

Implosion and Explosion of Teams: The Rights and Wrongs of World Cup 2010

“We have hugely talented players on this team. This success, being world champions, is a success for all of us. I don’t think we should focus on Andreas or Xavi. I feel very proud of the players. They also know and appreciate what we have achieved in a group that has great values & principles.”¹

Vincente Del Bosque, Spain Coach

Finally, the World Cup 2010 has ended. The thrills and spills of the top 32 teams in the world of football have come to an end with Spain crowned as world champion.

Along the way, we have seen the implosion of France (World Cup 2006 Finalist) and Italy (World Cup 2006 Champion). Both ended their 2010 competition in ignominy, coming in last in their respective groups. It seems completely unthinkable! So what went wrong?

Then again, we have the young German team that played beyond expectations by thrashing and knocking out England and Argentina. Also, it was the Spanish team that lived up to their promises of pressing, passing and possessing. They literally exploded!

What lessons can we learn?

1. Individual stars don’t win championships

France has all the stars, Frank Ribery, Nicolas Anelka, Florent Malouda, Thierry Henry, Patrick Evra, and William Gallas but they were unable to work together as a team. When they lost their match against Mexico, the whole team imploded. The French coach sent Nicolas Anelka home. Led by their captain Evra, the team mutinied and walked out of training the day before their match against South Africa.

Unless individual talents are galvanized and synergized to work together, they become a tremendous liability. It was a most shameful display.

2. Past achievement doesn’t guarantee present success

Italy, the former world champion, also failed miserably: A team that depended on older players and stars could not live up to their expectations. The most pitiful figure was Fabio Cannavaro, the world’s best player and defender in the 2006 World Cup, who turned out a complete let-down. It was his inept play and mistakes that contributed to Italy’s failure.

Many of the players rested on their laurels and thought that they could still achieve greatness. But, alas, they were wrong. Soccer pundits feel that Italy had too old a team to compete with the best. They did not rejuvenate themselves.

¹ AFP. “A Win For Values, Principles”. Today. 11 July, 2010. P 2. MediaCorp Press Ltd.

It is to our folly that we take our achievements for granted. There is no substitute for preparation, hard work, strategy, and teamwork. As Tommy Koh, former Singapore Ambassador to the United Nations, writes, “The lesson is that one should not become complacent with success. One has to work hard, replenish one’s team with new talent and have an indomitable will to win, in order to become a champion.”²

3. Teamwork with great leadership, a common vision and right strategy will usually win the day

The four semi-finalists, Germany, Uruguay, Spain and Holland succeeded because they played as a single unit for a common cause. They put aside their personal self-interests and played unselfishly for each other. These teams had stars but they worked with and for each other.

Names like Germany’s Thomas Muller and Bastian Schweinsteiger, Uruguay’s Diego Forlan, and Alvaro Pereira, Holland’s Wealey Sneijder, and Arjen Robben, Spain’s David Villa and Xavi Hernandez are all team players.

To succeed, leadership is important. All the four teams were led by great coaches, who were able to motivate their team members to play beyond themselves and challenge them to raise their games to another level.

Uruguay’s Oscar Tabarez, Germany’s Joachim Loew, Holland’s Bert Van Marwijk, and Spain’s Vicente del Bosque are all relatively unknown and understated but everyone of them has the uncanny ability to bring out the best in their players.

Ben Zander, the Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, says in a most profound way, “The conductor of the orchestra is the only musician who doesn’t make a sound. His power is dependent on his ability to make other people powerful!”

On the other hand, the coach of the French team, Raymond Domenech failed to unite and inspire his team. Instead they rejected his leadership. “He even refused to shake hands with the South African coach. Such insolent behavior showed that he was a petty and ungracious man, wholly unworthy to be the coach of a great country’s team,”³ writes Tommy Koh.

4. Don’t underestimate the power of the Unseen Hand

Although much have been written of the prowess of individual stars, the synergistic teamwork, and inspiring leadership, there is an X-factor, which I call the “Power of the Unseen Hand’ that is also important.

What would have happened if the disallowed goal by England’s Frank Lampard had been counted in their critical game against Germany?

How about the Argentinian Carlos Tevez’s goal that was allowed when he was clearly off-side?

² Tommy Koh. Rich pickings from a field of dreams. The Sunday Times. July 11, 2010, p 33. Singapore Publishing House. Singapore.

³ Tommy Koh. Rich pickings from a field of dreams. The Sunday Times. July 11, 2010, p 33. Singapore Publishing House. Singapore.

Then, how else can you explain Uruguay's Luis Suarez's desperate hand-ball to prevent the obvious goal by Ghana's Dominic Adiyiah? And for Asamoah Gyan, who had already scored two successful penalties, to miss the crucial one, which caused Ghana's early exit from the World Cup finals?

We can call it Luck or Good Fortune. But, it just showed that when we win or lose, there is more than meets the eye. We should not completely attribute success or failure to ourselves.

5. Recovery is important for both winners and losers

One of the best things that happened to Spain is that they lost to Switzerland in the first round group match. They learned not to take things for granted and most of all, they recovered. Contrast that to Argentina and Brazil teams, that did not lose in their early group matches.

When they were trailing Germany and Netherlands respectively during their matches, they panicked and lost their nerves. And never recovered.

We should take our learning from Asamoah Gyan of Ghana insists he would recover from his crucial missed penalty in the quarter-final match against Uruguay. He summed up best what should happen to every team that has won or lost in this World Cup, when he said, "I'll bounce back. I'm strong mentally. I had the courage to take the penalty." (Incidentally, Gyan scored in the penalty shoot-out, although his team lost to Uruguay in the final count.)

Italy and France left in shame and agony, to the disappointment of their own countries. England, whose expressed aim was to be in the final of this World Cup, failed. Brazil, my favorite team coached by Dunga, who experimented with European organization and Brazilian flair, did not fulfill their dream.

I am sure they will all go back to the drawing board, reexamine their preparation and programs, regroup themselves, rethink their strategies, perhaps replace their coaches (except for England), and start afresh. That's the beauty of the game.

That's the beauty of life. We should take failure as the opportunity to learn from our mistakes, and move forward. We can then echo the words of Gyan, "We will bounce back!"

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