WORLD CUP 2010 SOUTH AFRICA

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My World Cup: Referees get it right

By Paul Gardner

Half of the 32 World Cup teams have now strutted their stuff, and most of them have been singularly unimpressive. The awful truth behind this disappointment is that I am the one to blame for all the caution and the defensive play that we have -- and hence the lack of goals.

My guilt started four years ago, after the USA had lost 3-0 to the Czech Republic in its first game of the 2006 World Cup. I worked on the stats (this was brave of me, because stats tend to give me a headache) and discovered that of the 23 teams that had lost their first game in the previous two World Cups, only one had survived to get into the second round. In other words, the USA was as good as dead.

These were new stats, I do believe -- certainly I hadn't seen them before. But coaches being the slow-witted species that they are, failed to cotton on. I repeated the stats -- now fortified by the 2006 results (36 losers, of whom only 3 qualified) -- in this column 10 days ago -- and now I find these dismal stats and percentages are all over the place.

The news has even reached the hallowed ground of our ESPN experts. But more about them in a moment or two. Sadly, it seems that the news has also reached the coaches. It is evidently now acknowledged that a tie in the first game is a good result; but whatever you do, don't lose that game -- or you're out.

So we get turgid games. But we get losers anyway -- the worst of both worlds, in fact. According to the stats, the losers so far -- Greece, Nigeria, Algeria, Serbia and Australia are as good as done for. From what I've seen, the tournament will not be diminished by their absence. The Australians, in particular, are every bit as bad as I thought they were. They ended up playing with 10 men after Tim Cahill was red-carded.

Here I must switch to ESPN. The ejection, inevitably, was greeted with derision by the legendary Ally McCoist (the adjective is ESPN's, not mine). His co-commentator Martin Tyler did not venture an opinion.

Why would McCoist disagree with the decision? Because, despite his legendary (ESPN) status, McCoist's experience, and evidently knowledge, of soccer outside Britain is virtually zero. He knows the standards that apply in that tight little island, but not much else.

The point was beautifully made, post game, by Alexi Lalas. Cahill's foul, said Lalas, would probably be a yellow card at most in England (where Cahill plays for Everton). But this is different, this is the World Cup. The standards are stricter. Why even try that tackle? Bravo, Alexi.

Why indeed? It was absolutely asking for trouble, it got it, and the Australians have now lost their key player for at least one game. With no explanation from legendary Ally, other than that famous "very, very harsh" phrase that always issues forth from Brit mouths whenever thuggish tacklers are punished. In other words, for McCoist, the Mexican referee, Carlos Rodriguez, was to blame.

And so to the referees. Who have been, in many ways, the stars of the tournament so far. Right from

the beginning, when the Uzbeki Ravshan Irmatov (a guy I had thought would not be up to the task) gave us an absolutely exemplary display of authority, quick decisions, and fairness in the very difficult opening game between Mexico and the host South Africa. All four red cards so far, have been, in my opinion, correctly given, as was the obvious penalty against Algeria. Offside decisions, especially the close ones, have been repeatedly confirmed as correct by TV replays.

Which takes us back to ESPN. Efan Ekoku, another Brit-accented ESPN expert, made an enormous blunder during the opening game when he poured scorn all over the referee's decision to nix Carlos Vela's "goal" in the 38th minute. Again, the referee and his assistant got this 100 percent right. But Ekoku called it an "awful call" even after the television freeze frame had incontestably shown that Vela was offside.

"How can he be offside? There's a defender on the goal line," scoffed Ekoku, apparently unaware that goalkeeper Itumeleng Khune had come way out of his goal, leaving Vela offside. Or maybe Ekoku simply doesn't know the rule. Some expert.

So Mexico had to be satisfied with a draw in a game they should have won. Same old Mexican story. The USA did enough to warrant its draw with England, but was damn lucky to get it, courtesy of a slapstick miscue from goalkeeper Robert Green.

Neither team played particularly well. Same story with Slovenia, which came away with an undeserved 1-0 win over Algeria thanks to goalkeeper Faouzi Chaouchi's screw-up.

Maybe it is the ball, then, the infamous Jabulani. Couldn't possibly be the keepers, now could it? Not according to England captain Steve Gerrard, who expressed solidarity with Green, saying, "I don't think you can criticize the goalkeeper. They've been talking about the ball ..." Haven't they ever. "They" being mostly the goalkeepers. Not much bitching has been heard from attacking players -- certainly South Africa's Siphiwe Tshabalala and Germany's Lukas Podolski had no problems with the ball, both scoring with wonderfully powerful and accurate shots.

U.S. reserve goalie Marcus Hahnemann has regaled us with a quote that ranks high on the all-time idiocy list. Asserting that it was impossible to follow the flight of the ball in the air, Hahnemann promised us "You're going to see no headers on goal," he said, "Nobody can judge anything." That piece of nonsense was quickly disproved in the USA's warmup game against Australia when Edson Buddle headed a goal. And yesterday, Miroslav Klose managed to judge a cross perfectly to beat Aussie goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer to the ball and head a splendid goal.

Maybe the goalkeepers need help. Nigeria's Vincent Enyeama apparently got the best aid possible for his string of saves against Argentina: "My secret lies with God. Thanks to him I was able to do what I did today," said Enyeama, who did not go on to explain how Nigeria, despite divine intervention, ended up losing the game.

This seems to be the World Cup of excuses. The Jabulani, for a start. And then there are those damn vuvuzelas. The Serbians, ticked off after their loss to Ghana, complained that the racket kicked up by the vuvuzelas made it impossible for them draw support from their fans in the stadium -- they just couldn't hear them.

How anyone can find a good word to say about these stupid things is beyond me. I had come across them in South America -- and again at the Home Depot -- before I knew about their use in South Africa. They seemed to me an unmitigated blot on the game, a boring, monotonous drone that took all the human expression out of the stadium roars and cheers and ups and downs in intensity.

Then I discovered that they had one redeeming feature. It was revealed that FIFA was being asked to ban the vuvus -- not for any aesthetic considerations, but because they made so much noise that the coaches could not make themselves heard when trying to convey tactical wizardry to their players. On a related note, I note that the vuvu-din has drowned out the ESPN Brit-accents on a number of occasions. So even the ugly vuvuzela has its loveable side.

Finally, a word of thanks to the Argentines and the Germans, by far the best of this early crop. The Argentines were skillful and exciting, with Lionel Messi almost at his Barcelona best, while the Germans played spirited soccer, looked as though they were enjoying themselves, as though soccer is fun, and scored four nice goals in the process. By doing that they raised the goals-per-game average from a pathetic 1.3 to a less pathetic 1.6, and managed to make me feel slightly better about my involvement in the birth of anemic first-round soccer.

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WORLD CUP 2010 SCHEDULE- TV

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FRIDAY, July 2

ESPN
World Cup NETHERLANDS-BRAZIL (live) 9 am.
World Cup URUGUAY-GHANA (live) 1:30 pm.

MLS REAL SALT LAKE-NEW ENGLAND (live) 9 pm.

SATURDAY, July 3

ABC
World Cup ARGENTINA-GERMANY (live) 9 am.
World Cup PARAGUAY-SPAIN (live) 1:30 pm..

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