



[Gracias Espana! A Win for The Beautiful Game](#)

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Spain the winner, Spain better in every department, Spain — at last — capturing a major tournament. They tell me the Spanish have been waiting 44 years for this victory — but it might just as well be three of four times as long. Who remembers 1964, anyway?

All those subsequent disappointments were put to rest yesterday as Spain ran out totally deserving winner. Spain the winner - Spain the team that played far and away the better soccer.

Really, that almost apologetic 1-0 scoreline doesn't come close to doing justice to the quality and class of Spain's soccer, nor to the way that they put the Germans in the shade.

But Germany is nothing if not tenacious, so 1-0 it had to be. A close scoreline, but no contest in soccer terms. The trivialists who seem to infest our telecasts on these occasions gabble on about the significance of Spain losing games on June 22 and the curse of the yellow uniforms (next time guys and gals, why not get a full-blown astrologist in, complete with spells and crystal ball?) — but there are real soccer questions to be looked at here. Questions that are of supreme interest to the future of the game in this country.

Spain's triumph was not merely a local affair, not merely something for one nation to celebrate. The whole world of soccer should rise to applaud this win. It was a victory for the sport of soccer. A victory for the proponents of the Beautiful Game, a victory for those who believe that the game should be played with skill and artistry.

A victory to erase the melancholy memory of the dreary Greeks from 2004, or, for that matter, the constipated French and Italians of the 2006 World Cup final.

The Germans, to their credit, did not play defensively — but such was the threadbare nature of their attacking mode that, at times, it certainly *looked* as though they were content merely to shut the Spaniards down. But the Germans never showed that they had the resources to change the pattern of Spanish domination. Solid defending is all very well, but something has to happen at the other of the field as well, and for Germany there was very little going on up there.

For one thing, the Spaniards were defending pretty well, too. Lukas Podolski and Miroslav Klose achieved nothing — but they were merely the blunt end-points of a German attacking force that had power and strength and willingness, and not much else. In pure soccer terms, for anyone looking for creativity or soccer subtlety at work, the German midfield was a disaster area.

It was made to look worse because it was so comprehensively outshone by the Spanish midfield, which was a veritable hothouse of clever trickery, runs, and passes — but with plenty of running and spirit to keep things moving.

It is in the contrast of those two midfields that lessons for the USA are waiting to be learned. A contrast between the light-footed Spanish, and the heavy-footed Germans. Between the nimble and ponderous. No, I do not consider that unfair. The statistics are undeniable.

The four-man German midfield of Michael Ballack, Bastian Schweinsteiger, Thomas Hitzlsperger and Torsten Frings has an average weight of 178.5 lbs, an average height of just over 6-foot. For the five-man Spanish midfield — Cesc Fabregas, Andres Iniesta, Xavi, David Silva and Marcos Senna, the averages are: weight, 153.2 lbs, height 5-foot-8 inches.

Those are huge differences and simply cannot be ignored. They can be justifiably interpreted as indicating that sheer size alone is not the answer to winning games. But there's something much more suggestive here, something that cuts right across one of the hallowed coaching cliches — one that our lovely TV commentators never tire of quoting when they want to excuse a particularly vicious foul — the one that says there must be a hard man, a ball winner. You can't play modern soccer without such a player, they rant on and on, he does the dirty work, he's the one who allows the fancy-schmancy little guys to play.

Well, then - where was Spain's hard man? Surely, if ever such a player was needed, if ever his hour had come, it was against the massive Germans. A quick look at those five Spanish midfield names tells you there is only one candidate: the naturalized Brazilian Senna. Maybe Senna is supposed to be the hard man — but the point is that he did not play like one in this game, he did not *have* to play like one. Because he was part of a wonderfully fluid, quick-thinking, quick-moving, superbly skillful bunch of (comparative!) midgets who made light of the German size advantage — proved, in fact, what needs to be proved repeatedly, that size is *not* an advantage when skill is on the prowl.

In a sense, all of the Spanish midfielders were ball winners. But not in the overtly physical sense that the term is so admiringly used. They won a lot of balls simply by anticipation, by sharp soccer instincts, by being quicker with their mental and muscular sprightliness.

I am conjuring up a vision of Banality Bob Bradley enthusing over that Spanish midfield and realizing that his own midfield looks much more like the German version. I'd like to think he'd be wondering how the Spanish played so brilliantly — against rugged opponents — without recourse to the inevitable thuggishness of a designated midfield ball winner.

Because the Spanish victory, the Spanish style and class, seem to me to contain a message almost specifically designed for the USA: It tells us that we should do the brave thing, the daring thing, that we should take the risk of developing our immense and growing pool of Hispanic talent, something that would give us skilled players in abundance. That we should, once and for all, make the decision that we would rather play like Spain than Germany.

For a country — and for a whole generation of coaches — that has grown up feeling much closer to the German than to the Spanish style, that is not an easy decision to make. And there are always plenty of ways of dodging it.

You can, quite easily, find such a reason in this very game. It came at the crucial moment, the scoring of the Spain's goal. Was it not obvious that Fernando Torres was able to score only because he was bigger and stronger than Philipp Lahm, by far the smallest German on the field?

For those wedded to the "size matters" school, that will serve as justification. But not for those who see a wider picture, who see a future in which the USA, using *all* of its potential, moves into a position of global dominance by playing The Beautiful Game. *Viva Espana!*