

# Soccer's standard is under assault

## Brazilian game faces onslaught from too much violence and too much coaching

**NEW YORK** — For as long as I can remember, Brazil has set the standard in soccer.

You could say that they have taught the rest of the world how to play the game. But that would be far from the truth. What they have done is show the rest of the world just how good — how beautiful — a game soccer can be.

And they have not done that in some arid, theoretical, clinic-giving way. They have done it by winning on the field, with a record of world championships at all levels and versions of the game — from futsal and U-17 World Cups up to the big one itself — that no other country comes close to matching.

Not only have they delighted those who value the beauty of the game, they surely have the stats to convince those who feel that winning is all that matters.

Logical conclusion: The rest of the world will try to play like the Brazilians.

But that is not the case (you will have noticed that, in soccer, there is always a "but", to any theory, however well-founded).

There are actually two "buts" here. First, there are plenty of countries that regard Brazilian soccer as something essentially *exotic* and therefore beyond rational understanding. This is a European attitude, one that views Brazil as a country of florid excesses, the country that produced Carmen Miranda.

Remember her? The vivacious performer who (I quote from a film magazine) "brought the exoticism of her native country, a sensuality tempered by caricature, and

outlandish costumes and fruit-laden hats that have an unsuspected origin in the black slums of Brazil."

Yes, you can catch the color and spirit of Brazilian soccer there — and there's not much point in Norwegians or Russians or Scots trying to copy *that*, now is there?

The second "but" has a heavier tone to it. Along with the admiration that success breeds comes the reverse side: envy, even hatred.

The soccer world is full of those who resent Brazil's success and are forever trying to belittle or denigrate it. I have been listening to these people for decades. The very same decades during which Brazil has been winning everything in sight — but Brazil's successes seem only to have increased the fervor of its detractors.

The complaint I hear most frequently from these guys

— I could almost call it my "favorite" criticism — is that Brazilian soccer is a fake that has fooled everyone — including me, of course, but not the guy doing the criticizing, no sir, not him, no way.

He — and he's more than likely to be a coach — has seen through the whole thing. What galls him is that people believe all this guff about the artistry of Brazilian soccer *and jogo bonito*.

I and countless others have been fooled because we see only the pretty stuff, Brazilian soccer as a beguiling collection of flicks and tricks and backheels.

What we don't understand, apparently, is that Brazilian soccer is full of tough guys who don't hesitate to foul when they feel they have to. The Brazilians get away with it because — well, because of people like me who refuse to see it.

Phooley to that — admirers of Brazilian soccer are well aware that it has its hard side. For my part, I have never said, much less written, that Brazilians don't commit fouls — I've seen far too many bad examples to be under any illusions about that.

Soccer is a physical game. All successful teams — whether Brazilian or German or English or Italian — have to be able to take care of themselves. That is a given and needs no discussion.

The argument, then, is a different one: Where does the true heart of the sport lie? With the hard men and the runners and the hustlers and the role players, or with the ball artists?

An argument as old as the sport itself. The critics of Brazilian artistry have, in fact, been around since before there was any such thing as Brazilian soccer. They are the same people who, in 1863, objected when soccer's first rules banned hacking (basically, kicking an opponent's legs). To them, such a rule was sissifying the sport.

For me, it boils down to this: The Brazilians have been — by a wide margin — the most successful at finding a balance between soccer's two essential components: force and skill. And they have done it by emphasizing skill.

The equation has been greatly complicated in modern times by the arrival of tactics, an area that has a foot in both the force and the skill camps.

But tactics have worked against the skillful player. They have led to a massive increase in the importance of the coach, with a parallel decrease in the value of the individual player.

Brazilian soccer, I repeat, sets the standards for the

game. It also serves as a barometer for the game. It is giving us a rather troubled outlook at the moment.

"Brazilian soccer is the most violent in the world." Those are not the words of an anti-Brazil zealot, but rather of Tostao, the wonderfully skilled forward of the state-of-the-art 1970 Brazilian World Cup champion.

He continues: "We have the highest average of fouls,



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For Tostao, celebrating with Pele after the state-of-the-art Brazilian team's final goal at the 1970 World Cup, Brazilian soccer has become the most violent in the world.

around 50 per game, and the most violent fouls."

He was speaking two years ago — but Brazil's performance in this year's South American under-20 championship was worrying. It won the title — but was given a "severe warning" about its poor disciplinary record.

There is also the matter of coaching: "Nowadays, Brazilian soccer represses the players. That's why it is on the way down," says Flamengo forward Edilson, who is on the Brazil roster for the upcoming game against the United States. He goes on: "Brazilian players feel like prisoners on the field, coaches limit talent by demanding that we play tactically. I'm independent-minded, and I have been repressed because of this.

"That's why I've been out of the national team for a long time. They're afraid of independent players ... I hate going onto the field and having to do what the coach orders. But I have to obey. Otherwise, he kicks me out of the team."

We're left with a gloomy picture of Brazilian soccer under a double-pronged assault from too much violence and too much coaching.

A formidable combination. But I'm betting that Brazilian soccer, the real, skill-based Brazilian soccer, will survive the onslaught.

(Paul Gardner's column appears weekly in Soccer America.)