

Referees ruining the spectacle?

INTERNET, undated
Camaraderie can be forged in strange situations.

As Barcelona team-mates, Deco and Giovanni van Bronckhorst may have bonded winning the Spanish title or the Champions League. They seemed to grow closer on a surreal Sunday in Nuremberg. They also provided one of the images of the World Cup, sat together and consoling one another after absurd dismissals.

Indeed, the Dutch left back, for an innocuous foul, received a yellow card, the same punishment as Luis Figo got for a head butt (in the Portuguese captain's defence, if you are going to headbutt anyone then the irritating Mark van Bommel is a deserving candidate).

Costinha and Khalid Boulahrouz had become the first names on referee Valentin Ivanov's red card. The yellow was brandished 16 times, completing a World Cup record.

And yet it was not a dirty game. Instead, it marked the nadir for referees at this tournament, an achievement given the chaotic conclusion of the Croatia-Australia game when Graham Poll contrived to book Josip Simunic three times.

An inability to count to two correctly is, you would expect, a serious impediment in all walks of life, though those dealing with binary numbers may disagree.

Hark back to the initial days of the World Cup and controversies were comparatively rare. The contrast with a Champions League final marred by poor decision-making seemed apparent. But hopes it would herald an era of improved officiating have disappeared. Instead, with every game, the controversy mounts. There was Poll's horror show - the Englishman also contrived to miss two clear-cut penalties - and Markus Merk's remarkable award of a spot kick to Ghana against the USA.

There are a host of incorrect red cards - those shown to van Bronckhorst, Sweden's Teddy Lucic, the Australian Brett Emerton, Mexico's Luis Perez and Ukraine's Vladimir Vashchuk among them - and several other dubious dismissals.

Crucial errors are becoming commonplace. Comparatively little attention, outside Latin America, has been paid to the officiating of Massimo Busacca in the meeting of Argentina and Mexico. It produced a footballing classic and a winner to linger in the memory for years, yet it was marred by three serious mistakes. Firstly, Argentina's Gabriel

Heinze was clearly the last defender when he hacked down Jose Fonseca, but was only shown the yellow card. Then Mexico's Jose Castro was cautioned for a foul committed by his teammate Gerardo Torrado, who was later booked himself, meaning he could have been dismissed.

And, in the additional minutes before extra time, Lionel Messi had a 'winner' wrongly disallowed for offside.

Mark Viduka, who suffered one injustice when denied a penalty, came to Poll's defence, pointing out that referees are only human. So they are, and they have a mitigating factor. These are middle-aged men in desperate pursuit of elite athletes. In such situations, mental and physical tiredness seems inevitable, and decision-making suffers.

They are also easy scapegoats for players, managers and fans alike, who too often confuse a mistake for an indication of conspiracy or corruption. Their professional competence can be questioned, but their integrity should not be.

But the Swiss official Urs Meier, one of the leading referees of his generation, was hounded into retirement in a vicious witch hunt led by The Sun newspaper after disallowing a Sol Campbell 'winner' in Euro 2004. His decision, though debateable, was correct.

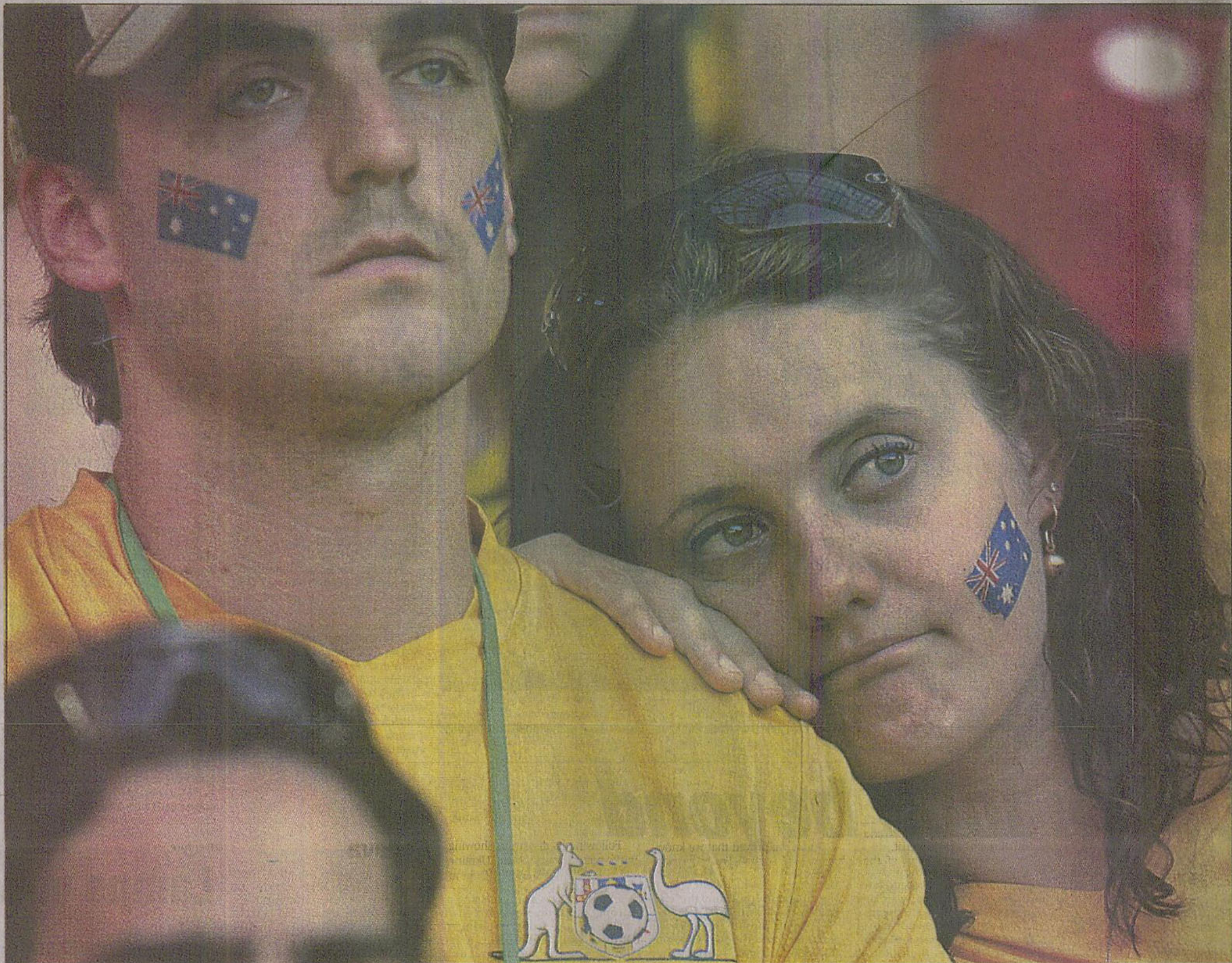
So, too was, the Uruguayan Jorge Larrionda in each of the three red cards he brandished during the battle of Kaiserslautern, when Italy finished with 10 men to the USA's nine, even if many of the minor decisions he made were incorrect.

In particular, he was right to implement FIFA's directive about punishing the two-footed, studs-up lunge with expulsion. It is a challenge with the potential to inflict serious injury and both American Pablo Mastroeni and Serb Mateja Kezman fully merited red cards for such tackles.

In contrast, FIFA's other clamp-down has been mishandled: Goalkeepers Ricardo and Paul Robinson, neither delaying a goal kick for more than a couple of seconds, were cautioned for supposed timewasting.

Few officials have managed to differentiate between legitimate pauses and deliberate attempts to halt play. And in a bid to stop diving, blatant penalties have been ignored.

The game's governing body cannot escape blame. There has long been the suspicion that too



THEIR LOOKS SAY IT ALL: Australian fans look dejected following their team's last-moment loss to Italy at Kaiserslautern on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Ref deserved a yellow card'

AFP, Berlin

World Cup organiser Franz Beckenbauer on Tuesday added his voice to the criticism of refereeing at the tournament, saying match officials were failing to keep a grip on matches.

"They haven't got the situation 100 per cent under control," said Beckenbauer, who won the World Cup as a player and a coach.

Russian referee Valentin Ivanov came under fire from FIFA President Sepp Blatter for showing a World Cup record four red cards and 16 yellow in Portugal's second-round win over the Netherlands on Sunday.

Blatter said Ivanov "deserved a yellow card" for his performance.

The referees' committee is due to meet on Wednesday to name the officials for the quarterfinal matches.

French official blames Blatter

AFP, Berlin

A leading French referee has slammed the "catastrophic" officiating at the World Cup and blamed FIFA President Sepp Blatter for putting politics before football in choosing referees.

"They have selected the best teams from each continent, but not the best referees," said Bernard Saules, the president of the French national union of referees (UNAF).

"It has been a catastrophe from the start. FIFA and Mr Blatter have introduced some political shenanigans into the choice of the referees to keep this or that country happy, and this is the result," he told AFP.

The best referees come from Europe, but only nine out of 26 of the referees at the World Cup are European, added Saules, though, with that number the Europeans have the largest proportion of referees at the tournament.

"It is alright to bring along the referees of average standard for minor international competitions, but not the World Cup."

However, two of the most heavily criticised referees at football's showcase have been Graham Poll

Ivanov laments card-game

AFP, Moscow

The under-fire Russian referee who dished out a record number of yellow and red cards in the Portugal-Netherlands second round clash denied Tuesday that he was the one at fault.

Valentin Ivanov described the match as "brutal" and the "hardest" of his career in an interview with the daily newspaper Izvestia.

He handed out four red and 16 yellow cards during the course of the 90 minutes.

"Probably in the sense of brutality, yes, yesterday's match was the

hardest," said Ivanov.

And asked if he had lost control over the contest, Ivanov said: "I don't know... I refereed as I saw things, as I understood these situations."

Players and media for his refereeing of Sunday's showdown where he reduced both sides to nine men have lambasted Ivanov.

FIFA President Sepp Blatter claimed Ivanov deserved a yellow card for his showing and Dutch coach Marco van Basten said the refereeing had overshadowed the football.

But Ivanov can take some comfort from his fellow countrymen.

A poll of 1,596 people published in Izvestia showed that 61 per cent believe players deserved what they got.

Another 23 per cent thought Ivanov wanted to make sure "Russia (who did not qualify) is long remembered in the World Cup 2006," while 10 per cent reckoned he was taking "revenge" for the 7-1 drubbing of Russia by Portugal in the World Cup qualifiers.

More curiously, six per cent of respondents said Ivanov embarked on a card spree because "the fewer footballers there are on the field, the more interesting the game."



PHOTO: AFP

I HAVE NO MORE CARDS LEFT: Russian referee Valentin Ivanov reacts during the game between Portugal and Netherlands at Nuremberg on Sunday.

I tried to tell Poll: Simunic

INTERNET, undated

Croatia defender Josip Simunic has revealed he tried to tell Graham Poll that he should have been sent-off in last Thursday's clash with Australia.

The English official gave Simunic a second yellow card in the second-half but failed to send him off until the last few minutes when he handed the player a third caution for another offence.

"When Poll booked me for the second time there was total confusion," Simunic told The Sun.

"Even I'd forgotten that he had already given me a yellow card because I was so wrapped up in the game."

"Then, about a minute later, one of my team-mates asked how I was still on the pitch and I realised."

"I went up to Poll at the end to tell him he had already given me two bookings. He didn't want to speak to me about it and was waving me away."

"Then he got another yellow card out and a red one. I think he got all mixed up about Dario Simic and me who also got sent off."

"But you have three officials and two more on the line and you'd think someone would have spotted it."

The incident was one of a number of errors that could cost Poll his chance of refereeing further matches in the tournament.

Aussies shocked but proud

AFP, Sydney

Shell-shocked Australian football fans watched in disbelief Tuesday as Italy ended the Socceroos' World Cup dream in cruel fashion with a penalty goal in stoppage time.

"I'm shattered, absolutely shattered," Sydney man Michael Rhys-Jones told AFP after watching Australia's second-round clash against the three-time champions in the city's Little Italy district of Norton Street.

"We outplayed them, we had such a good game. For it to end like that is devastating."

With the unfancied Socceroos' exploits capturing the public imagination in Australia, tens of thousands of people were undeterred by the game's 1:00 am kick off, local time, and turned out to cheer the Socceroos at big screen venues around the country.

Some Australians among the 20,000 packed into Norton Street were in tears after the last-minute defeat, while Italian fans hugged each other in relief and lit flares following a nail-biting match for both sets of supporters.

For Gerard Gilchrist there was some consolation in the fact that the Socceroos made the footballing world sit up and take notice during

the tournament, reaching the final 16 in only their second finals appearance.

"It's been great, soccer is going to be huge here now," he said. "It's still a crap way to go out though."

Prime Minister John Howard, in Indonesia on an official visit, expressed similar sentiments in less colourful language.

"I'm brokenhearted," he told reporters. "It's a very cruel way to lose, right on the knocker like that, but the team just played so bravely the whole match."

New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma, one of almost a million Australians who trace their ancestry back to Italy, was full of praise for the Socceroos.

"They have done us proud," he said. "They fought every inch of the way."

The crowds began partying hours before the game began, intent on celebrating Australia's advance to a second round berth that few predicted before the tournament began in Germany.

In Norton Street, they crammed every vantage point to watch the game on a 10 metre (30 foot) screen, with those unable to find a spot at street level perching on balconies and shop roofs.

The majority were decked out in

Australian colours, although Italy was strongly represented in this traditional bastion of Azzurri support.

"This is the biggest match ever for Australia," Vicki Noble told AFP, her face painted in the green and gold of Australia. "We just had to come here for the atmosphere, it's incredible."

Fans set off fireworks as flag-waving Italian supporters danced on cars outside the street's main pub, the Leichhardt Hotel, prompting chants of Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi" from the rival Australians.

The street was closed to traffic for the match but cars decked out in flags and signs saying both "Go Aussies" and "Forza Italia" clogged adjoining streets, tooting horns as onlookers cheered.

There were similar scenes in Melbourne's Italian district of Lygon Street, where police likened the crowds to the throngs who gather for New Year celebrations.

Australian-born Italian fan Michael Provino said the Socceroos had simply failed to capitalise against an Italian team reduced to 10 men early in the second half.

"They should have taken their chances," he said. "It's harsh but that's the game."

Who will whistle the final?

AFP, Berlin

Who is going to be the man in the middle when the eyes of the globe are on the World Cup final here on July 9?

A handful of the leading candidates appear to have ruled themselves out with blunders, blowing the field open.

The referees' committee is due to meet on Wednesday to decide who will officiate the quarterfinals. Their choices will give a clear pointer as to who could get the nod for the final.

For the 2002 climax in Yokohama, it was an easy decision to make, but with the incomparable Pierluigi Collina now retired, FIFA have a problem.

Quite simply, there is no out-

standing ref in the world at the moment.

Two men tipped to take charge of the final, Graham Poll of England and Germany's Markus Merk, have made uncharacteristic mistakes in Germany.

Poll was guilty of the now infamous three-yellow-card trick when a man once thought unflappable suddenly lost the plot in the highly charged first-round match between Australia and Croatia.

When Josip Simunic committed his first foul he was booked, but when the Croatian should have been sent off for a second infraction, Poll noted down the Australian number three, Craig Moore, instead.

That meant that Simunic was finally only dismissed in stoppage time.

It was a terrible howler for a World Cup referee and Andreas Werz, a spokesman for the referees' committee, had little comfort for the Englishman.

"Under normal circumstances, he would not take charge of any other matches at this World Cup," Werz said.

German official Markus Merk impressed when he took charge of the Euro 2004 final between Greece and Portugal.

But his stock dropped at the World Cup after the United States criticised his officiating in their tournament-ending 2-1 defeat to Ghana.

US coach Bruce Arena said Ghana's match-winning penalty in first-half stoppage time should never have been given.

When American defender Oguchi

Onyewu appeared to cleanly win a header against Ghana forward Razak Pimpong, Merk adjudged there was a push and Stephen Appiah converted the spot kick, which sent the Africans into the last 16.

"That was a big call. That was a key part of the game. We have control of the game and we go in behind by a goal," Arena said.

"That's tough. It's a tough one to deal with."

Of course Arena was the coach of the losing side, the usual source of gripes about the referees.

Russian referee Valentin Ivanov showed so many cards in the full-blooded Netherlands v Portugal second-round game that he broke the World Cup record with four sendings-off.

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