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World Cup

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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I am not a fan of *The Beautiful Game*, although I do watch and appreciate its beauty especially when it is displayed by the likes of Lionel Messi. Soccer, as with all games, when played with skill and competence is a beautiful game. The same might be said of hockey, baseball, basketball, or curling. When any skill is combined with artistry, whether in sport or some other human endeavor, it has a beauty worthy of admiration.

So I do appreciate soccer and have watched it in many venues on various parts of the globe. When the World Cup comes around, as well as other lesser championship competitions, I make it a point to watch.

And so over the past several weeks I have watched a fair number of matches. I have been impressed by some and less intrigued by others. Among those that I enjoyed most were those in which one side exposed and exploited the weaknesses of others.

The dismantling of Spain by The Netherlands on Friday the Thirteenth was the first match that grabbed my attention. Spain was the defending champion and one might have expected a first rate match. Instead it was a lesson in the insignificance of results from four years previous. The 5-1 thrashing was, at least for me, a surprise and the skills displayed were a thing of beauty. It also turned out to be a signal that The Netherlands was going to be a side to be reckoned with over the course of the competition.

Germany's beat down of Portugal in Group play was a similar revelation and signal. Germany's display of skills would be seen again in the most stunning result of the tournament in the semi-final against the host country.

Some of the most entertaining matches involved Costa Rica and Columbia playing well above expectations. The victory of the little guy is almost always appealing and the advancement of these two sides into the quarterfinals was as delightful as it was improbable.

As for Brazil they advanced as anticipated to the semi-finals although they never displayed the high level of play expected. I kept waiting to see the beautiful game played

with Brazilian style, but with the exception of a few fleeting moments it never appeared. Throughout their run the ESPN announcers continued to question Brazil's level of play, and expressed doubt that they would make it to the finish line.

As for the United States there were two aspects to the competition that have been analyzed. First was the quality of play. A record of 1-2-1 is hardly impressive, yet Tim Howard was unbelievable in goal and the fact that the U.S. could defeat their nemesis in Ghana, and play to a tie with Portugal and lose 1-0 to Germany was encouraging. Without Tim Howard of course these results may not have been as good as they were.

Second, what did all this mean for the future of soccer in the United States? This is a question asked every World Cup, and one that in the past was answered with "nothing." Does this now change? Maybe. Big crowds in public venues watched the games and across the country smaller groups of people gathered to watch and cheer together.

We know that young Americans are playing soccer in record numbers, although it is uncertain if this will translate to sharp increases in spectator interest and television ratings. This could be the year it happens, but for me soccer is not played at the same level in the United States as elsewhere in the world, nor are there comparable levels of fanaticism driving interest, and that will impede its development here.

As to the game at the World Cup level, it seems to me there are a few problems. While watching the clutching and grabbing, the pushing and shoving, and most markedly the diving, I thought maybe I was watching an NBA game. This style does not add to the beauty of the Beautiful Game and needs to be cleared from the pitch.

Also quite clearly the referees are over-matched. Trying to watch 22 players up and down the pitch at considerable speeds, even with the marginal help of the linesmen, is beyond the ability of any human being. There needs to be one or two more referees and they need the help of a replay official.

Then there is the matter of clocks and time keeping. Clocks start and stop. Precise passage of playing time is kept in

nearly every other sport that uses a clock. Is it too much to expect that when I watch a game I know how much time remains? It is nonsense to watch time running out only to know that time will be added and no one knows how much until 90 minutes have run off the clock. And when time is added, say five minutes, and that seems to mean anywhere from four-and-a-half minutes to six. Or am I missing some subtlety or occult reading here?

As to the semi-final games the German demolition of Brazil was both shocking and highly entertaining. Even someone as untutored in the game as I could see the goals coming well in advance of the ball entering the net. I was watching the first half at a gym where many people were watching on televisions and with each German goal shouts of disbelief filled the room. That so many were watching in the gym may be a sign that soccer is gaining a bigger following in the U.S., or perhaps Florida, or maybe just at my workout center.

As to the Argentina and Netherlands match I expected to see something special and maybe it was. Shutting down Messi was no small achievement. However with my knowledge level, the sophistication of the defense, if that is what it was, did not register on me. And then to have a match of this significance decided by a version of a roll of the dice seemed silly. Two teams played for 120 minutes plus and then used this artificial device to decide the outcome. This was the semi-final of the World Cup, not some third division Sunday shuffle. Did the best team win? It would seem there is about a fifty-fifty chance it did and a fifty-fifty chance it did not. Wouldn't a series 30 minute sudden death overtime periods be a better way to break a tie? There could also be a significant rest period at the end of regulation time as is done in hockey.

So we go into Sunday with two highly talented teams meeting in what I hope will be a fair and satisfying match decided by the players on the field, playing the game rather than displaying their acting talents.

I look forward to the World Cup Final as do sports fans across the globe.

On Sport and society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be good sport to be a bad loser.

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