

Game made in heaven and hell

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AT last, the World Cup has ended. Now life can return to normal. Though, for some, the hype may linger a while.

But what is important is that we can derive valuable lessons from the competition, not that Malaysia would be in the World Cup anytime soon.

Indeed, some have alluded that life is one big football match.

Each of us wants to score our goals so that we can be recognised as being a success in life. And, theoretically, we have a chance to do so.

As they say, the ball is round and it depends on the skill we have to handle it in our own league, advancing a step at a time.

Otherwise, how else can we explain the participation of so many from the "less developed" countries, relative to Asia — purportedly, the dynamo of the world economy?

That Trinidad and Tobago and Angola could hold Sweden and Mexico to a draw is proof enough that their presence is not by chance.

The regimen of discipline, teamwork and professionalism has a lot to do with it — values that many can identify with as well as cherish.

Perhaps that is why the World Cup can bring people of diverse cultures, places and religions together, regardless of their inclinations. For a time at least, the world seemed to be one, much to the envy of United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

If only the UN can have a similar grip on its member states, chances are the world would be a better place for everyone.

Imagine, instead of trying to even scores on the battlefield, it could be settled on a football pitch by players rather than armies.

There is already "The Peace Team", made up of Division One Israeli and Palestinian footballers, except that football now has taken a more confrontational stance.

An interview with 96-year-old Argentinian Francisco "Pancho" Varallo, the only living survivor of the first World Cup in 1930, tells us a lot about the standard of football now.

According to him, today's players are athletes — "All they do is run."

He implied that "professionalism" has something to do with it. The game is now much more scientific, with too much emphasis on formation and strategy to win.

Some have described the current games as boring, lacking the South American creativity and colour. Many long for the likes of Pele (said to be the best there has ever been) and Diego Maradona (the last of the football "entertainers").

Many miss the way they dribbled the ball past a number of players, or set up chances for others to score.

And many were awed by their creative ball skills, scoring goals almost single-handedly, without too much passing of the ball.

It is no wonder that both Pele and Maradona are among the names polled in the All-Star XI Dream Team, in conjunction with the 2006 World Cup (<http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2006/worldcup/dreamteam/>).

Could the changing styles have something to do with football becoming more of a European game, more so this time when the four semifinalists came from "old" Europe.

More and more coaches are also European, including those in Asia.

The Cup is also increasingly being commercialised, given the huge advertising revenue to be made.

Commercialism has increased by leaps and bounds compared to some two decades ago before the introduction of satellite television.

As a result, football is now more pervasive, played in the remotest part of the globe. All that is needed is a football and a reasonable space.

As such, it brings hope to the ordinary folk that they will one day be a World Cup player just like many of the present players who come from similar humble backgrounds.

But football also has its dark side. A recent book by award-winning investigative sports reporter Andrew Jennings, *Foul! The Secret World of FIFA: Bribes, Vote Rigging and Ticket Scandals*, hinted why.

Early this year, a Zurich court rejected an application, made on behalf of Fifa, seeking an injunction against the book and instead ordered Fifa to pay costs!

Though this is not the first time fingers are being pointed at Fifa, one of the pressing issues this time is why International Sport and Leisure, the marketing company that owns the television rights to the World Cup, not only went bankrupt in 2001 but paid one million Swiss francs into Fifa accounts in 1998.

Still, according to Jennings, this may be just the tip of the iceberg as he claimed malpractices at every level, that cronyism is rife, and that huge numbers of Fifa match tickets ended up on the black market.

A case in point, claimed the author, was at the England-Sweden game in the 2002 World Cup where an entire row of England fans had bought black market tickets marked with the name of a member of Fifa's executive committee.

Yet another book, *I Love Football: A Match Made in Heaven*, by Hunter Davies (2006) traces some of the notorious social butterflies in the football fraternity.

Many of these are still hidden from the public domain, unlike the display of notorious behaviour on the field.

In the tense heat of the moment, understandably, players can lose their cool. And because of that brief moment of madness, the team can lose everything.

This brings to mind the Zinedine "Zizou" Zidane head butt. For this, the French skipper was sent off during the second period of extra-time in the World Cup final in Berlin.

The match ended 1-1 in extra-time, with Italy triumphing 5-3 in the penalty shootout.

Zizou, whose parents emigrated to France from Algeria, was said to have been insulted by Italian defender Marco Materazzi.

What was actually said is still mired in mystery.

Since then, Zidane had explained in a television interview that Materazzi had insulted his mother and sister.

No matter what was uttered, it is a known fact that racism and bigotry have long existed in many competitive world sports.

In the case of football, according to the British Social Issues Research Centre (<http://www.sirc.org/publik/fvracism.html>):

"Racism is a problem for football across Europe and is an important factor in the problem of football hooliganism itself."

In this case, one lesson we can learn from the World Cup is that when it comes to the crunch, it is no different from that of the United Nations. And Kofi Annan can take heart!

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