three on their goal difference and the thoroughly merited 2-1 win, with top quality strikes from Cahill and Holman, didn't quite get them there.

The constant score updates from the parallel game by SBS commentators during Australia's match did a first class job of robbing the later replay of Germany vs Ghana of all value. Pity about that, SBS, because it was a good game. Ghana looked pedestrian but still managed to keep Germany scoreless and looking relatively ordinary for long portions of the game. In the end, Germany scraped a 1-0 win to top the group, with Ghana also going through on goal difference ahead of two more deserving sides.

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Groups E – H

group f

World number 78 against number 31 and nil all after 90 minutes said a lot about the belief and determination Ricki Herbert has instilled in a New Zealand side short on finishing but very long on confidence. This was an astonishingly open group, holding every possibility from New Zealand as an unlikely group winner through to the drawing of lots. As it was, New Zealand finished higher than Italy and will go home disappointed at what might conceivably have been, had one of their few shots on goal gone in. Chris Wood might have done it for them four minutes from time. Paraguay, and especially Valdez, worked tirelessly as in their earlier group games, looking much the prettier side but no more likely to score, thanks to Paston's outstanding defence of the Kiwi goal. Coach Gerardo Martino was critical of Paraguay's inability to cut through but at least they go through. "Can you get any closer to qualifying?", asked Herbert. Probably not.

The wheel of karma turned first for France, then for Italy. The Italians and Slovaks both needed a win of up to two clear goals to join the next round, such was the Group F uncertainty. The Slovaks went into the second half one up and with half an hour to play Italy looked like the ageing side that brought so much criticism for Marcello Lippi. Their control was sloppy, their passes went nowhere and although it's easy to be wise in

hindsight, this Italian side was never worth a Round of 16 berth. And with their football, such as it was, overshadowed by dramatic diving at almost every touch, and often without one, it's difficult to feel sorry for them. They saved their best football for the genuinely dramatic final minutes which saw two Italian and two Slovakian goals plus a goal line save by Martin Skrtel and (it has to be said) some characteristically Italian goal mouth histrionics from Quagliarella. Slovakia go through owing much to their inspiring young captain Hamsik. Italy bottom of the group. "I take full responsibility", Lippi said. "They played as if they were afraid and that can only be my fault". At least there was one gentleman in the side.

group e

Japan and Denmark badly needed three points, with Cameroon out of contention and Holland already on six. After Japan's two glorious first half set pieces, both producing goals, it was a long way back for the clunky Danes against the brisk, clinical Asians. Denmark's penalty was a good call and captain Thomasson might have scored again except for a mis-kick; but Japan's third from Okazaki, unselfishly set up by Honda, finished them off. As SBS's excellent imported anchorman Paul Dempsey observed, noting the skills of USA, Japan, Serbia and Australia and the promise of New Zealand, the seeds of a new world football order seem to be sprouting. Dempsey's good value. Asia gets two in the last sixteen.

Robin van Persie put the Netherlands one up at 36 minutes, making a Cameroon side which had promised so much for African football look very containable. Dutch stubbornness with more than a pinch of class when needed, took them through with all nine points, playing well within themselves. Eto'o's well taken penalty offered just a sniff but when Robben came on and deftly smacked Sneijder's exquisite pass against the upright with Huntelaar smoothly guiding home the rebound as if the whole thing had been rehearsed that morning, you felt this is a side that's a long way from peaking. All nine points, without raising a sweat – impressive stuff.

group g

Brazil went into its last match on six points; and Portugal, with four, could not rule out elimination if Côte d'Ivoire secured a large enough win and a clean sheet in the parallel match. They needed at least a point, then. Brazil began brightly, but Portugal looked far superior by midway into the second half. At that point, it became clear what was happening. Both sides would have taken a goal if scoring was absolutely unavoidable, but the nil all draw suited them both too much to produce anything like a decent game. Both were trying just hard enough to make it look as if they were trying. Both went through as a result, but the packed Durban stadium was severely shortchanged.

2-0 up at half time, Côte d'Ivoire still needed another seven goals to progress (or an equivalent loss by Portugal). Neither outcome was ever going to happen and it's to their credit that they continued to play good football and to Korea DPR's that they took the few chances on offer to push forward. Côte d'Ivoire went round and through the Korean defence; Korea DPR, still cheerful, hard working and creative, did their best whenever they could. They were dominated by Africa's most physical team but still created moments of danger for the Ivorians until Kalou's effortless 81st minute volley ended all hope of even a draw.

group h

Both Group H games should have been humanely put out of their misery. Chile's six points in the bag meant Spain had to win and Chile still needed a draw to be certain. The tame 2-1 win to a slightly improved Spain against a ten man Chile put the best two sides through, though the final fifteen minutes were gruesome to watch. Chile were content to watch Spain passing the ball around, suggesting they were aware of the likely nil all result in the group's other game. A risky strategy but it worked in the end, and you wouldn't bet against them in the Round of 16. As SBS's Ned Zelic said "Even with ten men they were the better side". But it was ugly and unworthy football and Spain still have a lot to do. Given their history at the tournament's sharp end, they don't look convincing to me.

The Switzerland / Honduras game, taking nothing away from the efforts of both sides, never looked like producing a goal. One feels for a Swiss side described as functional at best. They've tried hard and had bad luck for two World Cups straight. Gritty Stephane Grichting, in particular, stood out as a physically courageous defender who took more than one nasty knock in a dour game. Honduras, for all their creative flair, looked even less likely to score. A loose ball floating comfortably across the goal mouth and missed one after the other by three strikers (the word is used loosely) effectively described their day. Both go home, Chile and Spain go through.

In the first elimination round Africa has one contender, the Americas seven, Europe six, Asia two.

The Round of Sixteen

1600, 2030 hrs

june 26	Uruguay v South Korea	USA v Ghana
june 27	England v Germany	Argentina v Mexico
june 28	Netherlands v Slovakia	Brazil v Chile
june 29	Paraguay v Japan	Spain v Portugal