

England end disappointing World Cup with barren draw against Costa Rica

Daniel Taylor at Estádio Mineirão

Tuesday 24 June 2014 19.04 BST

Ignore, for one moment, England's bland ignominy and just reflect on those moments at the final whistle. Costa Rica - little, patronised Costa Rica - have won Group D and their manager, Jorge Luis Pinto, could be seen punching the air and bellowing to the skies. As one team traipsed away apologetically, the other reflected on the prize of a knockout tie in Recife on Sunday. They have done it from a country of 4.8m people. Or the equivalent of 10 Bradfords. "It's a conundrum," as Roy Hodgson said.

For England, it was the strange feeling of being at someone else's party, outside with their noses pressed against the window. It was a stodgy performance and when Hodgson said he was "pleased to give the fans something to cheer about" it felt suspiciously like a man employing an old trick to try to manipulate the headlines. Hodgson kept to the deception and "couldn't have asked for a better performance". It was dispiriting to hear.

The truth, however much he tried to dress it up, is that it was a prosaic game that drifted along without any real sense that England had it within them to put on a display that might have banished a few of the criticisms as they prepared for the long flight home. At times it felt like a throwback to those warm-up matches in Miami, with a strange flow to the game and only brief moments when the crowd were fully absorbed. Except back then there was a measure of excitement. Now there was the sense of dragging out a long, strained goodbye.

In one stand the crowd entertained themselves for a good 20-minute period by whacking a beach ball around, as if oblivious to the fact there was a football match going on. The first Mexican wave began after 15 minutes, which is always a sign that there is not much happening on the pitch, and England's supporters could be heard going through the now-familiar repertoire of gallows-humour chants. Steven Gerrard was afforded a sympathetic reception when he was brought on in the second half for possibly his final international appearance and Frank Lampard's lingering wave indicated this could feasibly be the last time we see him in England's colours. As for the younger players, Luke Shaw slipped in seamlessly at left-back and there were brief flashes of what Ross Barkley can do in midfield. Yet the game was flat. It was, in short, about as dreary as anything that has been seen in this World Cup.

"I thought we were really unlucky not to win this game," Hodgson said. "I thought the whole back four was absolutely excellent. We restricted the [Costa Rica] team to almost no chances. In midfield we dominated and outplayed them." A manager is allowed to praise his team but Hodgson took it as far as he could possibly go.

The mood might have been lighter, perhaps, if Daniel Sturridge had been more clinical with three presentable chances. Sturridge at least showed for those opportunities, even if his finishing was misjudged on every occasion. “I’m not concerned about Daniel Sturridge, he’ll take goal chances in the future,” Hodgson said.

Equally, there were other moments that fitted neatly into England’s World Cup story and felt entirely unsatisfactory. Phil Jones, whose career has stagnated over the last year, could be seen trying to control a routine pass and giving away a throw-in. Chris Smalling’s lack of refinement on the ball was noticeable more times than he will want to remember and there was a little snapshot of England’s tournament when Jack Wilshere and Bryan Ruiz went for the same ball. Ruiz got their first and his pirouette left Wilshere tackling thin air.

Wilshere, to give him his due, was one of England’s better performers but the bottom team in Group D seldom passed the ball with any real tempo or penetration. Costa Rica also struggled at times for fluency, short of the vibrancy and energy that had helped them overcome Uruguay and Italy. They started the game quickly but their best moment actually came from a free-kick when Celso Borges curled his shot towards the top corner only for Ben Foster, deputising for Joe Hart, to flick out his glove, at full length, and turn the ball on to the crossbar.

After the interval, Foster was rarely troubled and there were spells when we were reminded that Costa Rica’s 28th position in Fifa’s world rankings puts them one behind Scotland. Unfortunately for England, they did not have the wit or gumption to do anything about it.

Hodgson brought on Gerrard, as well as Wayne Rooney and Raheem Sterling, in the second half, rather than turning to Rickie Lambert and continuing his policy of using the occasion as a way of rewarding his squad players.

The Brazilian crowd had been singing Rooney’s name - along with the rather less polite “*Eliminados*” - and he did at least bring a save out of Keylor Navas with a chipped shot. Otherwise the game shuffled towards its end without a huge amount of drama and Hodgson did not even mention the two penalty appeals when Sturridge went down; probably for the better, as the second of them looked suspiciously like a dive.

At the final whistle, England’s manager led his players over to the end housing their largest contingent of supporters and seemed slightly taken aback by the ovation. “An emotional moment,” Hodgson said afterwards. He looked tired, suffering and in need of a break. No manager ever wants a public outpouring of sympathy.

More match reports

Topics

England

Costa Rica

World Cup 2014 Group D

World Cup 2014

World Cup

