

# Question your answers

JANUARY is the season for punditry, as the world looks at the year ahead and predicts, pontificates and ponders the possibilities of the sporting year.

From a global perspective, 2014 will be punctuated by the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, and the Soccer World Cup in Brazil.

The latter will no doubt ignite memories of a month in 2010 when South Africa stood still long enough to see the creation of a Spanish football dynasty, further strengthened when they defended their European title in 2012.

Defending the World Cup will be much more challenging, particularly following an ominous defeat by hosts Brazil in last year's Confederations Cup, the relative decline in dominance of the Barcelona nucleus of the team, and the progressive emergence of rival teams, and the fact that it would mean another six years of international dominance.

Repeat international champions

## Sports teams will have to raise their games this year

have become increasingly rare.

The Rugby World Cup has never been defended, while football's last repeat champions were Brazil in 1962. Cricket had its own dynasty when Australia won three one-day-international world titles, the last in 2007. The norm is that ageing, and the fluidity and evolution of the sport, makes it extremely difficult to reach the pinnacle across two generations of players.

This is because it tends to take two "cycles" and four to six years for a coach to mould a team with experience and a winning culture.

So a World Cup triumph often coincides with the retirement of a core group of players, as happened to England after winning the 2003 Rugby World Cup.

Alternatively, if the team is kept together, victory often quenches desire, and the passage of four

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years leaves players and teams a yard short of pace, and perhaps more importantly, easier to figure out and neutralise tactically.

What worked to win once rarely succeeds the second time. Spain have succeeded three times, but a fourth will require either that they raise the standard of a predictable plan to the point where it is indefensible, or overcome six years' of observation and counter-strategy from rival coaches by

adapting their own approach. Either is possible. Both are extremely challenging.

It's for this reason that in the high-performance sports world, success today often predicts failure tomorrow. Money is one antidote to this affliction — European football leagues are dominated by a small and exclusive club of high-earners and big-spenders, for example.

The best a smaller team can hope for is a single inspired season, perhaps carried by a future superstar, who is then invariably snapped up by the high-rollers a season later.

The Cheetahs in South African rugby and Borussia Dortmund in German soccer have both punched above their weight and provided the whales with players to help them win the following year.

This is the sporting equivalent of the income gap, where poverty pre-

dicts poverty in performance as much as in personal finance.

The sustainability conundrum in high performance management can only be overcome through constant adaptation and innovation, married to constant reinvention of motivation. The death knell of any sports team is the phrase: "We have a winning formula", or "We already know what works."

On that note, if the Springboks continue the trend of narrowing the gap on the All Blacks during 2014, let's hope not to hear any such talk from the camp. Sometimes, the best place to be, leading into a big tournament, is second, because it's where desire and the necessity to innovate thrive.

If there is one lesson in this for all of us it is: question your answers, because when you "know", you're likely to be at your most ignorant. It's late for a New Year's resolution, but that would be mine, on behalf of sports coaches everywhere.

## City back on top of league

MANCHESTER City went top of the Premier League after securing a controversial 2-0 win at Newcastle United yesterday with an Edin Dzeko goal and a stoppage time effort from Alvaro Negredo.

Newcastle were incensed that a stunning volley from Ivorian international midfielder Cheick Tiote was disallowed by referee Mike Jones after 34 minutes when the hosts trailed 1-0.

Tiote smashed the ball home with a swerving 20-metre left-foot shot, but, as the Newcastle players were celebrating, the referee consulted with his linesman and disallowed the goal.

They decided that Yoan Gouffran, who was standing in an off-side position three yards from goal, was interfering with play and blocking goalkeeper Joe Hart's line of vision.

Tiote, who has only scored one goal for Newcastle in 104 appearances, said: "I think it was a goal and I don't know why the referee didn't accept it."

"We asked the referee to explain why he didn't give the goal, but he didn't say anything so we had to get on with it." United manager Alan Pardew also said he did not know why the goal was disallowed as he felt Hart's vision was not impaired.

"The referee has not been clear in his answers. I don't understand it. Even if Man City's defenders were on the edge of the box and we had four offside, it was such a clean hit it was going in the top corner, so there was no way Gouffran was in Joe's view."

"Unfortunately that was a mas-



FLYING HIGH: Manchester City striker Alvaro Negredo, left, challenges Steven Taylor (observed) of Newcastle United during the English Premier League match at St James' Park, Newcastle upon Tyne, yesterday. City moved to the top of the log with a 2-0 win  
Picture STU FORSTER/GETTY IMAGES

sive call and he has denied it on a tiny technicality here which I think was wrong." Dzeko swept City into the lead after eight minutes, timing his run perfectly to meet a cross from Aleksandr Kolarov to plant the ball past Tim Krul.

Their second came in the final seconds when Negredo beat the offside trap and scored at the second attempt after his first effort was blocked by Krul for City's 94th goal of the season.

"It was a very difficult game and it's a very big result as we know

it's a tough place to come and win," said Manchester City boss Manuel Pellegrini.

"It was an offside goal as they were interfering with Joe Hart and the referee made that call," he added of Tiote's strike.

City moved on to 47 points from 21 matches, one ahead of Chelsea. Arsenal, who started the weekend top, will go back to the summit if they win at Aston Villa tonight.

The one blot for City was seeing Frenchman Samir Nasri carried off on a stretcher in the later stages with what appeared to be a

serious knee injury after a clattering from defender Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa, who was booked for the challenge.

The Magpies have now lost three successive league games and are eighth in the table with 33 points.

In the day's other match, Liverpool beat Stoke City in a pulsating match at the Britannia Stadium, finally winning 5-3.

The Reds went into a two-goal lead through an unfortunate own goal by Ryan Shawcross after five minutes and a 32nd-minute strike

by Luis Suárez, but were pegged back before halftime by goals from former players Peter Crouch and Charlie Adam, the latter being an excellent strike.

Liverpool went up a gear in the second half and went into a 4-2 lead with a Steven Gerrard penalty and a second from Suárez.

Jonathan Walters set up an exciting last five minutes with Stoke's third, before Daniel Sturridge made the points safe for Liverpool, who move up to fourth spot, one point ahead of Everton. — Reuters and sports staff

## More misery for England as Aussies go 1-0 up

AARON Finch scored a ton as Australia maintained their dominance over England with a six-wicket victory in the first one-day international in Melbourne yesterday.

Finch (121) and David Warner (65) dazzled while captain Michael Clarke contributed 43 runs as the hosts eased to a victory target of 270 with 26 balls to spare.

Earlier, half-centuries from Gary Ballance (79) and Eoin Morgan (50) helped England put a wobbly start behind them and post 269/7.

The 163-run stand between Finch and Warner in 28 overs laid the foundation for Australia's win, which prolonged England's misery after their Test series whitewash.

Australia's openers enjoyed their share of luck, with Finch dropped by Ballance on eight and Warner, on 22, called back after replays could not establish conclusively Jos Buttler had taken a clean catch behind the stumps.

Warner eventually holed out in the deep off Joe Root.

Jordan dismissed Shane Watson for a two-ball duck in the next over, but Clarke and Finch scored freely to kill the contest.

Ballance eventually caught Finch in the 40th over off Ben Stokes.

England suffered an early blow when Alastair Cook edged the fourth ball of the day to perish caught behind for four.

Clint McKay (3/44) claimed his second victim in Root (3) to reduce the tourists to 22/2 before Ian Bell and Ballance steadied the ship, but

Bell reverse-swept Xavier Doherty for a boundary and slog-swept Glen Maxwell for a six to reach 41 before attempting a repeat of the same shot only to be clean bowled by Doherty.

Morgan joined Ballance in the middle for England's most productive partnership, adding 83 runs from 14.1 overs.

Maxwell dismissed Morgan for 50 off 47 balls while Ballance fell in the 46th over, justifying his call-up with his maiden ODI 50. — Reuters

### TV HIGHLIGHTS

#### TODAY

Hockey: World League, New Zealand vs England at 10.25am, Australia vs Argentina at 12.25pm, Netherlands vs Belgium at 2.30pm, Germany vs India at 4.25pm, all on SS7  
Soccer: Chan, Ghana vs Congo at 5pm, Libya vs Ethiopia at 8pm, both on SABC1/SS4; English Premiership, Aston Villa vs Arsenal at 10pm on SS3; La Liga, Villarreal vs Real Sociedad at 11pm on SS5; Serie A, Inter Milan vs Chievo at 10pm on SS7; Fifa Ballon D'Or Gala at 8pm on SS3  
Tennis: Australian Open from Melbourne, at 2am, 10am and 2am (tomorrow) on SS1