

World Cup: Does your team really always want to win?

The knockout stages of the World Cup not only provided plenty of drama but also some great football. With only a few teams left, every one of them is now desperate for a win. But across the competition, that hasn't always been the case; distorted incentives can sometimes make a loss look like a more appealing option



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An incentivised loss?

The round-robin format of the group stages, with two teams advancing out of groups of four, certainly helps to limit the influence of luck on the selection of the knockout-phase participants. But it can also distort incentives - and sometimes, going for the win might not really seem worth it.

One example was the match between England and Belgium, which the latter ended up winning 1-0. Both teams had already qualified for the round of 16 and were only playing for the first two spots in the group. After Belgium scored, the English team didn't look too keen to equalise - and it had been speculated in advance that both teams might want to avoid winning the group.

This was because even though a first-place finish would pit a squad against a second-place team from another group and make for an apparently easier round-of-16 matchup, the runner-up was perceived to be placed in that half of the [tournament](#) bracket that is the easier way to the final.

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Information asymmetry and a historical disgrace

At least in the England vs. Belgium instance, no one else was harmed because both teams had already secured the top two spots in their group. But that wasn't the case at the 1982 World Cup in Spain when West Germany and Austria squared off in the last match of their group. The [German 1-0](#) win sent both teams to the next round but instead sent Algeria home.

The surprise winners of their first match against Germany would have advanced with a draw, an Austrian win or a German win by more than two goals, but were helplessly watching what would become one of the most notorious cases of informal match-fixing. Because Algeria and Chile had already played their final group match a day earlier, Germany and Austria both knew beforehand which results would help them advance.

And this is why the "[Disgrace of Gijón](#)" prompted FIFA to make ensure the final pair of group matches are played simultaneously to eliminate this information asymmetry.

After falling behind the Germans, the Austrian players were faced with the dilemma of either settling for the narrow loss, which would drop them to second place in the group and bring up tougher opponents in the next round, or equalise to regain first position, but running the risk of more goals being scored against them by the superior German team and facing elimination.

In an application of game theory, they decided to stay put and accept the loss – with the Germans happily conspiring, because an Austrian equalizer would have meant them leaving the tournament.

'Fair play' gone wrong

Coming back to the 2018 World Cup, the Japanese team faced a similar situation in their final group match as they entered the day in the first place shared with Senegal, level for points, goal difference and goals scored. Falling behind 0-1 to (already eliminated) Poland dropped them to third place in the live table. The Japanese attacked fervently – but only for about fifteen minutes, when Colombia went up 1-0 against Senegal in the simultaneous match. With Japan and Senegal completely level again, a newly conceived FIFA rule would kick in which would award the tiebreaker and thus the second place and a spot in the knockout bracket to the Japanese, based on their better fair-play record of red and yellow cards.

Barring an equaliser for Senegal or a red card against one of their players, the "Samurai Blue" knew they would advance in spite of their defeat if Colombia could hold on to their lead. So instead of pushing for an equaliser and exposing themselves to a counterattack which might send them home, they settled for the 0-1 loss and kept passing the ball among themselves.

Ironically, this was FIFA's attempt to reward fair play that resulted in one of the more unsportsmanlike showings of the tournament.

Careful with rule changes

Speaking of distorted incentives, there isn't a better example than the qualification round for the 1994 Caribbean Cup. At the time, FIFA and the continental governing bodies were experimenting with the "Golden Goal" rule, which was effectively a sudden-death win for the first team to score in overtime after a drawn match in regular time.

For the Caribbean Cup qualification round, the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Football (CONCACAF) had established a rule that required a winner for every match, sending drawn matches to overtime, and also put in place an unusual variant of the "Golden Goal", meaning the overtime goal that ended a match would actually count as two goals for the match result. Barbados entered their [final qualification match](#) against Grenada needing a win by two goals to advance to the next round.

Up 2-1 late in the match, the Barbadians figured they might not be able to score an additional goal in the few remaining minutes of regulation – so they scored an own goal to tie the match and send it into overtime, hoping they could then score the winning "Golden Goal" which would give them the two-goal margin they required. The Grenadian players realised that scoring a goal in either net in the remaining minutes of regulation would send them to the next round, so they tried to either score a regular or an own goal, but Barbados successfully defended both sides, making it to overtime and eventually scoring the desired double-goal winner.

Apparently, someone hadn't fully thought through the rule changes that in this case actually incentivised attacking (or defending) both goals on a football field. And given the situation they found themselves in, both teams' behaviour was perfectly reasonable. So whenever you see someone acting in a seemingly absurd fashion, keep in mind to make sure you are aware of the rules of the game – or the business – and the incentives that come with them.

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Author

Sebastian Franke

Consumer Economist

sebastian.franke@ing.de

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