

Little change on the world stage

THE World Cup has come and gone, leaving behind the realisation that the balance of power in the beautiful game is in exactly the same place it was on June 12. Yes, Spain capitulated in defence of their crown, but the other big four — based on rankings, qualification and previous World Cup results — all made the semifinals.

Before last night's final, Germany had three trophies (previously as West Germany, of course), and Argentina had two. Holland and Brazil claimed third and fourth places respectively, and so for all the fanfare, for all the goals, for all the "shock results", the balance of power in world football remains exactly where it has been for 30 years.

In fact, if anything, this World Cup has delivered fewer surprises than previous editions, with analysis of results compared to expectation (based on betting odds) showing fewer upsets than in 2010.

There were some near-upsets; Chile came within a few penalty kicks of eliminating Brazil and guaranteeing a "surprise" semifinal. That was not to be, and nor was Africa's challenge realised.

Mexico and the US promised much, but left proudly disappointed, not for the first time proclaiming that "next time" will deliver the awaited breakthrough.

The most resounding result was Germany's 7-1 semifinal thrashing of Brazil, but that still doesn't negate the fact that the World Cup remains a tournament that appears open, but ultimately isn't.

The reality is that the world's elite football family is no closer to expansion, despite the promises,

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There is no question that money drives success

and the World Cup tournament is increasingly dominated by the wealthiest leagues, centred on western Europe.

There's no question that money drives success. Within each of the big leagues of Europe, there is a very good relationship between a club's financial value and its finishing position on the league table. So it should be no surprise that national teams that provide players (the assets) to those wealthy clubs also perform better.

In the case of Germany, the pathway to success is even more compelling — disappointing World Cup and Euro performances between 1994 and 2000 saw strategic decisions made to overhaul the system and compel every professional club to run an academy targeting young players.

The focus, as it always is in successful sports systems, was on coaches, and Germany created the

world's most advanced coach education programme for football.

This is a huge investment, \$1-billion since 2001, but it produced a squad of young and exciting players, whose potential has been evident through the German league for a considerable period.

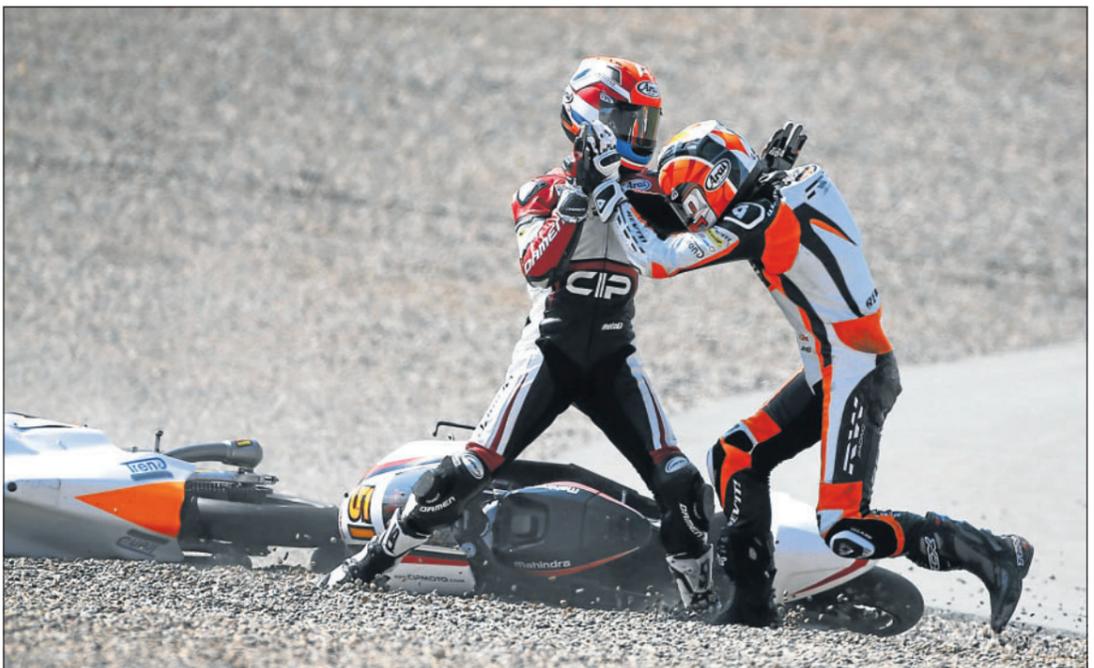
Last year, when two German teams, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, contested the Champions League final, they shared 26 mostly very young players who were eligible for the German national team.

Is it any wonder, then, that they have emerged from the 2014 World Cup as one of the strongest teams? Their 2014 success is also their fourth consecutive berth in the semifinals, further proof that theirs is a system, not a speculation.

Of course, not all nations can emulate this strategy, and nor should they. Argentina, for example, have capitalised on those systems by creating what is effectively an "export" model — 19 of the 23-man Argentina squad play in Europe — 13 of them in Spain, Italy or England. Africa should similarly aim to use the riches of Europe to develop its talent.

The key ingredient in this export model is excellent man management, something that has tripped up South American teams before, and certainly got the better of Africa in 2014, with the rather embarrassing pay disputes casting a shadow over the continent's performances.

Until that changes, Europe and the two biggest South American teams have too much inertia, too much weight behind them, and the rest of the world will remain on the outside, looking in.



HANDLEBARS AT DAWN: Dutch Moto3 rider Bryan Schouten grapples with compatriot Kalex KTM rider Scott Deroué, right, after they crashed out during the German MotoGP at the Sachsenring circuit yesterday. Picture: REUTERS

Now Marquez makes it nine in a row

MARC Marquez won his ninth consecutive race of the season yesterday as he dominated the German MotoGP to finish ahead of Honda team-mate and compatriot Dani Pedrosa, with Jorge Lorenzo on a Yamaha in third.

The win gives Marquez a perfect total of 225 points, with Pedrosa taking sole possession of second, 77 points back.

Italian Valentino Rossi, who finished fourth, is now third in the

rankings and 84 points adrift.

The Spaniard is also the youngest rider to win nine races in a row, breaking the 1984 record set by the late Englishman Mike Hailwood.

The race at the Sachsenring was threatened by rain, which caused a farcical start as a group of some 14 riders got caught trying to change tyres at the last minute.

The race began with only nine riders in their qualifying positions. Stefan Bradl, the 2011 Moto2

world champion, took advantage to lead for the opening stages before Marquez glided past the German with 24 laps to go.

It then came down to a straight battle between Marquez and Pedrosa, who applied what pressure he could on his team-mate, but Marquez rode with supreme confidence and continued to set fastest laps.

● South African Brad Binder finished second behind Jack Miller of Australia in the Moto3 race. — AFP