

A Lesson in Humility

There was so much to admire in Spain's journey to the summit of world football during the 2010 World Cup: Vicente Del Bosque's wise management, Xavi's brilliant orchestration of the play, Andrés Iniesta's incisive running with the ball, David Villa's prowess in front of goal, and the goalkeeping exploits of Iker Casillas. But for those of us who observed the current World and European champions at close quarters, it was not only their football ability that impressed. Their human qualities, in particular the humility displayed by many of the Spanish players, gained them respect beyond their technical achievements. Was this positive behaviour just a lucky coincidence or was it the result of a culture within the Spanish game?

It is easy to see that this successful generation of Spanish footballers are modest, unpretentious and happy to promote a "we" mentality. As Xavi stated during the World Cup: *"We are a group of very normal, very hard working people who love the game."* The same can be said of their head coach, Vicente Del Bosque, who has won both the UEFA Champions League and the World Cup with his respectful, patient and unassuming style of management. What is not on public display is the process which has nurtured many of these gifted players, young men who have their feet firmly on the ground.

As Fernando Hierro, sports director at the Spanish FA (the RFEF), and Ginés Meléndez, RFEF coaching school director, informed the participants at UEFA's recent national coaches conference in Madrid, the aim in Spain is to educate talented youngsters to play, to compete and to develop a psychological balance. Ginés explained: *"The players need to be really well balanced. A player whose behaviour varies excessively between euphoria and drama on the basis of the result will perform poorly in competitions."* From the grassroots to the elite youth squads, the RFEF puts an emphasis on the teaching of values, such as commitment, comradeship, naturalness and modesty. Through selection, encouragement and training, they strive to produce top players and good characters.

Developing a work/family ethic and a down-to-earth attitude is a conscious decision of the technical staff at the RFEF. In their world, there is no place for arrogance, conceit or a feeling of superiority. Vicente Del Bosque, at the top level, fights against complacency and false pride. Of course, players need an ego, a determination to be the best that they can be, but this must not be confused with the negative face of egotism. When players or coaches succeed, there is no need to engage in self promotion. As the maxim says: *"If you have to tell people you are, you aren't."* If you have to tell people you are good at something, maybe you are not.

Spain won the World Cup in South Africa with superb technical quality. They also won the fair play trophy and this is testimony to a philosophy that values fast technique and positive attitudes in equal measure. When FC Barcelona's Xavi spoke about his national team captain, Iker Casillas of Real Madrid CF, he said: *"He's a very humble, very normal guy."* This statement could have applied to many of the players in Spain's national team, particularly those who have graduated through the youth ranks in the past decade and a half. Xavi, Iniesta, Casillas and company have won everything,

yet they provide the next generation with a valuable lesson in humility.