

All Whites All Right

New Zealand 1 Slovakia 1 – World Cup 2010 Group F Pool match

Tuesday 15th June

It's a cold grey morning in Buenos Aires as members of the local branch of the All Whites supporters club make their way to a small café in the Palermo district to watch the All Whites opening World Cup match against Slovakia. There is no need for larger premises as just four chairs in prime viewing position are pulled up and occupied. Things will be very different in two days time when Argentina plays its second game against South Korea but for now we have the place to ourselves.

It's been a long wait between drinks for the All Whites and this is clear as we introduce ourselves and Josh tells us he wasn't even born when the World Cup was played in Spain 28 years ago. The rest of us were at some stage or other of school somewhere in NZ.

Argentina is football mad and it's great to for once be on the same world stage as them. Lately when locals ask where I'm from and mention the All Blacks I am proud to reply that we also play a bit of football and in fact will be there in South Africa! The reaction of disbelief is similar to the one I get when I mention that it's 23 years since the All Blacks won the Cup!

The national anthems slip by unnoticed as we finish our introductions and the game gets underway in glorious South African sunshine. The All Whites start sharply and push forward and create a couple of good chances but can't quite find the target. Chris Killen is in the thick of things and the Kiwis look confident and focused. After 20 minutes or so the Slovaks find their feet in their World Cup debut and their quick passing and speed starts to open up the All White defense. At halftime it's 0-0 and for the first time in a World Cup the All Whites have played 45 minutes of football without conceding a goal.

Five minutes into the second half Slovakia's ambition is rewarded and silence falls over the Balcarce café. A cross from Stanislav Sestak on the right finds Robert Vittek in front with space and he powers a header into the bottom corner just out of reach of keeper Mark Paston.

The next half hour goes past with a few close calls on defense but thankfully no goals conceded and if we can just hold out an equalizer might be possible. Slovakia seem to have shut up shop and hardly threaten except for one dangerous attack which Winston Reid shuts out with a desperate diving tackle. Time is almost up as Shane Smeltz has a good chance but his header glances wide on the left.

With ninety plus minutes on the clock Smeltz recovers possession on the left and works his way into the area, his back is to the goal as he takes on the defence before looking up and turning in a perfectly weighted cross. Waiting near the right post is Reid who directs a pinpoint header into the bottom right corner. GGGOOOOAAAALLLL. The bar erupts in true Argentine style as four Kiwis and a late arriving Aussie shout and jump and celebrate the most important goal in New Zealand football history.

Seconds later its all over and New Zealand have scored a goal, a draw, a championship point, and a share of the Group F lead. History has been made as we shake hands and head out into the crisp cool air. Outside the streets are deathly quiet as the All Whites win goes unnoticed by Argentines going about their daily business and waiting for Diego Maradona's team's next game. We Kiwis are buzzing inside as we head home or to work to share tales of this great day. Congratulations to Ricki Herbert, Ryan Nelson and the All Whites team. Next up World Champion Italy. Vamos Nueva Zelanda!!!

