WORLD CUP OBSERVATIONS
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This World Cup, we've all been talking balls. As match after match failed to follow the form book, column inch after column inch after sound-bite has been consumed by the subject; in the singular and the literal, how much to pump the ball up, how much to pump it up in the air, how to protect it, how to steal it, how to play without it; in the plural and the metaphorical, how to coach it.

The Balls You Kick.

New Zealand's Dan Carter kicked poorly and complained about the balls. Jonny Wilkinson kicked poorly and didn't, although the England camp let it be known that some of the balls they used were over-inflated and Jonny was seen on more than one occasion to change the ball just before an important kick. Meanwhile, Chris Patterson of Scotland kicked like a dream, Percy Montgomery barely missed a shot at goal, and ball-manufacturers Gilbert issued a press-release saying that, due to advances in modern technology, these were the best balls ever!

According to England, however, the balls they were given to use in practice were different from those they used in matches; in the week leading up to the semi-final, therefore, they asked for and got a special dispensation to use all six of the match balls in practice. Come match-day, however, Jonny still saw fit to change the ball just before taking a penalty. As the conspiracy theory grew that this was another example of dirty tricks by the home team, another question came to mind; how did he know which was which? The answer came from a television close-up; the match balls had the name of the match stamped onto one panel. That, say the manufacturers, was the only difference between match and practice balls. Has the science of kicking got to such a point that a few grams of ink might make a difference? Or is it, as Patterson and Montgomery would seem to suggest, all in the mind?

PS; As someone who has missed the odd kick for England, I can only applaud the ingenuity of the excuse. I used to blame the wind, the surface, my boots, anything, but I never thought to wonder whether my kicks flew by the posts because there was too much writing on the ball. And as for practising with a match ball, or even anything remotely like a match ball, forget it. We used to practise with big, heavy, plastic-coated white balls and then play internationals with browny, shiny, slippery leather ones that only came out of their wrappers just before kick-off. With all those odds stacked against me - oh, and the absence of a kicking tee - no wonder I was so bad!

The Ball You Kick Away.

"Sometimes it's better not to have the ball." So said England coach Mike Ford in one of the many media briefings during the tournament. Given all that I had ever been taught about rugby, and given the time and effort his fellow coaches were putting in to ensure that England won restarts, gained ascendancy at the set scrum, challenged the opposition throw and competed at the breakdown, that seemed like heresy. But the Argentinians put the theory into successful practice in the first game and, most matches thereafter, succumbed to prolonged bouts of aerial ping-pong. I can see the logic; drill the ball downfield and chase it in sufficient numbers and width that you deter your opponents from even thinking of counter-attack. They can kick it off the field, handing you the lineout throw, or they can return it, hopefully with interest, and hand the problem back to you. French coach Bernard Laporte obviously thought this was the key to success with his selection of siege-gun boots Lionel Beauxis and Damien Traille at fly half and full back for the knockout games against New Zealand and England. It seemed to me, however, that France only started to turn the tables on the All Blacks when they started to run at them , rather than kick at them, while the folly of playing a centre at full back was brutally exposed by England's second-minute try.

The Ball You Do Anything Not To Give Away.

"Truck and trailer" was the phrase on every commentator's lips in 2003, as we witnessed a seemingly endless succession of rolling mauls with the ball-carrier tucked in behind his colleagues, the opposition seemingly unable to do anything lawful to prevent an ugly trundle towards their line. "Pick and go" were the buzz words this time as what seemed like large periods of each game were dominated by a series of drives round the fringes of rucks. Although some tries were scored from close range, the ends, to me, did not justify the time and energy spent on the tactic. As a means of winding the clock down to protect an advantage, "pick and go" had some obvious merit, but to my untutored eye it seemed to be heads-down rugby; narrow, dull and ponderous.

I was, therefore, surprised to hear Martin Corry praising the Tongans for their mastery of the tactic; according to the Leicester skipper, the islanders were adept at thereby turning slow ball into quick ball. To me, it seemed to make slow ball even slower and give defences a chance to find their feet and their bearings. Not so, argued Radio Five Live summariser Matt Dawson. The point is for the ball to be recycled rapidly as soon as a "picker and goer" has made any sort of inroad, has got the defence, if not onto the back foot, then at least on to its heels. I remain to be convinced.

The Ball You Steal.

In 1999 it was defence; in 2003 it was the set-piece; in this World Cup, the key area was the breakdown. That was the verdict of Eddie Jones, the man who coached the Wallabies in 2003 and who this time around was acting as adviser to the Springboks.

Given the first two developments, this was always likely to be the case and, going into the tournament, statistics showed that a staggering percentage of tries run in by runaway

favourites New Zealand had been scored from turnover ball. Skipper Richie McCaw was the undisputed king in this area; it was perhaps significant that when referee Wayne Barnes ruled that the flanker's efforts at the breakdown in the quarter-final against France were just the wrong side of the law, the All Blacks' game fell away.

The eventual World Cup winners, however, had the perfect game, one that they had been perfecting over time. Just before the tournament began, the IRB'S analyst, Corris Thomas, highlighted just what made the Springboks a force to be reckoned with. Thomas pointed out that in the 2004 Tri-Nations, New Zealand had 40% more possession than South Africa and Australia 11% more. Both made 50% more passes than the Springboks, while New Zealand created twice as many rucks, the Wallabies 40% more, and both teams conceded fewer penalties. Yet South Africa won the tournament by initially kicking for position and then employing an aggressive blitz defence. "It will be interesting," concluded Thomas, "to see if they use it in 2007."

And how they used it! All four of their semi-final tries against Argentina came from opposition ball - two turnovers and two interceptions - while the tactic was rewarded, directly or indirectly, in the final with at least three of their five penalties. It was effective, it was punishing - but it wasn't particularly pretty.

The Balls You Can't Coach.

Although the ultimate spoils went to the team that carried out a carefully thought out game plan with supreme skill and courage, the rest of the tournament was distinguished by some great performances against the odds and against all logic. England, for instance, after their stumbling performance against USA and their inept display in the pool match against South Africa, had no right to beat Australia in the quarter-final or France in the semis.

Yet, from the ruins of a 36-nil thrashing by the Springboks, England found a hitherto undreamt of cohesion, a collective ferocity that stunned both opponents and pundits and had observers spouting forth about traditional "English" characteristics such as resolve, resilience and dogged determination. The players themselves talked of their collective will, their sense of togetherness forged in the Royal Marines training camp at Lympstone, and tested in the searing heat of the criticism that came their way after their collapse against South Africa. The coaches for their part, and quite rightly, refused to take any credit. England's success came from players who, as Nick Easter said before the final, were able "to look into each other's eyes and know they would give everything."

That sort of team spirit, it seems to me, is impossible to coach. Most experts agree, however, that it can be engendered by subjecting players to an almost sadistic level of punishment. That, of course, can go wrong - witness the Springboks' abortive experiment with 'Kamp Staalrad' before the 2003 World Cup – so it's not only England who swear by such commando-style training.

Fiji, for instance, were taken to the wire in their pool matches before that quite amazing victory over Wales, which was sealed by a late try. Their players attribute such hitherto unsuspected resilience to their pre-tournament blow-outs on what fly half Nicky Little described in the team's media guide as his most respected opponents, the sand-dunes of Sigatoka and the mud run of Tongalevu. In pre-tournament training, the players would be rousted from their beds at 5am and driven through an ever more demanding series of exercises on these awesome natural obstacles. If you look at the photo (below) that they used to adorn their media guide, you get some idea of what the modern player has to go through. As for me, I love the scenery - and am so glad to have played when I did!