A Pleasant 2010 World Cup Surprise [1]

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As a general rule, I am not very much into World Cup events. I am not big on most sports, and especially not soccer. While I am grateful for many of the benefits which hosting the 2010 Soccer World Cup has brought South Africa (such as improved road infrastructure), I do feel that the billions of rands spent on building stadiums could have spent on housing or long-term poverty alleviation. Also, I am not very keen for the "cult of personality" used to create hype for the event, although I understand it is necessary so we can present a happy and enthusiastic face to the world. I am a grinch like that.

But not even I am immune to excitement and patriotism going around. I've watched more soccer these past two weeks than I have in... years, if not my whole life. And while not having any overly-optimistic dreams of grandeur for the national team, Bafana Bafana, I was supporting our boys and wishing them well before being knocked out Tuesday in what was a great game.

On the day of the inaugural match between South Africa and Mexico, I went to fill my car up with petrol before going to church, where the game would be displayed on the big screen. With only a couple of hours to go, the energy was palpable and there was an almost tangible buzz in the air. Everywhere people were in good spirits. Everyone wanted South Africa to do well, but realistically Mexico was the better team. Everyone hoped for a win, but cautiously so.

The petrol attendant, jolly and all smiles, asked me where I was going to watch the game. I told him I was going to watch it at the church. He then said that we must say a prayer before the game. I smirked, thinking I knew what for: everyone in the country was praying for a win[1]! But I was very surprised when he continued: "Today, all of South Africa must pray and say thank you for this privilege."

I was stunned for a second, and humbled. I have a lot of idealism and pride, but suddenly I had a different perspective. It is not just about winning and achieving, but about being part. Not all the enthusiasm and excitement were artificial. South Africans were proud, not necessarily because of anything specific, but just because. And an event about which I have misgivings was used to show me once again that, rather than just always wanting more, we should stop and just be thankful.

Later that day the team ranked 83rd in the world tied 1–1 with the team ranked 17th. South Africa erupted and was joyful. While Bafana Bafana did not proceed past the group stages, they ended their World Cup adventure by beating France, ranked 9th, 2–1 and securing the pride of the nation.

- 1. When South Africa hosted the 2003 Cricket World Cup, we lost the opening match against the West Indies. That experience and humiliation left a bitter taste and most people want to forget about it.

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