

MY SAY: The World Cup - more than just soccer

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The World Cup is finally over! This time there were many winners and firsts. There was victory for Spain — the world's best team — and also for South Africa, the first country on the African continent to host the event.

The tournament was a great success although the country initially faced scepticism from many quarters. True, it received some bad press, especially with regard to security, but its 40,000-odd dedicated police force managed to keep the problem from worsening.

Weather-wise, the 2010 World Cup is said to be the coldest on record and the most watched since 1994 when the US hosted it, with more than three million people estimated to have watched the games from the stands.

Some would count the introduction of the vuvuzela to the World Cup as definitely a first. Never before had every game in the four-week tournament suffered from what is described as an endless ear-splitting distinctive sound. The instrument, made mostly in China and usually used to summon villagers for a community gathering, was almost banned from the stadiums for distracting the players but survived the threat. In fact, the vuvuzela eventually became synonymous with the 2010 World Cup and a much sought-after souvenir. Most probably, it will reappear four years from now in Brazil, perhaps with another name — a corneta.

Sepp Blatter's about-turn over not having video replays and other forms of so-called "in-game" technology can also be counted a first. He had to climb down over the apparently bad calls made during the games between England and Germany, where the former lost (Frank Lampard's clear goal was not given), and between Argentina and Mexico, where the latter lost (Carlos Teves was well offside when he scored).

"It is obvious that after the experiences so far at this World Cup, it would be a nonsense not to reopen the file on goal-line technology," Blatter was quoted as saying, in contrast to his insistence on making it "a game of the people with a human face, so we don't want technology on the field of play".

There is also a case for the newly designed Jabulani — the name of the 2010 FIFA World Cup ball — meaning "to celebrate" in the Zulu language. While the conventional ball is made with 32 hexagonal panels, the Jabulani ball has only eight spherically moulded ones. The design is said to encourage more short-passing tactics and "making it hard to control once it's off the ground" after soaring in the air. To play the ball in the air is supposedly much harder, so too when throwing it in since it is reportedly more slippery, hence resulting in short throw ins. During the final match, a gold-coloured version called Jo'bulani — to commemorate the city of Johannesburg — was used instead.

What counts most is that Spain finally joined a select list of champion nations for the first time since the World Cup began in 1930. It also won the Fair Play award. Spain, according to a FIFA analysis, was among the five best teams in the 2010 World Cup in terms of the number of passes completed — at a rate of more than 84%. Xavi made 669 passes, the most by a player. A poor percentage of passes seems to correlate with the early exits of the other favourite teams.

Indeed, the Spanish team's mastery over its opponents, especially in its last two games, can be attributed to such a ball-passing approach, which pushes the opposing team towards its own goal line. This gave Spain more chances to try for a winning goal. This tactical set-up deviates from the otherwise homogenous game and gave the Spanish team an added advantage.

It is Dutch maestro Johan Cruyff who created the quick touches and slick passing of "total football", and Spain turned it into a winning strategy against his country in the World Cup final. In fact, Cruyff was so confident of the tactic that he predicted Spain would eventually wrest the Cup for the first time ever.

But Cruyff was not the only one. By far the most unique feature of the 2010 FIFA World Cup was of course the presence of a psychic octopus that stole some of the thunder from the games. Paul developed such a following that punters who dared to ignore the beast were "punished". It also had enemies who were eager to see it end up as part of a menu somewhere. Until the very last game, the octopus was able to beat other competing psychic animals — parrots and parakeets that had long commanded the confidence of many in this part of the world.

To be sure, the 2014 FIFA World Cup will not be the same without the likes of Paul. See you in Brazil!

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