

EDITORIAL

The baleful glare of Joao Havelange has dominated world football since the retirement of Sir Stanley Rous in 1974. The Brazilian was elected largely on the strength of his appeal to the more obscure footballing nations, who form the majority, and he has made it his business to keep them happy at all times, thus ensuring his continued supremacy.

Sometimes, his policies have been sensible. I am not one of those who criticised the expansion of the World Cup from 16 to 24 finalists, for example. FIFA's insistence on having some representatives from football's third world in the final tournament was difficult to justify when only 16 teams were present and it was so obvious that we were not watching the best 16 teams in the world, as we should have been. Their inclusion became easier to bear after the expansion, and some of those little countries have given us such memorable moments over the years. Now, with 24 finalists, we can look forward to seeing how the minnows get on against the giants, without the disappointment of not seeing other, more skilful sides in action. It has often been argued that a tournament with 24 finalists is unwieldy, but even the Mexicans, struggling in the aftermath of a dreadful earthquake only months before the competition was due to start, proved that 24 candidates can be handled reasonably efficiently.

Neither do I take issue with the decision to go straight to a knock-out format after the first round. Sudden-death matches are the essence of cup football. Few would argue with a league system for the first round, giving everybody a chance to play at least three games before catching the plane home, but thereafter knock-out matches are surely preferable. In Leagues, teams are only too happy to settle for a draw if one point is all they need, and it is difficult to blame them, but the knock-out eighth-finals and quarter-finals in Mexico 86 were certainly an improvement on the sterile second phase in Spain 82.

The ubiquitous penalty shoot-out is another favourite target for the critics, but in fairness it is extremely difficult to devise an alternative – so difficult, indeed, that most of those who have condemned the practice as a travesty of football have been unwilling to grasp the nettle. The alternatives which have been suggested all have drawbacks of their own. They include playing on indefinitely until someone scores a goal (*drawback*: what happens after the last bus has gone and nobody is left in the stadium?); removing six players from each team and playing five-a-side until a goal is scored (*drawback*: this is as much a travesty of football as the penalty shoot-out); determining the result on the number of goals scored in the first round (*drawback*: it would be unfair on those teams who had qualified from the knock-out stages from a difficult group where goals were understandably hard to come by). So it goes on. Penalties are not ideal, but they do provide a result based on skill, which a toss of the coin certainly would not.

So much for those aspects of FIFA policy which I find acceptable. Now for the others, and where better to begin than the beginning? Originally, the 1986 World Cup final tournament was scheduled for Colombia. One would be hard pushed to think of a better example of a banana republic. It is a nasty little country, riddled with corruption, one of the world's main sources of cocaine, and quite obviously a thoroughly unsuitable choice. How FIFA could possibly have selected such a place at all is beyond comprehension, but they then proceeded to compound their folly by announcing that, on reflection, Colombia would be unable to organise a tournament with 24 finalists, and handed the competition to Mexico. Why was Colombia's unsuitability not apparent *before* the selection was made? What happened between FIFA's original announcement and their change of mind? We shall probably never know, but we will always have our suspicions.

Mexico was in many respects a less than satisfactory second choice. The well-publicised drawbacks of heat, humidity and altitude, coupled with the preposterous kick-off times (commercial considerations to the fore, as you would expect from FIFA) made life unnecessarily difficult for most of the finalists, especially the Europeans. But at least Mexico had the track record of having staged, in 1970, one of the most memorable tournaments in recent times. The Mexicans are football-crazy and have, in the Azteca Stadium, one of the most breathtakingly beautiful sporting arenas in the world. So, given that we seem to be stuck with the idea that the World Cup must alternate between South/Central America and Europe, and giving FIFA the benefit of the doubt on the question of them being strapped for a venue at short notice, we move on to what actually happened between 31 May and 29 June 1986.

It became apparent very early in the tournament that the standard of refereeing was woefully inadequate. FIFA decided to invite referees from all over the world. A laudable sentiment, this, but it doesn't take account of the fact that few if any referees from outside

Europe and South/Central America have the necessary experience to handle a competition of this stature. The players had enough to put up with from the climate – surely they were entitled to the best referees, chosen on merit rather than nationality? Clearly not. Señor Havelange has other considerations on his mind.

The policy of choosing referees to run the line is also open to question. Lining is an art in itself, requiring the sort of fine judgement which can only come with experience. Although most referees started their careers as linesmen, by the time they get onto the FIFA referees' list they have left their line careers far behind them. George Courtney, the only English referee in Mexico, realised this and spent some weeks prior to his departure for the finals running the line in minor matches in order to refresh himself. Judging by the dubious nature of so much of the flag-waving in the tournament, not many of his colleagues took the trouble.

The FIFA public relations people went to great lengths to tell us that referees were under strict instructions to ensure fair play. Defensive walls would have to retreat the regulation distance under threat of caution, for example, and of course players would have to tuck their shirts in and pull their socks up. But what ever happened to injury time? We learned that if players went down injured, they would have to be removed from the pitch for treatment so that the game could proceed with the minimum of interruption. For this reason, stretcher-bearers were on standby ready to scramble whenever anybody bit the dust. Those players who like to waste time when their team is in front weren't fazed, however. They simply rolled around in agony until the stretcher arrived, wasted a few more moments arguing about it, and then struggled painfully to their feet, determined to carry on manfully for the sake of their teams. A few more moments would be wasted while the hapless stretcher-bearers beat a retreat, and then the player concerned would effect a miraculous recovery and carry on as if nothing had happened. Maybe I'm wrong, but I can't remember a single one of these cynics being booked for ungentlemanly conduct.

All very well, provided that the referee is prepared to add time on at the end of each half to negate time-wasting tactics. Clearly, the referees in Mexico, with only one or two exceptions, were not, and so the cheats, thus encouraged, prospered. Cheating was not, of course, restricted to time-wasting. Diego Maradona, for all his brilliance, is a cheat and stands condemned as such out of his own mouth. It is understood that the decision of the referee is final, and it is also understood that if a player commits a foul which the referee does not see, there's nothing to be done about it. Such things happen in virtually every match, and everybody, even though they may get excited about it at the time, accepts the situation. However, Maradona stepped way out of line by admitting, on the following day, that he had scored Argentina's first goal against England with his hand. In these circumstances, given FIFA's apparent preoccupation with the concept of fair play, was it too much to expect them to take action, such as suspension for bringing the game into disrepute? Clearly it was, and so long as FIFA is controlled by Joao Havelange, who has as much relevance to the principles of sensible, fair and perceptive management, as Mickey Mouse has to Darwin's theory of evolution, it will continue to be so.

Finally, on the domestic front, there's good news and bad. First the good news. At last the First Division is to be reduced to 20 teams, a process that will take place over the next two seasons. This is good news for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the job of the international managers will be made that little bit easier. Now for the bad news. New League President Phil Carter has already announced that he is exploring ideas for a new competition, perhaps along the lines of the Full Members' Cup, to fill the gap. Well, what did you expect?

PETER DUNK