

GOAAAAAAL

Del Piero, Wayne Rooney, Lionel Messi, Ronaldinho, Crespo, Ballack, Torres, Luca Toni and many others - if you haven't heard these names in the past few days, either you have had a debilitating attack of neurosis or have been living the life of a recluse in the jungles of Sumatra (who knows, there may be a few tribal supporters of the Brazilians there as well). The cauldron set afire by the tackles, tactics and last minute substitutions, the dribbles, the massive attacks and swift counter-attacks - it is almost like the best that the world gets to see of the game of Football – soccer is a recent misnomer given by those who've grown up on a staple of American breakfast cereals. From the African savannas to the bohemian cities of South America, from the Down Under and the veiled maidens of Persia to the sushi-chewing Japanese; from the art savvy Frenchmen to the yelling hooligans of England and the proud boys from Deutschland and all Europe; now even the Yankees – this world wide web, the largest following for any single game in the world with some 300 million strong fan following is having a virtual party in Germany !

The world goes around but figuratively and suddenly comes to a standstill when the Football World Cup comes to pass. Thirty two nations competing for the coveted cup. People seem glued to their TVs and now their PCs at work too. Incessant talk and debates ensue on the teams, players, tactics and very few can stay unaffected by the FIFA virus. Its something akin to a world war, with all the natural flaws, the not-so-perfect professionalism but perfect sportsmanship on the ground, spear-headed by the world body FIFA. All this sounds cliched isn't it ? But just look around you and you would come face to face with the truth.

The frenzy builds slowly until the event kicks off with the opening match and then the fever only rises until it is a contagion across the world; afflicted men and women can be found everywhere drooling over every GOAL - that sweet adrenalin pumping feeling when the ball slips into the six yard box and makes the net bulge – the roar of spectators and the antics of the scorers; it is all a heady celebration of the human spirit !

Remember, the teams competing are the best of the best; and the skills on display with the quality in every field of the game; be it the tenacious and stoic defenders, the lightening bolts and opportunistic strikes from the forwards, nuances of the mid-fielders or the unwavering goalkeepers and the strategies in the mind of the restless coaches, that you would get an opportunity to see at the World Cup cannot be compared to any other league match or championship. Not everything is rosy, as scores of injuries and fouls on the ground come bundled with the package – but then, when did football claim to be a gentleman's game ? Players come and players go (observe players like Zidane, Ronaldo and Figo on steady decline); rules change too (the golden goals last time around); but the game brings in fresh batches of immense talent and retains its zing !

Even those nations not actually in the final thirty two, have hordes of citizens rooting for either one team or the other, rattling off facts, statistics, names or just getting carried away in the stream of excitement during the world cup. Like in India, a classic example of non playing champions of the game; where the following is so inherent in some pockets of the country, especially places where the game is more regularly played and practiced in letter and spirit, the interest is sustained and reaches the zenith during the tournament – notable among them being Bengal (a sweet in Kolkata was named 'Del Piero' during the last WC), Kerala and Goa to name a few. However, the exodus that happened from these areas and their denizens who propagate and evangelize the game (though it calls for none) like the author himself, make sure that no part of our cricket-crazy country remain free of football-mania.

A waste of time, time-pass or productivity losses, disinterest in other activities, non-stop flow of energy and wide-eyed conversations at every chai-shop, college quadrangle, office cafeteria or across the dinner table; are some common descriptions of this affliction that are immediately recognizable during the period the World Cup runs. Live the moment, as the carnival would come again, only four years hence. With every match, be it the power play or artistic passes and careful caresses with the ball (as if it were your sweetheart as the Sambas claim); lose yourself in the ninety minutes of unadulterated bliss. I am eagerly awaiting the semi finals and then the moment of glory - the final match ! Right now I have no time to give a thought for the withdrawal symptoms after it gets over. Having a sweet daydream of the gorgeously light ball wafting into the goal thanks to the wizardry by those talented sorcerers of the game who have diligently trained for years under the watchful eyes of splendid master coaches ? Me too ...

Some may call all this foolish, mindless hype, inexplicable or plain stupid; what they forget is that the wave of inflammable passion is inextinguishable – it is the igniting of the flame of human spirit in the hearts of the lovers of football, that makes the world resonate in a buoyancy of liveliness and good spirits – a signal of affirmation for a life

that can celebrate and enjoy the 'one world' concept – even among the myriad problems and pains that stare us in the face; beyond the various miseries, trials and tribulations that life offers as hurdles – these can be stowed away in the dustbin for a few days, getting high on the spirit of the game of football. The numerous minds connect in an intangible network of brotherhood and sway in an imaginary joie de vivre; a global manifestation of romanticism, unparalleled !

There, there goes another one - a superb curl from the left passing through three defenders and beating the hapless goalie, agape - Goaaaaaaal Goaaaaaaal Goaaaaaaal !!!

SHAMIT BAGCHI

17 JUNE 2006