

Battle of wits plays out at WC

DOCTOR KNOW

ROSS TUCKER

LOUIS van Gaal's decision to substitute his starting goalkeeper in the 120th minute of the Netherlands' quarterfinal against Costa Rica brought a tense, cagey quarterfinal stage to a close on an appropriately tactical note.

As the stakes have risen, coaching decisions have become more and more important.

The Van Gaal substitution, hailed in hindsight as "genius", would just as easily have been criticised as "insane" had Holland been defeated in that shootout.

Both reactions would have been incorrect, in my opinion.

I explained in my previous column that penalty kicks ultimately come down to the kicker's ability to execute a skill under enormous pressure.

If the kicker pulls it off, and the speed and placement of the ball are even 90% of ideal, the keeper has no chance of making a save.

Therefore, what ultimately creates a heroic goalkeeper is only partly his skill in reading the direction of the ball and pulling off the save.

Most of it requires below average placement of the penalty, and that's what Costa Rica produced.

The first, second, fourth and fifth kicks were all just slightly too close to the keeper, at a convenient height, and in truth, more than two could have been saved.

What Tim Krul, Holland's called-upon saviour, did do well was wait for as long as possible before diving, which allowed him to go the right way.

From that point on, though, he needed sub-standard kicks to be in with a chance.

So I don't believe Van Gaal deserves the accolades for that particular switch. That it came off is more down to the quality of the kicks, and



IT WORKED: Dutch duo Tim Krul and Louis van Gaal celebrate after the keeper won the match
Picture: REUTERS

also the incredible Dutch penalties, which no goalkeeper on earth would have been able to save.

The margin between a "genius" move and "insanity" was therefore something over which Van Gaal had no influence.

Other coaching decisions have, however, been decisive in matches.

This World Cup has seen more goals by substitutes than any previous edition. While I don't think this necessarily says anything about the game in general, it does highlight very powerfully the ability of coaches to change matches from the bench.

One of the reasons this

“The semis will impose new challenges on coaches to find weakness

happens is because fatigue impacts the starting XI significantly, so fresh legs open matches up by finding more space. Research has found that, after 60 minutes of football, a player's top speed is about 10% slower than at the start of a match.

That translates into about 1.5m over a 15m sprint, which means an easily intercepted pass at the start becomes a decisive defence-splitting pass by the end of a match.

Fast, fresh substitutes create situations where that 1.5m is decisive — look at Lukaku first creating and

then scoring for Belgium during extra time against the USA.

Substitutes also allow coaches to make tactical adjustments, and those change match flow. During the second stage, we saw many late goals, as Holland, Greece, France, Germany, Argentina and Belgium all scored after 80 minutes or in extra time, thanks to changes in tactics and attitude towards the end of matches.

The quarterfinals were different — early goals changed three of the four matches, setting them up as defensive shut-down efforts. The semifinals will impose a new set of challenges on coaches to find weaknesses in opponents and to hide their own.

Perhaps the decisive factor will be how coaches juggle their resources in the face of injury and suspension.

Of the four remaining teams, Brazil have been the worst hit, losing their influential star Neymar to injury and their captain Thiago Silva to suspension, along with a few other doubts that may force coach Carlos Alberto Pereira to rethink his approach entirely.

Argentina face questions over Angel di Maria, though their playing style is built around Lionel Messi. The Netherlands and Germany seem, at least for now, to be holding up well.

Whose tactical decision-making holds up best is likely to emerge with the World Cup trophy in a week's time.

Centre court princess bows out

EUGENIE Bouchard, the Canadian who captured the hearts of British tennis fans as well, apologised for letting them down after losing in the Wimbledon final.

"I don't know if I deserve your love today but I really appreciate it," the 20-year-old told the crowd after her straight sets defeat to Czech Petra Kvitová.

She also apologised for not putting on a better show for her royal fan, Princess Eugenie, who made a last-minute trip to

the All England Club to support her namesake.

"I'm very happy that she came," Bouchard said. "Disappointed I couldn't put on a better show."

After Andy Murray's shock exit in the quarterfinals, and in the absence of any other British hope, SW19 had adopted Bouchard, impressed by her aggressive playing style and composure.

Bouchard breezed through to the final, beating world No 3 Simona Halep in the semifinal,

during which she was roared on by her admirers on Centre Court.

Bouchard was named after Princess Eugenie, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of York, by her "royal nut" mother, Julie Leclair. She has a twin sister named Beatrice, after Princess Beatrice, a brother William, 15, named after the Duke of Cambridge, and younger sister, Charlotte, named after the daughter of Princess Caroline of Monaco. — © *The Sunday Telegraph*