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My World Cup: Spain worthy winners! Dutch deserved losers

By Paul Gardner

Spain triumphant, worthy winners! The Netherlands dejected -- and deserved losers. This was terribly disappointing from the Dutch. In fact their play at times bordered on the disgraceful. Not what was to be expected in the grand final.

But there was not too much "grand" about this game. For the umpteenth time, a grand soccer final has let us down. The quality of the game has not lived up to the pretensions of the occasion. No blame attaches to Spain, here. The Spanish continued, as they have done throughout the tournament, to play their skilled soccer, weaving their intricate web of passes, despite repeated provocative fouling from the Dutch.

So the Dutch did what they set out to do -- and what the Swiss and the Hondurans and the Chileans and the Portuguese and the Germans had also tried to do. Stop Spain from playing. The other teams tried to do it, by and large, without resorting to overtly foul play. The Dutch just forgot about fair play -- and hoped to get lucky with a breakaway goal.

The Swiss made it work. No one else did. And spare a thought for the Chileans, the only opponent that tried to play an open attacking game against Spain. At least Chile gave us an enjoyable spectacle before it went down, with colors flying.

We saw this crudely physical game from the Dutch four years ago in a brutal game against Portugal -- the famous game that featured 16 yellow cards and four reds. The referee, Valentin Ivanov of Russia, unfairly got the blame for that, when it should have been the attitude of the players, particularly the Dutch, that was condemned.

Yesterday, referee Howard Webb came close to facing a similarly impossible situation. But where Ivanov had to deal with 22 players who seemed intent on mayhem, Webb got off more lightly, for the Spaniards, on the whole, refused to be drawn into the fray and managed not to commit the damaging retaliatory fouls.

Even so, Webb flashed 14 yellows and one red, and I think he should have shown a few more. Mostly to the Dutch -- who were damn lucky they survived until the 109th minute with 11 men on the field. It was, I repeat, a very disappointing performance from the Netherlands, from a team that had been playing good soccer to reach the final.

There was little sign of good soccer from the Dutch yesterday. Were things as bad as Ruud Gullit gloomily pronounced from the ESPN studio after the game -- "The game was terrible ... it was boring"? Probably not, but there was precious little to get excited about.

I would make Andres Iniesta my MVP -- of the final (and not just for the goal that he scored), of the tournament -- and maybe of the sport of soccer over the past two years. For these reasons: Spain has been carrying the torch for the skillful as opposed to the physical game for quite a few years now -- maybe as long as a decade. It has done so unflinchingly, never modifying its game to match might with might.

Its victory in the European Championship two years ago was a mighty reward for its faith in its traditional soccer -- a faith that had been sorely tested by 44 years without a trophy.

Iniesta was an ever-present member of the 2008 Euro champions, and his importance grew as the team headed for the 2010 World Cup. To have a team based on skill -- in other words a team that, unlike so many modern teams, is faithful to the origins and traditions of the sport -- means having supremely skillful midfielders.

It also means having midfielders who know how to take a battering. That ought never to be the case. Players who want to play soccer as it was originally conceived, who want to display its many intricate skills, should not have to prepare themselves to withstand assault and battery. But that is the modern reality.

Iniesta is a small man -- 5-foot-7. But he stands mighty tall on the field, takes his inevitable knocks and simply keeps on doing the right thing -- playing skillful soccer. By doing that, he has struck a huge blow for the sport, the *real* sport, of soccer.

One hundred and forty seven years ago, in England, there was a famous meeting of "football" aficionados which quickly split into two opposing camps. Those who favored the physical game broke away and played rugby. That ought to have been the end of the matter -- but that split has never quite vanished -- the physical knock-'em-down, gotta-see-blood proponents still haunt the sport of soccer.

Sometimes, it almost looks as though another meeting should be called. Those who are still pressing for a physical game can split off once again and go away and do whatever they like. Who cares, just as long as they leave the skill proponents to carry on the unique traditions of the game.

Iniesta has shown, and has helped his team show, that skill can triumph, that the small man can be decisive, that attractive soccer can be winning soccer. And it would be unfair not include his teammate, both on the national team and at Barcelona, Xavi, in the same category.

In that sense, I pity the Dutchman Wesley Sneijder, another skilled small man -- but one who found himself yesterday entangled in a team that decided to play rough-house soccer. Not Sneijder's game, and it left him a forlorn marginal figure among the Dutch he-men.

So soccer gets yet another reminder that it needs shaking up. Spain, wanting to play the purest soccer, found it difficult to do so. Not because opponents were better, in a soccer sense, but because they were so utterly defensive, or because, in the case of the Netherlands, they resorted to physical intimidation and provocation.

Is that how we want the sport to continue? When a team that wants to play attacking, flowing, attractive soccer -- the real game -- must prove itself in boring chess-matches or ugly battles before it wins anything? I do not suggest that a skilled team should not have to struggle, but those struggles should be built around the unique qualities of the sport of soccer, not based on shamelessly negative tactics or willfully rustic tackling.

How much longer will it be before FIFA realizes it is not doing nearly enough to save its sport from scared

coaches and dangerous thugs? If that line of reasoning does not appeal to Sepp Blatter and his cohorts, then how about this: How much longer do we have to wait before we get a final worthy of the glories of this sport?