

1990 WORLD CUP

FINAL TOURNAMENT IN ITALY

The 14th World Cup ended in a disgraceful final with West Germany beating a nine man Argentina with a late controversial penalty. Much of what had gone before had been eminently forgettable. There were fewer goals than ever, more players sent off, infrequent moments of excitement and little in the way of inventive football from the supposed cream of the world's professional talent. But attendances were up on 1986 and there was a huge television audience.

The competition actually began with one team finishing with nine men, Argentina the holders being humiliated by a depleted Cameroon, the surprise team of the entire tournament who lacked only discipline and experience. They were unquestionably the most attractive team in the finals, reminiscent of Brazil. Before the matches began, Holland's Ruud Gullit had been asked to name his World Cup winners. He replied 'Cameroon'.

They failed only against England, but not before they led 2-1 and with more wisdom might easily have put the game beyond their opponents before conceding one penalty needlessly and another as a result of poor covering. Moreover they had four regular players out through suspension in this game.

In Roger Milla they had almost the best forward in the tournament. Despite being 38 years old and in semi-retirement playing on the island of Reunion for St Pierre, he was the master of the ball at his feet. Only the ebullient little Sicilian Salvatore Schillaci was better. He came off the substitutes bench to save Italy in their opening game with Austria and emerged as the top scorer with six goals. Nicknamed Toto, this former tyre repairer had played only one season in the First Division with Juventus. In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy's dog was also called Toto, but Schillaci was over the moon rather than over the rainbow. Alas he was unable to steer Italy to the final pot of gold.

The Italians were technically the most gifted team, but they lacked finish and fell short of what was required in the last third of the field. The Germans were the strongest physically and with Italy emerged from the group games as the most likely finalists. England and the Republic of Ireland began their challenge with a typical encounter in which the ball probably needed to be carried off on a stretcher – as Tommy Docherty would say.

But England then had more than their share of luck in the second round against Belgium, who twice hit the woodwork. With Paul Gascoigne seeming to be everywhere despite his obvious lack of pace and lacking the experience to know when to release the ball, he provided excellent footwork, free-kicks and corners and along with Mark Wright, Des Walker and Gary Lineker was among England's outstanding players. In the semi-final with West Germany they had their best match of the tournament and one which ended in the unsatisfactory method of penalty kicks. Italy also failed in the same manner against Argentina, who had looked a pale shadow of their Diego Maradona-inspired victory four years earlier. Maradona himself managed one defence splitting pass of note and had one shot at goal in the entire competition. His distributive contribution led to Claudio Caniggia scoring the goal against the run of play which eliminated Brazil and his effort from a free-kick against Italy went harmlessly wide. Otherwise Argentina were pretty dreadful and fortunate to reach the final. But it was not difficult to get through as there were many other poor teams.

Holland were the biggest disappointments. Their big four of Marco Van Basten, Ruud Gullit, Ronald Koeman and Frank Rijkaard let them down badly. There was no spirit in the side as the players clearly did not relish Leo Beenhakker as coach, having wanted Johan Cruyff to take over. There was some excuse for Gullit, out with injury over a year, but none for Van Basten who scarcely had a kick, Koeman was off form and Rijkaard disgraced himself by getting sent off for spitting twice at Rudi Voller of West Germany.

The Germans tried their usual play-acting when fouled and intimidated most of the referees. But Lothar Matthaus often looked a powerhouse in midfield and Andreas Brehme supplied an endless stream of crosses from his famous left foot. He also converted the penalty in the final. In general many teams were let down by the players who should have done better.

Uruguay, in better discipline, were well organised in defence but poorly served by Enzo Francescoli and Ruben Sosa up front. Spain were as inconsistent as ever and Emilio Butragueno was anonymous. The Soviet Union were lethargic in the opening game with Rumania who were full value for their victory, but improved afterwards and were hit by a couple of refereeing decisions against Argentina which cost them a place in the next round. Maradona showed he had added a new dimension to his handling prowess, by stopping the ball in his own penalty area, an action which went unnoticed and the Soviets had a player sent off rather harshly.

Austria played their best football before the tournament started, Yugoslavia recovered from losing 4-1 to West Germany to finally sink in another penalty competition, Scotland committed suicide in the first game with Costa Rica and left themselves with too much to do. Sweden failed to do as well as expected and Colombia were fitful. The Colombian goalkeeper Rene Higuita, famed for his upfield sorties, was finally caught out attempting a sleight of foot against Milla.

Brazil lacked courage up front, but still managed to give the impression of a team capable of doing something better. Czechoslovakia did quite well until upset by the Germans and Egypt looked good in defence with Hany Ramzy outstanding. South Korea, the United Arab Emirates and the USA were not expected to shine, though the Americans showed some ability to learn and made the Italians look quite ordinary against them.

Individual players to enhance their reputations included Gheorghe Hagi (Rumania), Enzo Scifo (Belgium), Dragan Stojkovic (Yugoslavia) and had Caniggia not stupidly handled the ball to get himself banned from the final, who knows, Argentina as pathetic as they were might have repeated the scoreline of the 1986 final against West Germany. The Irish gave everything and enjoyed themselves.

England won the Fair Play award. They deserved that at least. Peter Shilton ended his international career on 125 caps, but was caught off his line when the Germans scored with a wicked deflection from a free-kick and dithered about to be dispossessed in the third place play-off with Italy. But then the game can be cruel. Stuart Pearce and Chris Waddle had the misfortune to fail from the penalty spot.

Refereeing left much to be desired. Those officials running the line had difficulty in understanding the off-side law. Now FIFA have announced through the International Football Association Board that a player will no longer be considered off-side if he is level with the second last opponent or with the last two opponents. This merely transfers the problem from one side of a fine line to another. Far better for them to outlaw off-side from all dead ball situations bringing free-kicks into line with corners, throw-ins etc.

Officials often had trouble in keeping up with the game. Clearly standards of fitness are not what they should have been. Most onlookers could see that they often made up their minds about a tackle upon the reaction of the victim. But surely refereeing is not about awarding Oscars for acting?

Television coverage has also plumbed the depths. Action replays *ad nauseum* are cutting into play. Commentaries are grating and opinions of studio experts of a banal nature. But then what can one expect if the standard of play is the same?

The Germans attacked ceaselessly in the first half of the final without the necessary guile to score. In the second half the Argentines clearly hung on for penalty kicks and the game which had begun badly fell away even more. Pedro Monzon became the first player to be sent off in a World Cup final and near the end Gustavo Dezotti became the second. This was after Roberto Sensini was adjudged to have brought down Rudi Voller. Andreas Brehme converted from the spot past Sergio Goycochea who had stood in for Nery Pumpido who had broken his leg in Argentina's second game.

Thus West Germany joined Brazil and Italy as teams who have won the cup three times. Manager Franz Beckenbauer became the first man to captain and manage a World Cup winning team.

If the coaches of the world cannot improve on this spectacle, the game faces a worrying future. If they blame the players for the spectacle then clearly talent is drying up as fast as the global warming effect. But perhaps hope lies in the situation facing the Cameroon. Their Soviet manager could speak no French and had difficulty communicating his instructions to the players. Eventually perhaps the way forward is to encourage individual talent not stifle it with systems – or coaches.



West Germany's Andreas Brehme beats Argentina's keeper Sergio Goycochea from the penalty spot to give West Germany their third World Cup final victory. (Colorsport)