
Monday, March 30, 2009

Paul Gardner's Soccer Talk is a benefit for Soccer America members.

A Triumph for the Snow White Formation

By Paul Gardner

Three years back, in the lead up to the 2006 World Cup, Julio Grondona -- that's Don Julio, the man who runs Argentine soccer -- had some scornful things to say about some of his own players. It had been pointed out that the Argentine roster might well include a quartet of highly skilled attacking players -- Lionel Messi, Carlos Tevez, Javier Saviola and Sergio Aguero -- all of whom were decidedly on the short side, with an average height of around 5-foot-6.

Don Julio dismissed the idea, commenting that anyone who wants to see an Argentina team featuring all four of those players had better go out and rent the movie "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

He got his way -- Aguero did not make the squad, and the other three never all got on the field at the same time. And Argentina was bounced out of the World Cup in the quarterfinal stage. But we're not going to forget the performance that Tevez and Messi -- both had come on as late subs -- put on in Argentina's 6-0 demolition of Serbia.

Maybe things will be different in South Africa. For the Argentine side is now coached by Diego Maradona, one of the game's greatest players - and himself no more than 5-6 at full height. A coach who values pint-size players. On Saturday he put Messi, Aguero and Tevez together on the field in Buenos Aires, and all of them scored in a 4-0 rout of Venezuela.

I suppose there will be those who dismiss that result because it was "only Venezuela" that Argentina was playing. Maradona claimed otherwise: "Venezuela has improved, and it wasn't easy to score four goals."

Maybe Maradona should be reminded that Brazil scored four times against Venezuela only five months ago -- and that game was in Venezuela. But for the moment, Maradona's euphoria is infectious: "This was the perfect game. We kept the ball, we broke down the wings, and we had lots of scoring chances created by the shorties. This is my ideal team."

A lovely term, that. The shorties, *los chiquitos*. As opposed to the big muscular guys, the athletes, *los grandotes*, who increasingly dominate the sport. Maradona cast a thought in their direction, too: "I'm waiting to hear if we've convinced those who want us to play with big strikers and hit long balls up to them."

Of course, he'll hear that response the moment that Argentina loses, or simply has a bad game. It will all be the fault of the shorties. Because Maradona is taking a risk, he's flying in the face of current trends that emphasize size and speed rather than the intricate skills that the shorties bring.

Will it be possible for the shorties to prove what one has long suspected -- that the belief that only way to



counter the sheer physical strength of today's mammoth defenders is to oppose them with huge muscular forwards is largely myth? And that the smaller, more nimble players will cause more problems.

If ever there was a group of shorties equipped to do just that, it is Messi, Tevez and Agüero. But for them to excel, Argentina will have to ignore what has become the most mindless aspect of the modern game -- the over-reliance on crosses. That trio is unlikely to win many heading duels. They need the ball on the ground, where true soccer skills can be put to use.

A weekend of watching MLS games (and, to be fair, most of the European World Cup qualifiers) provided ample evidence of the promiscuous use of crosses -- many of them delivered with the head down, simply a ball hoofed up in the air to land in "the mixer", soccer's version of a Hail Mary, seen a dozen or more times in every game.

That can't possibly do for the shorties, it would be playing directly to their opponents' strength in the air. Keeping the ball on the ground robs defenders of that advantage. A ground game means defenders have to indulge in more tackling (and, no doubt, more obstruction), and that is a frightening thought, for it means more fouling. It will also mean that the shorties will have to keep their cool through a great deal of provocation.

Will referees look after the shorties? One can only hope, though one does so with anxiety, given the way that referees look so benevolently on serial fouling. We shall see where the referees stand when Maradona and his shorties face tougher teams.

Make no mistake, the shorties are striking a blow for the real game of soccer, a game that is shaped by its unique skills, not by studs up tackles and flying elbows. Good luck to the Snow White formation and its Seven Dwarfs, even if there are only three of them.