

Sports

World Cup Wrap-up:
Musings From the
Trenches of Soccer Mania

By J. Grigsby Crawford

These are the trenches of the World Cup: no, not the sidelines of South Africa, but the roadside cafes of South America. This is where I watch the games alone. This is where dreams die and sort of sometimes come true. This is where I scream and yell at the TV in English and people giggle because they don't know what I'm saying.

This year's World Cup was a special treat. It brought excitement to the usual lull of summer months on the equator and had the extra kick (!) of seeing the U.S. team advance into relevancy—kind of. For those of us who are bored by the ridiculously lopsided medal counts at the Olympics, U.S. competitiveness in soccer is truly the final frontier. Previously, being truly involved in the World Cup was something that only existed in theory, like dragons, evolution, or the game of cricket. But now we're in it, so it... *is*.

But the U.S. flame only shone ever so brightly and for so long. And, of course, the World Cup is bigger than just one team or country. In sum—and tribute—to a thrilling competition, here's a list of the highlights and lowlights of the 2010 World Cup.

Highlight: Fascism

Of the 16 countries that advanced to the elimination round, a staggering nine have had some form of right-wing military dictatorship/authoritarian government in recent history. In the 16-team round, when these teams faced off against a country that had had a more republican form of government, the former fascists (or country that had *more recently* been authoritarian) went 5-1. For instance, Spain's Franco regime lasted one year longer than Portugal's Caetano, hence Spanish victory. The one exception was Brazil's win over Chile (Pinochet's rule from '74 to '90 certainly has a lot of name recognition, and outshines the Vargas regime, as far as dictatorships go, but—at least for now—Brazil remains superior on the pitch). Then, of course, the final four had three former fascists, including eventual champion Spain.

For those curious, in the 16-team round, USA-Ghana was one of the only two fascism-free contests. It also happened to be the only game between two Anglophone countries in the round. (Eight of the 32 World Cup teams were English-speaking, compared to seven Spanish-speaking.) And—just for kicks—by my count, half of the 32 World Cup teams were colonies of imperial powers some-

time during the 20th century.

Lowlight: The Strangers

The U.S.'s late-game victory over Algeria to ensure its advance to the knockout round was thrilling and emotional. But overshadowing it was a chilling fact conveyed by the Spanish-speaking announcer earlier in the game: 16 of the 23 players on Algeria's roster were born in France. Knowing we had just eked by France's B-team was another grim reminder of the general shadiness of international soccer competition and that the U.S. still has much work to do before it can run with the big boys. Regarding the Algerians' birthrights, I'm not sure whom the joke is on: France? Algeria? Colonialism? You and me? The game of soccer? Well, *c'est la vie*.

Highlight: Red is the new Black (Stars)

The new, sexy, red-themed kits that Ghana busted out for their final three games were easily the flashiest uniforms of the tournament. The only downside of this fashion statement is that it makes my old white and black authentic Black Stars jersey (bought on the streets of downtown Accra) obsolete.

Lowlight: Brazilian bandwagon hopping

Once upon a time (read: the '90s), it was acceptable—even “cool”—to root for Brazil. You cheered for them. You bought one of their jerseys and realized you’ve been spelling the country wrong your whole life. You learned their roster and pretended not be annoyed and confused by all their one-word-*a-la*-Madonna nicknames. You were a Brazilian Bandwagon Hopper. It was OK. Everybody was doing it.

But times have changed. Oh, cheering on Brazil is still “cool”—if you’re Brazilian. But you’re not. You’re a gringo. In fact, nothing screams, “I’m a gringo” more than being a part of this trend. If you’re really pining for a crazy and passionate Latin American team to root for, go for Argentina. Those fans can cry after their team scores a goal and *make it look cool*. Uruguay is another nice, acceptable pick for your fiery Latin persuasions, since they’re kind of like Argentina’s adorable younger sibling (and at least their *soccer* team has never resorted to cannibalism, ha ha). Paraguay is a nice super-underdog to root for, but three Argentines changing their citizenship pre-Cup to play for them gives a blow to their credibility. Chile’s a nice team, too, but remember that if you start seeming too interested in Chile’s successes, you begin to look like Richard Nixon.

As for the Ecuadorians who

seemed to have jumped on this Brazil bandwagon, I’m at a loss for answers. All signs would suggest these two countries be arch-rivals on the soccer field. Ecuador’s a smaller country with considerably less international

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success on the field, to put it mildly, compared to Brazil—the giant on the other side of the continent. One would think that Ecuadorians would resent this towering bully that constantly gets all the success; so the adoration that gets thrown Brazil’s way instead is simply inexplicable. The counterargument that this is a nice display of South American solidarity carries no weight, since Ecuadorians had *four* other South American countries they could have chosen to support—countries that at least speak their language. I’m trying my hardest to refrain from a Yankees reference, so let me put it this way: Jumping your small market roots to cheer on the perennial favorite might be like a lifelong Kansas City Royals fan saying “screw it” and deciding to cheer on the Cardinals. But, of course, this is much more serious.

Highlight: Che’s Dream

A total of five South American teams were in the World Cup. Of the final eight teams, half were South American (the other four teams being three European countries and one African). Although things quickly fizzled out from there (all but Uruguay failed to advance to the final four, only to be smoked by the Netherlands) it’s an impressive showing deep into the tournament for one continent. Expect the 2014 World Cup, in Brazil, to be a Latin fiesta, in which a bevy of teams hold the “home continent advantage,” which of course is only relevant when the host country is European or South American.

Highlight: Last Red Card in Paris

The meltdown of this year’s French team included infighting, a boycott of practices and generally disappointing play that led to an early exit. It was glorious. But I’m not bashing the French just for the sake of seeming macho and fashionable, the way some of our countrymen do (they always seem to be the ones who’ve never traveled overseas). This isn’t kicking a team when they’re down, either. This is celebrating a victory for the sport and it goes back to last World Cup, when Zidane’s loss of temper and famous head-butt led to his ejection and France’s loss to Italy in the final.

The problem wasn't so much the action, but that in its aftermath, a disturbing number of viewers seemed to think the brazen move was "badass" or "cool." (These were almost certainly people who've never played a team sport.) Out here in the rational world, however, we rank losing your temper and costing your team a World Cup as "uncool." Thus, the karmic debt justly carried over into this year's Cup. In the late 1700s, Thomas Jefferson learned the French word *idéologie* and single-handedly introduced the word "ideology" into the English lexicon. Perhaps at that time they could have borrowed a word of ours that still seems to elude them: teamwork.

Lowlight: Rogue nations

The Democratic People's Republic of North Korea was a real wildcard—a whippersnapper maneuvering its way into this Cup and giving thousands of ticket holders their first, and likely last, chance to see North Koreans in living color. They even came out of the gates with what many titled an "impressive loss" against Brazil (employing a phrase that could only be used with a country like North Korea and a sport like soccer). But after that, they had seven (!) goals put up on them by Portugal—and you'd be lying if you said you weren't a little cu-



rious if there would be some ex- cutions involved after that beat down. Then, as if it could go any more downhill from there, it did.

But as exciting as it is to have a rogue nation in the mix (with baseball we get Cuba), it ultimately was a sad reminder that when a country has "people's republic" in its title, it's rarely a "republic" and is even less likely to belong to the "people." At the games themselves, Chinese citizens were dressed up in North Korea gear in an unsuccessful charade to make us forget that North Koreans can't travel freely. "Highlights" of their matches back home were edited to cut out their opponents' good play, which was likely a hefty task. And several members of the team saw South Africa not just as a place to compete, but also as a place where they could hopefully defect and enjoy the basic freedoms available in the rest of the world.

Highlight: The host with the most

Even though their team didn't advance, the country of South Africa was a real winner here. The latest summer Olympics were hosted by a Stalinist dictatorship, and it showed. Men were killed while constructing the ugliest stadiums known to man and China suffers from pollution clouds so massive they literally affect weather patterns. If this World Cup was South Africa's post-apartheid coming-out party, I can only tip my hat to a job well done. Jimmy Carter should be proud.

Lowlight: Mano a mano

¿Cómo se dice keep your hands to yourself? In the final minutes of Uruguay's win over Ghana, Suárez's handball stopped a for-sure goal from going in. It simultaneously earned him a red card and his team's victory: Ghana ended up missing the penalty kick in regulation and lost out in the subsequent round of five PKs. So, by all accounts, the handball saved Uruguay from sure loss and gave them a chance to win. The player "got away with it" and many critics said it was "the right move."

Well. Good for them. But when "the right move" involves flagrant cheating, for which the offender is later paraded around the field like a savior, you can count me out. Uruguay played a well-fought tournament up until that point, but it's probably a

good thing they didn't advance to the championship, carrying the karma of having won *like that*.

Speaking of appendages, until all the writers out there figure out the correct plural of octopus (hint: it's not octopi), I don't want to see anymore of them in the media—especially not for the purposes of predicting the future. Okay, okay, so some cephalopod correctly “foresaw” the outcome of eight World Cup games. Yes, folks, welcome to the age of science and reason.

Highlight: Horns of plenty

Lots of people spent considerable time and column inches complaining about the constant sound of the horns at the games. (The horns have another name, but I won't use it because, like the word “liberal,” it's been co-opted by its opponents and given a negative connotation.) For a time, hating on the horns became trendier than rooting for Brazil.

A great president, and failed haberdasher, once said, “If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” Last month, a great South African *should* have said, “If you can't stand the noise, turn down the volume, Einstein.” The constant buzzing added a sense of urgency to the games. And it's a gracious nod to any obsessive compulsive who's ever laid into a kazoo without stopping before realizing it's been January 1st for

over an hour.

Lowlight: It's time to blow the whistle...

...on bad refereeing. There were so many poor calls (with even poorer timing and consequences) that it would be pointless to rehash them all now. The point is that these were not bad calls of the balls-and-strikes nature that we can argue about over post-game beers. These were blatant errors that threaten the integrity of the game. Team USA wasn't the only victim, but it's worth mentioning the phantom foul that erased its would-be winning goal versus Slovenia. It almost completely ruined the U.S.'s run and gave Americans fuel to prove that this

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is an inferior sport. Luckily, it turned out not to matter and only gave American players and fans a chip on their shoulder (and still should). If people want to punish us for our geopolitical stances, they should do it the usual way: at the next round of world trade negotiations, not on the field.

Highlight: The theme song

No, I'm not referring to Shakira's “Waka Waka”—although she and that song have several mer-



its, which, lucky for you, I won't go into here. (I'll only point out that it's the best incorporation of South African beats and rhythms into popular music since Paul Simon's *Graceland*.) I'm referring to the actual theme song of the World Cup, which I can only describe as the “ohoo-oh-ohoh!” song played before and after any TV coverage involving the Cup. I don't know what it is, but that song had an openness, lightness, and worldliness to it that just made me want to donate to UNICEF every time I heard it. It confirmed my belief that all good things in life have a theme song.

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