



Ghana goalkeeper Richard Kingson (L) was a star of the World Cup, saving many shots with legs as well as hands, while Uruguay striker Carlos Suarez turned into goalkeeper to foil a goalbound header against Ghana in the quarterfinals.

PHOTOS: AFP FILE





Uncanny 'keepers

REUTERS, Port Elizabeth

The standard of goalkeeping at the World Cup can be summed up by the fact that the most memorable save of the tournament was made by a centre forward.

Conversely, two of the best displays by a man wearing gloves came from Ghana's Richard Kingson, who made most of his saves with his feet.

The tournament was not a vintage one for goalkeepers, with few doing much to enhance their reputations and many doing the opposite as they struggled to deal with the unpredictable aerodynamics of the Jabulani ball.

Uruguay striker Luis Suarez's flying one-handed block of Dominic Adiyiah's diving header in the last minute of extra-time in their quarterfinal against Ghana was an effort most keepers would have been proud of, but only a handful of saves by conventional custodians stand out in the memory.

Kingson's display in that match and in the group phase was impressive, if a little unorthodox.

The man who spent last season as third-choice for Premier League side Wigan Athletic was always quick to see

danger and used his legs to great effect.

There were some "normal" saves, however. It is hard to imagine the Netherlands coming back from 2-0 down against Brazil in their quarterfinal but it looked certain to be the scoreline until Maarten Stekelenburg went full length to touch Kaka's curling shot around a post. Fellow finalists Spain can also thank Iker Casillas for his penalty save against Paraguay.

Fernando Muslera was a major factor in Uruguay conceding only two goals in five games before the semifinals and Paraguay's Justo Villar recovered from a first-game flap that handed a goal to Italy to have a good tournament.

Germany's Manuel Neuer was unspectacular but went about his business with a calm certainty. While others flailed and shifted their weight prematurely while dealing with longrange shots, he ensured that the many he faced, particularly against Argentina in the quarterfinal, were safely swallowed up in his chest.

Others flattered to deceive. Nigeria's Vincent Enyeama was man of the match in their opener against Argentina but blundered horribly in the next game to set Greece on course for their 2-1 comeback win.

Eduardo was excellent for Portugal against Spain but will probably be unhappy with his parry of David Villa's shot back into the striker's path for the only goal of the game.

The first week of action featured a series of blunders, with England's Robert Green and Algeria's Faouzi Chaouchi both dropped after allowing tame shots to get past them and Australia's Mark Schwarzer and Alexandros Tzorvas of Greece also gifting goals.

Oddly, the ball was both villain and a boon for the keepers. Its unpredictable movement through the air, particularly its tendency to dip and swerve late, meant that any kind of block or parry was usually the order of the day.

Eyebrows were raised when Casillas was almost deceived by Cristiano Ronaldo's 30-metre free kick but in fact the big Spaniard had done well to ensure he was fully behind the ball, which swerved past his hands and hit his shoulder.

However, the fact that so few players were able to keep the ball below crossbar height from distance, particularly with free kicks, meant that all-too-often the keepers were not even tested.

'Messi still the best'

AFP, Potchefstroom

Spain defender Carles Puyol believes Barcelona teammate Lionel Messi will be crowned the world's best footballer despite the talents of World Cup finalists Wesley Sneijder and Xavi.

Messi had a disappointing World Cup as Argentina were knocked out of the tournament by Germany in the quarterfinals.

In contrast, both Sneijder and Xavi have played crucial roles as Holland and Spain reached Sunday's World Cup final.

"Sneijder is one of the best players, yes, but to decide on who is the best, it's difficult," said Puyol.

"He is an important player, all the attacks pass through him, he scores goals and provides crucial passes, so you always have to watch him."

"As far as the Ballon d'Or is concerned, both Sneijder and Xavi have been good all year and they would deserve it. But, for me, Leo Messi is the favourite."

Xavi wants to enjoy

GUARDIAN

Spain's midfield fulcrum Xavi has said he is determined to enjoy the World Cup final. But the Barcelona playmaker is keen to relieve the pressure of being installed as favourites after defeating Germany in the semifinal and ensure Spain make the most of their first appearance in the final.

"Let's enjoy the final," said Xavi. "We dedicate this victory to Spain. If we play on Sunday like we did today, we will have a great chance."

Xavi said Spain dominated their youthful opponents, turning the screw in the second half and scoring the winner moments after Toni Kroos had missed Germany's best chance.

"We played as we wanted to," he said. "Now it is a final against Holland, a great team playing great football with great players in midfield and up front. We will have to impose our personality and football on them."

For once, however, David Villa was unable to find the net but he remains in pole position to win the Golden Boot and feels Spain can build on their best performance of the competition.

"We have shown that in the big moments we rise to the occasion," said the new Barcelona signing. "It is the best game we have played. We deserved to score more but a [Carles] Puyol goal put us in the final and we are exultant."

The Barcelona winger Pedro has admitted he was surprised to start last night's World Cup semifinal in front of Fernando Torres. The Liverpool forward was relegated to the bench by the coach, Vicente del Bosque, after failing to score a goal in the tournament thus far.

Pedro repaid his manager's faith by producing an excellent performance as the Euro 2008 champions overcame a spirited but slightly subdued Germany.

The 22-year-old is now expected to keep his place for Sunday's match against Holland at Soccer City, and this time it will not come as a shock. "I was a little surprised to start," said Pedro. "But thankfully I became involved in the match. I am very happy with the way we played and our progression to the final."

The man he replaced, however, could have got that long-awaited goal last night if Pedro had not been quite so selfish. As Spain broke in the final minutes Pedro squandered the opportunity to square the ball to the Liverpool centre-forward on the edge of the Germany box, when Torres would only have had Manuel Neuer to beat.

Pedro instead chose to go on his own and was robbed of possession by Arne Friedrich. "I was alone and had Torres to my side," said Pedro. "Perhaps I had too much confidence in myself."

Puyol mulls future

AFP, Potchefstroom

Veteran defender Carles Puyol, whose headed goal took Spain into the World Cup final, will make a decision on his international future after Sunday's title showdown with Holland.

"What faces us is beautiful and after that will be the time to think," the 32-year-old Puyol said Thursday.

"No decision has been made. I will talk about it with the coach Vicente Del Bosque and the sporting director (Fernando Hierro) after the final."

Barcelona star Puyol made his international debut in 2000 against the Dutch in a friendly and on Sunday will be winning his 90th cap.

Puyol's powerful header from a pinpoint Xavi cross 17 minutes from time in the semifinal on Wednesday was enough to steer European champions Spain to a

1-0 win against Germany and a place in a first World Cup final.

He had come close in the first half of the Durban clash, but his header sailed over the crossbar.

"I haven't scored many goals so this one was very important. I'm happy for the team to be in the final, we deserve to be there," said Puyol.

"I had talked about the move with Xavi and to put the ball near to the penalty spot. In the first half it didn't work, but in the second Xavi was right on target. It was a moment to treasure, even more so because I'm not in the habit of scoring goals."

"Everything went so quickly and we knew that if kept our shape, we could reach the final. We know how important this is for Spanish football. I hope that on Sunday I can score another important goal like this one."

Spain and Holland have yet to win a

World Cup final although the Dutch have been runners-up on two occasions.

Both sides like to play a tight, stylish passing game with patience the key to moving forward.

Puyol believes it will be an open final on Sunday.

"Both teams like to play football, both have very talented players," said the defender, who has seen his team grow in confidence since losing their opening group game to Switzerland.

"We were favourites at the start of the tournament and when we lost the first game it was seen as a disaster."

"We didn't play badly. We got through the first round and have grown in confidence. On Wednesday, against Germany, we played our best match."

"We approach the final with desire and respect. Both teams can produce an attractive final, we both deserve to be there."

Refereeing up for a change

AFP, Johannesburg

Refereeing at the 2014 World Cup will be radically altered with the possible introduction of goal-line technology and the use of extra officials, a top FIFA executive said on Thursday.

FIFA have come under increasing pressure to introduce technology and video replays after a series of howlers at the World Cup.

England's Frank Lampard had a perfectly good goal ruled out against Germany when the referee and his assistant failed to spot the ball had landed behind the line after coming off the crossbar.

Mexico were also furious when Carlos Tevez's goal for Argentina was allowed to stand despite the striker being in an offside position.

FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke said the Lampard incident had been a "bad day" for organisers.

"We're talking about a goal not seen by the referee which is why we are talking about new technology," Valcke told the BBC.

He also suggested that the use of two extra referees positioned on the goal-

line -- a system trialled last season in the Europa League and set to be used in the Champions League this coming season -- might also be used in future World Cups.

"But let's see if this system will help or whether giving the referee an additional four eyes will give him the comfort and make duty easier to perform, then why not?," said Valcke.

In March this year, the International Football Association Board (IFAB) decided against introducing goal-line technology despite the widespread outrage following Thierry Henry's handball which helped France beat Ireland in a World Cup play-off.

But Valcke admitted that the fast and furious pace of the modern game is posing new problems for FIFA.

"The teams and the players are so strong and so fast. The game is different and the referees are older than all the players," said Valcke.

"The game is so fast, the ball is flying so quickly, we have to help them and we have to do something and that's why I say it is the last World Cup under the current system."

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said in

the aftermath of the Lampard controversy that the opposition to goal-line technology would be reviewed.

"The only principle we are going to bring back for discussion is goal-line technology," said Blatter.

"Football is a game that never stops and the moment there was a discussion if the ball was in or out, or there was a goal-scoring opportunity, do we give a possibility to a team to call for replays once or twice like in tennis?"

Blatter also said that in October or November FIFA would unveil a new global plan to improve refereeing.

"We want to improve the match control," he said. "How to do it? After World Cup 1990, we created a task force called football 2000."

"We made some amendments like the back pass to goal keeper. It's not today we have just started. It's an ongoing process. We'll come out in October/November with a new model how to improve high level refereeing."

"I cannot disclose more of what we are doing but something has to be changed."



Italy and Inter Milan defender Marco Materazzi arrives with his daughter in Panama City on Thursday to take part in a friendly match named "Messi and his friends against the rest of the world" to take place on July 14.

PHOTO: AFP