



Admission tickets may be tough to get, but exit passes aren't: Portugal's Costinha sees yellow and then yellow-red.



Precision work: David Beckham curves a free-kick into the lower left corner of Ecuador's goal – 1:0 for England.



Dream pair: Lukas Podolski scores twice after assists from Miroslav Klose in Germany's game against Sweden.



A Saturday-night blast: Maxi Rodriguez fires a long-range kick, making the score 2:1 against Mexico.

Overcoming nerves

France's comeback

Draws impossible, extra time, penalty dramas – thanks to the round of 16, the FIFA World Cup became a true spectacle. An end to the 48 group matches, and an end to the upsets by the underdogs. In their place, a knock-out system: Only the strongest survive.

It's that simple and brutal – and that's what makes it uniquely exciting. To have your nerves tested to the limit and to come through – that is the special challenge facing the players. The games played during the round of 16 showed just how differently the pressure on the athletes can be vented.

Possibility No. 1: Stress is converted – like in the game between Portugal and the Netherlands – into aggression that goes far beyond the limits of fairness and reason. Referee Valentin Ivanov of Russia showed eight yellow and four yellow-red cards to players who had lost control of themselves.

Tension can also lead to anxiety, and even to mental paralysis. England and Ecuador hardly risked a thing in their game. The fear of failure seemed to be so huge. It took David Beckham's individual class and his free-kick to advance England to the quarter-finals following an uninspired effort. In Kaiserslautern, in the game between Italy and Australia, the Italians needed a controversial call from the Spanish referee Medina Cantalejo during extra time. The penalty by Totti that put Italy ahead 1:0 sent the unlucky »Socceroos« back to the other

end of the world, where the country had discovered European football in just a few weeks. Perhaps, the euphoria will turn into a love affair. The coach who initiated a similar development four years ago in South Korea proved his ability once again: Guus Hiddink.

PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

Like others, Switzerland and Ukraine had little to offer athletically – for 120 goal-less minutes. The Swiss even pulled off another trick: They did not convert a single one of their penalties. The Swiss team still lacks the experience of dealing with extreme situations. Even though they were forced to go home after the shoot-out, the future belongs to Kuhn's team. Perhaps even at EURO 2008 in their own country and Austria.

The same applies to the Spaniards. They, of course, were unable to burnish their country's lacklustre FIFA World Cup record. Still, the young Spanish team holds promise for the future. Ghana played attractive football, but was tripped up, like so many African teams, by its fatal inability to score: a never-ending story?

The team that beat Spain represents the third – and most appealing – possibility of dealing with high-pressure situations. During the round of 16, France unleashed unsuspected power. Realising that their last chance could be drawing near, the golden-oldies of Zidane, Thuram and Makelele took to the pitch against Spain with a sense of determination that was totally missing during the disappointing group matches and that produced a well-deserved 3:1 victory.

The conversion of stress into positive energy was also seen in the game between Argentina and Mexico. It was 120 minutes of football at the highest level, crowned by Maxi Rodriguez's magical goal to make the score 2:1.

The play of the German team was just as impressive. In their game against Sweden, the hosts faced the possibility of an early exit, something that could have dampened the party mood and excitement sweeping through the organising country. But that didn't seem to bother Lukas Podolski, Miroslav Klose and all of the other German players. They played like never before and scored early. The Germans' fairy tale continued. ■