



FEVER PITCH

Football World Cup 2010

England has once again taken its majestic place upon the World's stage in a gladiatorial contest that will see David pitted against Goliath, mortal against demi-god. From the majestic landscape of the Cape to the towering foothills of the Drakensberg it truly is fever pitch and not just because of the malaria lingering in the great southern plains. All hopes of national pride are now pinned on the incisiveness of Wayne Rooney, surefootedness of Frank Lampard and the tactical insights of John Terry and Fabio Capello. Once again our hearts have set sail for foreign shores as in the days of Achilles and Hector. Glory will no longer though be the battlements of Troy and a fair maiden's hand but rather the touch of a golden trophy.

In days gone by sporting battles too could be a fight to the death. Indeed in the Meso American ball game which took hold more than 3,500 years ago it was not unknown for the losing team to be ritually slaughtered and sacrificed. As recently as 1969 what was known as the Football War flared up between El Salvador and Honduras in the qualifying rounds of the 1970 Fifa World Cup. This conflict saw the last combat between propeller driven aircraft and a death toll of nearly 3,000. Great battles certainly will take place not only on but also off the pitch. Conflict there will be and heroes will be made. In today's modern World however our fallen heroes will be sacrificed to the indignation of public clamour and the press.

Today's sporting arena will witness not only a battle of teams and players but a battle of brands. Advertisements have already arrived on our airwaves and screens with the likes of Adidas, Nike and Coca-Cola all vying for our attention. Great fortunes for sure are there to be made, kingdoms won and lost. The so near glory and recent demise of Portsmouth FC into the hands of administration stands as testament to this.

Branding and sports wars will be fought behind the scenes and sometimes in the Courts. Fifa has already introduced team wide anti doping tests. In 2008 Chelsea's former star Adrian Mutu received a multi million dollar fine from Fifa for failing a drugs test. More recently this year Bayern Munich's Franck Ribery received a three match ban resulting in his exclusion from the UEFA Champions League final. All of these dramas played out not only within Fifa but also the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne Switzerland which administers much sporting conflict. For certain at this World Cup and beyond there will be a myriad of lawyers, facilitators, mediators and arbitrators dealing not only with player, club, national and commercial interests but brands. Sport's stars will be looking where necessary to protect their privacy and promote their image. David Beckham already holds super human status in this regard. Clubs and individuals too have already been held liable for negligent injuries sustained on the sporting field and any star who is injured may well seek recompense.

Who will umpire fair competition on this World stage? For certain it will not just be the match referees although all eyes have been turned on them within the context of recent bribery and match fixing allegations. We have already seen the demise of Lord Triesman and Gary Lineker quitting his job at the Mail on Sunday in protest. Since 2006 security guards have been posted outside referees' hotels and Fifa has introduced an early warning system. In the 1930 World Cup final the dispute however between Uruguay and Argentina was as to who should provide the match ball. The wisdom of Solomon prevailed and each team provided the ball for one half.

A great contest of course requires great umpires. England's refereeing representative at this World Cup will be Howard Webb.

The origins of football can be found in nearly every corner of the globe from the ancient ball games of The Kingdom of Egypt in 1800 BC to the Chinese game of Tsu Chu dating back to 255 BC. For us football can be traced back to the tempestuous medieval contests that saw village pitted against village. So raucous, rampant and violent were these contests that in 1314 King Edward II banned the game of "football" on pain of imprisonment. Indeed this distracted the populus from practising archery that was a necessary skill for the art of war in particular with France. Today thankfully it is more a war of words and skill. Football will however forever be our noble and beautiful game.

In any war be it sporting or commercial it is not always of course the most talented that triumphs. Many dream Brazilian teams have fallen by the way side. There is no doubt however that Maradona in his day even if aided by his hand of God was the most skilful player on the pitch. Now we have the likes of Messi, Kaka, Robinho and Xavi all vying for glory, their own crown of laurel leaves and golden tribute. Will Capello lead our passionate young English Lions to triumph?

Who will win? Sport? Business? The people of Africa? Maybe justice and of course even England !!! Dreams do sometimes come true.

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