

world cup 9 – Round of Sixteen

## **The Last Sixteen**

*june 28 2010*

### *Days 1 & 2*

Asian organisation takes a hit from South American flair on day 1, and it's goodbye to a worthy USA. What a pair of games on day 2 with major controversy, England's humiliation completed and Argentina set to meet Germany in the last eight.

### **Uruguay 2 - South Korea 1**

On paper this was a good match up of the improving sides from two continents. But a peculiar Uruguay opener, when Korea seemed to say "here, have a goal on us" set an uneven pattern for the first half. In an open game Uruguay's captain Lugano was superb, organizing in and from defence while Diego Forlan just gets better and better, if such a thing is possible, as a playmaker and striker. The glorious Luis Suarez, who scored both goals for the South Americans, looks as if he's still to peak if the side can push on with it in the next round. "Can the Uruguayan class of 2010 match the achievements of the 1970s side?", asked commentator Gary Bloom. They already have – they play like gentlemen not gangsters, and regardless of the results to come they're a better side, too. How far their game has developed in three and a half decades.

The Koreans, too, are not without credentials, having put Italy out in 2002. They pushed Uruguay hard in the second half and the South Americans' misjudgment of sitting back to absorb pressure told in the 68<sup>th</sup> minute when Lee Chung Yong equalized from a set piece. But it was to be Uruguay's day and in the 80<sup>th</sup> minute Suarez finished it off with a sublime strike on a loose ball from a corner kick. To score a goal of such quality in sheeting rain speaks volumes about this man's talent. A feast of skill in appalling conditions and good sportsmanship all round. Uruguay will need to tighten up in defence, though, from now on.

### **USA 1 - Ghana 2**

Sadly, USA could not put their skill and self-belief to full expression in a game which saw the first genuine flashes of the African game at its most enthralling. Kevin-Prince Boateng's long, low and chillingly accurate 5<sup>th</sup> minute goal was the first glimpse but more were to come. Ghana danced in the American midfield with creative, adventurous manoeuvres that pushed the playmaking to its physical limits and made the tightest of passing margins seem natural. All the things we love about the Africans, at last.

But USA clawed back with pleasing second half attacks from Dempsey and Bradley against a top class Ghanaian defence and earned a deserved penalty on the hour mark. Donovan's strike looked good going in off the upright but it probably wasn't what he meant to do.

It was Gyan's brilliant finish five minutes into extra time that sealed Ghana's control of this match – a classical African goal of power, precision and sheer beauty. Thanks and condolences to the Americans, but they'll be back. USA has arrived, and Africa has a quarter finalist.

### **England 1 - Germany 4**

“Don’t Mention the Beach Towels” said a banner in the Bloemfontein stands. The Germans have objected strongly to pre-match gamesmanship. They always do, of course, though they dish it out well enough. Ask Pim Verbeek. They dished out something else today, too – a football lesson verging on a thrashing for an England side that never looked as if it wanted to be at this tournament.

This game looked for a short time as if it might have everything, with the added spice of historic rivalry and an echo from 1966, when Germany was pressured in the final by a marginal Geoff Hurst goal off the overhead that has never been able to be disproved. Goal line technology has come a long way, though FIFA doesn’t seem to have noticed, and Frank Lampard’s first half strike, which bounced clearly a metre behind the line and then spun forwards for keeper Neuer to collect, was disallowed by Uruguayan referee Larrionda. And if it had stayed at 2-1, after Klose’s mechanically competent opener on 20 minutes, Podolski’s second soon afterwards and Upson’s header, England would have had cause for serious complaint. But the truth is that a brief England adrenalin shot fizzled out quickly. Müller made it three on the hour and then calmly steered in his second six minutes later, set up delightfully by Özil on the end of a counter attack from defence which looked like the “light training run” Germany had boasted of against Australia. England went absent without leave. If not exactly barking, the bulldog still whimpered once or twice, but Gerard’s skilful 81<sup>st</sup> minute shot, blocked by Neuer, came much too late to make a difference.

England now face an even more fearful opponent – their own media – and although Capello insists today he will not resign you have to think it’s Ciao for Fabio. As Martin Tyler put it, the disallowed goal will be talked about for years to come “... but it really only papered over England’s cracks”. It may be unfair and it’s often naïve to lay the blame at one man’s feet but Capello’s “ponderous 4-4-2 formation” ([guardian.co.uk/football](http://guardian.co.uk/football)) was unable to motivate a tired side that has never looked the goods. Job done for Germany and it’s on to Capetown, for Argentina.

### **Argentina 3 - Mexico 1**

The Argentines often use the word ‘latigazo’, meaning ‘crack of the whip’, reports the Guardian’s Sean Ingle. And if Carlos Teves was the executioner it was Lionel Messi, world footballer of the year, who held the whip hand in Johannesburg.

It was Argentina’s first real test and you have to say, notwithstanding long memories from 1986, that Maradona has done for his side what Capello couldn’t or wouldn’t do for England – he’s taken the pressure off them and publicly acknowledged them as stars at every opportunity, which of course they are. During the anthems The Argentines seemed almost in a trance of ecstasy, whilst the Mexicans, with their unusual (shall we say) chest salutes seemed to strike a more military pose. Perhaps that was the difference and the Mexicans certainly looked ready for a set to when Teves’s clearly offside opening goal, delightful though it was from Messi’s chip, was allowed to stand by Italian referee Roberto Rosetti. Iguain’s plundering of a horrible Mexican defensive error made it 2-0 at the break.

Mexico came out again looking good against a weak Argentinian back line, but Teves soon put paid to that with probably the goal of the tournament so far – a spinning turn from the little terrier, outside the area, followed by a swerving blitzkrieger, perfectly placed in the top corner of the net. A strike of similar quality from Javier Hernandez gave Mexico a well deserved goal as Argentina eased off, knowing their next game with

Germany in Capetown will be a tough encounter. Will that be the game for magical Messi, playmaker from heaven today, to finally find the net himself?

*Days 3 & 4, June 29 & 30*

Day 3 said goodbye to a courageous Slovakia that's still a level or two below Europe's best and provided a devastating foretaste of South American supremacy when it matters most. Another contrast of continents between Japan and Paraguay, and a European thriller between Spain and Portugal.

### **Netherlands 2 - Slovakia 1**

Slovakia, who do for tattoos what the French do for hairstyles, entered the World Cup as an independent nation for the first time and were far from discredited. With Robben back in the starting eleven, the Netherlands fielded their strongest side. The derogatory comments from SBS's Les Murray and Craig Foster, suggesting the Dutch were boring, rather missed the point. This is a side that still hasn't peaked and Foster's statement that "if the Dutch win the World Cup, it will have been a poor tournament" was, frankly, churlish. What's got into Foster in this tournament? He's saying some very odd things for someone who knows so much about the game.

There were plenty of glimpses of Dutch vision and finishing and UK commentator Gary Bloom was more on the money – "They'll take their time to find the decisive opening". It came moments later, in fact, from a super long ball out of defence to Robben who took advantage of van Persie's decoy run and cut inside, elegantly slotting it past the diving Mucha from the edge of the area. 1-0 in the twelfth minute, and at half time.

The Slovaks needed something extra and tried hard but their 4-2-3-1 formation denied real service to Vittek and they were kept in it by two fine saves from Mucha in the opening minutes of the second half. The unpleasant side of Dutch football showed itself when van Persie kicked out at Zabavnik for no real reason, and Robben's deliberate handball in the first half was equally puzzling.

In the final analysis, the Slovaks couldn't go up the extra gear as they had against a much less formidable Italy but they can count themselves unlucky that two excellent attempts on goal stayed out, thanks to Stekelenburg's superb saves. Vittek really should have buried one of them, though. The Dutch looked more cohesive over 90 minutes and their second from Sneijder was nicely provided by Kuyt while Slovak defenders were still discussing the Dutch free kick that led to it. And that was the story, really. A late penalty from a contrived fall by Jakubko gave Slovakia one back. "The Dutch will take some stopping at this World Cup" concluded Bloom. They won't get a sterner test than in the Quarter Final. Brazil, next, for the Orangemen.

### **Brazil 3 - Chile 0**

At the start of this match an upset seemed, if not likely, at least possible. By the end Brazil had surely firmed as tournament favourites after a majestic display of almost mocking football. They don't mean it that way, I'm sure – they're just that much better than all the rest when they decide to get going.

But at the kick-off it seemed set for something special. Kaka was back from suspension, Brazil had underperformed in earlier stages and Chile looked hot and ready for it. They played crisp, aggressive one touch passing from the off but inevitably it didn't take Brazil

long to serve notice with a stinging long shot from Gilberto Silva well saved by Chile's captain, Brava.

By midway through the first period, Chile were pressing and Brazil were replying with well crafted moves from Kaka and Maicon on both sides of the field. Brazil might have had a penalty when Lucio and Contreras tangled legs, though Lucio made a lot of it. But it wasn't long in coming. Maicon's 35<sup>th</sup> minute corner went straight to a well shielded Juan to head powerfully past Brava and three minutes later Fabiano finished off a beautifully combined Brazilian attack. "Simply fantastic pace and poise from the Brazilians", said commentator Dave Woods. Right on cue, they'd gone into overdrive to swing it decisively their way. 2-0 at half time.

The second half began untidily at both ends and Chile, while still making things happen, looked to have lost concentration and never really completed their attractive attacking. Robinho's stylish third for Brazil almost on the hour put it beyond them, though Chile never stopped. They just don't know how to. They almost scored when Sanchez set up Valdivia's 66<sup>th</sup> minute volley just over the bar, but you always felt that one back would simply lift Brazil once again; and Robinho almost made it four, anyway, with fifteen minutes to go.

Back it went immediately to the other end for the nimble Suazo to nearly beat Cesar and he did it again, volleying from a corner two minutes later. It's been wonderful to see such football from Chile – and awe-inspiring to see how methodically Brazil dealt with it. It'll be interesting to watch what The Netherlands can produce in the Quarter Final.

### **Paraguay 5 - Japan 3 (penalties)**

Even if the shoot out were not the best way to resolve tied games, some matches just deserve them. This one had penalties written all over it from the outset. With a first ever Quarter Final place at stake for both teams, neither seemed able to get past the block of preferring not to lose. On field, the cheerful Paraguayans belied their rather militaristic anthem; the Japanese, until extra time, looked the more likely to score with less of the possession.

It was a game which, by the halfway mark of the first half, suggested promise and intrigue just below the surface but the spark needed to set it alight never came, mainly because neither side played with the skills the occasion demanded. Paraguay, particularly, were casual, even sloppy, in their passing, though the hard working Ortigoza attacked with flair and on two occasions in the second half defended superbly. But he and Benitez both took too long over their opportunities. Valdez did well to get a shot away in a goal mouth scramble in extra time but it was well blocked by Kawashima. Honda, for Japan, was often hindered by supply that came just a stride too late.

Matches like this are difficult to write about because while so much happens, nothing eventuates and the nil all score line at half time was concisely summed up by commentator Dave Woods as "... very nil nil". More of the same in the second half and extra time made penalties a welcome relief. Komano hit the bar with his, Paraguay went through, neither side looked even half a chance against Spain or Portugal.

### **Spain 1 - Portugal 0**

This was more like it. An uncertain Spain on an almost unbeaten run of fifty plus games, and unbeaten in qualifying. Portugal capable of wonderful artistry and seven goals against Korea DPR. It was an each way bet, really.

With magnificent performances from Torres and Villa – a shot on goal before Portugal even touched the ball – and wonderful left hand breaks from Portugal's best on field, Coentrao, there was little to choose at half time. Spain looked fancier but perhaps Portugal looked marginally more likely to score. Spain's passes, mostly to their own players, were painted across the field like brush strokes on a master's canvas. A more restrained Portugal waited for opportunities and at first took them better. A thunderous long range shot from Ronaldo, which Casillas failed to hold but quickly gathered, proved the keeper's point about the Jabulani ball. The ball's most vocal critic had to contend with both dip and bend of almost a metre. Somehow, these flight variations are quite different from player-controlled swerve, and FIFA must ensure it performs the same about turn on this dreadful mistake as it now has on goal line technology.

The shot was Ronaldo's last hurrah. His game was off colour in the first half and in the second he became a spectator, and perhaps this was the deciding factor when Spain found another level and this finely balanced match turned ever so slightly in their favour just before the hour mark. Several promising moves were finally consolidated when David Villa put his second attempt into the roof of the net following a delicate build up from just outside the penalty area, a nice through ball from Iniesta and a fine first time block from Eduardo. They'd found that something extra that Portugal hadn't and Ramos almost made it two, denied only by more extraordinary keeping from Eduardo. "No-one deserves a goal in this tournament more than Sergio Ramos", said commentator, John Helm.

Villa had a couple more cracks at goal before being relieved of duties, but the job was done. A match played in good spirit between two sides who know and like each other was marred by the unnecessary sending off of Costa by Argentine referee Baldassi in the final minute. The knock to Capdevila was hard but unintentional and the game was better exemplified by the nice moment between Carles Puyol and Coentrao after a tough but clean tussle for a contested ball. "Spain edged it", said Paul Dempsey. "They had the nerve and quality when it was most needed".

Ronaldo bows out after predicting this tournament would prove him the world's best player. Argentina's Messi, much less conceited, remains happy to serve his team and take whatever plaudits may come along afterwards. A much more attractive approach altogether. Spain should easily account for Paraguay. Sadly, we now have to say goodbye to either Germany or Argentina.

### **The Quarter Finals**

**1600, 2030 hrs**

july 2	Netherlands v Brazil
july 2	Uruguay v Ghana
july 3	Argentina v Germany
july 3	Spain v Paraguay