

Pirlo Gets Us Purring Again



Andrea Pirlo's display against England on Saturday last was utterly sublime.

Watching Andrea Pirlo play football, even from the remove of one's sitting room is a privilege. But one can only imagine what it must be like to play alongside him.

That the 35-year-old Italian has dictated the pace of so many top-level matches over the years for both club and country, while also conjuring up some wondrous free kicks, puts him in standalone territory in my view.

Over 90 minutes in the soaking Amazonian heat of Manaus, the Juventus maestro touched the ball 117 times, successfully finding a team mate with no less than 103 passes from a total of 108.

In contrast, England, despite a spirited showing (the sort of phrase the English media have often used to describe Irish efforts), simply weren't good enough.

Steven Gerrard played a like a man whose best days are behind him, while his Liverpool team mate Jordan Henderson huffed and puffed when confronted with Pirlo, Andrea Di Rossi and Claudio Marchisio at different times.

It's not Roy Hodgson's fault that he doesn't have better players to pick from in central midfield – when one considers that Tom Cleverley had featured in several England squads under his watch, that says it all.

But for all Hodgson's downplaying of expectations, quite an astute way of holding onto his job after the World Cup, I'd

suspect, when will England next produce a player of Pirlo's class? Then again, when last could they boast of so thoroughly complete a midfielder?

Though clearly not in Pirlo's class, David Platt was perhaps the last English 'middle man' of top-level quality, so much so that his talents were recognised by Serie A after his Italia '90 exploits.

David Beckham has been many things, but he rarely mastered central midfield in the manner he professed he was capable of.

And while Gerrard has certainly been a better player over the course of his career than Sir Alex Ferguson might otherwise contend, he hasn't bossed the continental nor the international game in a measure comparable to Pirlo.

But Pirlo, who will retire from international football after the World Cup, is one of those glorious footballing exceptions.

To talk of "the next Pirlo" is as fatuous as declaring that the next Zidane or the next Messi has been unearthed.

The fact that Pirlo plays the game at walking pace regularly suggests that the busy footballer among us is not always the most productive - looking effective and being effective are two different matters entirely.

It also suggests that the kick and rush approach of English football, which may well be easy on the eye and lapped up by pie and prawn sandwich munchers alike, simply has to change, if England are ever to content for major honours again.

"Being part of a team that belongs to everyone makes me feel good," wrote Pirlo in his majestic memoir 'I Think Therefore I Play'.

"A lot of the time, it's better than sex: it lasts longer and if it falls flat, it can't just be your fault...Much better to be a soldier on the pitch than in the bedroom."

The satisfaction the watching world has gained from Pirlo's ongoing brilliance is undeniable. And a few more master classes in Brazil would do very nicely indeed.