

# World Cup against racism

## BEYOND RACE

A new perspective

BY K.K. TAN

THE euphoria over the World Cup should remind us of the true spirit of sports which is based on brotherhood, equality and mutual respect. I remember before the start of the 2006 World Cup semi-final in Germany, players for Brazil and France held a banner declaring "Say no to racism". It was a touching and proud moment for me and, I am sure, also for millions of viewers, to see their football heroes making such a public gesture against racism.

FIFA is responsible for developing and setting rules for football and for establishing the sport's greatest competition - the FIFA World Cup once every four years.

The association has survived the politics of two world wars and strived to stay politically neutral. Due to its European roots, it has faced its greatest challenge on how to deal with racism and tried very hard to address it in 2006 at the 18th World Cup in Germany, which is part of a continent with a long history of racism.

FIFA's official promise is "The world is a place rich in natural and cultural diversity, but also one where many are still deprived of their basic rights. FIFA now has an even greater responsibility to reach out and touch the world, using football as a symbol of hope and integration (notice it does not use

"assimilation")." FIFA's stand regarding unity, one of its core values besides authenticity, performance and integrity, is stated as: "It is FIFA's responsibility to foster unity within the football world and to use football to promote solidarity, regardless of gender, ethnic background, faith or culture."

The 2006 World Cup with more than 30 billion accumulated spectators worldwide, was the ideal platform to send a clear rejection of any form of racial discrimination.

FIFA announced for the first time in 2006 that teams could have points deducted for racist remarks by players and officials. At each of the 64 games, a banner covering the centre circle was displayed from the stadium's opening until the end of the official pre-match protocol, bearing the tournament slogan "A time to make friends" combined with the message "Say no to racism".

A "Football Against Racism" logo on banners covered each field's centre circle until kickoff at all matches. Before each quarter-final game, team captains read a "declaration against racism" over the public-address system, and photos of teams and referees holding the Football Against Racism flag were shown.

It was clearly a statement that FIFA wanted to make and for the players, fans and tournament organisers to declare that racism has no place in football.

As stated publicly at that time: "FIFA places great importance on respecting ethnic backgrounds. As the most popular sport, football has the biggest chance in the battle

against racism, making it clear to the public that skin colour has no impact whatsoever on our everyday routine, our lives, and our sport. FIFA is totally committed to taking steps to eradicate such pernicious trends in society and football ..."

Moving forward to the current World Cup, it could not have been more apt for South Africa to host it from FIFA's anti-racism standpoint. For the country's 45 million people, it can be seen as a significant step in nation building after years of racial oppression and inequality under the former apartheid regime.

South Africa won its bid to become the first African nation to host the World Cup six years ago against a backdrop of negative perceptions regarding its ability to finance the construction of the infrastructure on time and to provide the manpower needed for a massive global event.

The country's first post-apartheid president, Nelson Mandela, campaigned hard for this prestigious tournament since 1994 because he saw it as a way forward to foster reconciliation after decades of racial separation and conflict.

Danny Jordaan, a former footballer, anti-apartheid activist and head of the South African Organising Committee said that despite the challenges and frustrations, the effort has been worth it, given the history of apartheid.

"We are a nation that comes from a divided past, a past of conflict, almost of war," he said. "And so the building of new single non-racial South Africa is a critical part of sustainable economic growth."

He says the World Cup has helped foster reconciliation and

built social cohesion.

The UN Human Rights chief, Navi Pillay, added her voice to supporting FIFA's position on racism by saying that the World Cup is a perfect opportunity to highlight the need to tackle racism and intolerance on and off the field.

"Let's kick discrimination off the field. Let's tackle exclusion. Let's put racism offside," she said.

Pillay added that the World Cup is an opportune time to reflect on the fact that sport is meant to foster social cohesion, bring different cultures together in a celebration of healthy competition, and to overcome the diffidence and even contempt that all too often divide countries and communities in the political and social arenas.

So, as Malaysian fans of the World Cup, what can we learn from FIFA's efforts to combat racism globally? In a multi-ethnic society like ours, sports has tended to be a cohesive and unifying factor but much more needs to be done to promote unity, friendship and understanding.

Any form of racial bigotry, including efforts by any quarters to promote racial supremacy of any ethnic community is inconsistent with the spirit of the World Cup. So while we enjoy the matches in South Africa, let's not forget the values and message that FIFA and football have for us in opposing racism on and off the field. Let's kick racial chauvinism out of our lives, learn to respect our various ethnicities and accept our diversity as a strength.

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