



Messi and Iniesta can wait: Graham Hunter argues that the award honouring the best player on the planet in 2010 must go to Xavi

King of the world



THE most gifted, consistent and visionary player Spain has ever produced is called Xavi Hernández and his love affair with the football began on the concrete-covered Plaza del Progreso in Terrassa, a city about an hour from Barcelona.

The smallest of the gang, the Catalan kid nonetheless ran the show, never letting the ball run away from him on to Galileo Street, which runs alongside that town square where a thousand games were won and lost during a golden childhood. But Joni Mitchell more or less

foretold what would happen. Today the Plaza sports one of those evil signs which graphically shows a red line through a soccer ball and reads: Fútbol Prohibido.

It doesn't need translating. "Progress" in Plaza del Progreso means no football, no new Xavis. It is a little reminder that times change and time never passes more quickly than during a golden age.

If your footballers are humdrum, visionless, scared to receive the ball without being allowed to crash a boot right through it so that the pressure transfers to someone else, then the era drags. And drags you down.

But the good times require us to pinch ourselves, notice that they are special and act accordingly. If you blink your eyes and then rub them, Xavi will be gone. Which

is why, hopefully, Fifa will put a temporary halt to the soul-destroying nonsense emanating from Sepp Blatter's mouth recently and, tomorrow night, Xavi is awarded the Ballon d'Or.

The voting college, as they now call it, comprises the coaches and captains of the world's national teams plus the France Football correspondents around Europe. Everyone is allowed three nominations, the award amalgamates the Fifa World Player and the more historic and revered Ballon d'Or for the first time. The three candidates, chosen from a 23-man long-list, are Xavi, Andrés Iniesta and the holder Leo Messi.

So at least there won't be an outright injustice when, in the Zürich Congress Hall, the envelope is opened and a name

read out. But over the years that the Golden Ball has been presented, from Sir Stanley Matthews in 1956 to Messi 13 months ago, there have been some crimes against greatness.

For reasons ranging from the untimely death of Duncan Edwards to stiff competition and an increasing trend to vote fashionably, the list of those who have been passed over, despite careers of longevity and magnificence, includes Bobby Moore, Paolo Maldini, Kenny Dalglish, Peter Shilton, Oliver Kahn, Raúl, Romario, Dennis Bergkamp, Andrea Pirlo, Marcel Desailly and Thierry Henry.

It shouldn't happen to Xavi. Until I read the rules I was a purist. Messi is by far the most gifted player in the world and en route to challenging Pelé and Maradona

They deserved it, but fate kept them from the Ballon d'Or

Bobby Moore
Kenny Dalglish
Peter Shilton
Oliver Kahn
Paolo Maldini
Raul
Roy Keane
Romario
Dennis Bergkamp
Andrea Pirlo
Marcel Desailly
Thierry Henry



Photographs: Getty Images

for all-time status. He was my candidate. But the judges were invited to consider "class (talent and fair play), personality (charisma) and career (length of career)" if they found the players' achievements in 2010 difficult to separate.

However, one of the men who developed the system which in turn developed Xavi made a strong case for the 30-year-old. Johan Cruyff said this week: "Given his career, his exceptional achievements and his superb year this is the right time to make Xavi the Ballon d'Or winner - in fact I fear it is now or never".

When the Sunday Herald put all this to the orchestrator of FC Barcelona and Spain's current greatness, he balanced pride at potentially becoming only the second Spanish winner with

an admission that acceptance would be bittersweet. "Above all I wanted a Spaniard to win it in our World Cup year, and, if not, then Leo Messi because he's the best in the world, no discussion, and will go on to win several Ballon D'Or trophies," Xavi said.

"Such a player comes around every 50 years. So if it's Andrés or I this year it's only because Argentina's World Cup didn't turn out well. Otherwise there is no contest. Leo is already better than Maradona was. He's the undisputed No 1 and is going to reign over world football for years".

There's another reason causing Xavi to pull away from the golden trophy almost as hard as he wants to reach out for it. "When you train at Barça's La Masia as

a kid there are certain phrases dinned into you which still flit through my head during matches 19 years later" he says. "Charly Rexach [legendary Barça striker and one time Cruyff lieutenant] always used to yell at us, 'not one touch football!! HALF TOUCH football!'"

HE added: "They taught us to know who was around us before the ball arrived and to be prepared to use a flick or a cushion or a volley in 10ths of a second to keep the circulation of the ball flowing.

'Head up, control the ball, love the ball, look for your team-mates, move, receive, move ...' And the entire philosophy is that it's a team game.

So who should win an individual prize? "Diego Milito and Wesley Sneijder had enormous seasons and they aren't in the top three - justice? What about Iker Casillas who had an incredible World Cup and lifted it as captain? There should be a Ballon d'Or for each department of a team, attack, midfield, defence and goalkeeper."

Perhaps he's right. But until there is this should be Xavi's moment. Iniesta missed a significant chunk of 2010 with injury and Messi's World Cup was attractive without hitting his personal high notes. Xavi won La Liga and the Spanish Supercup with Barça, was man of the match against Portugal and Germany en route to lifting the World Cup. He not only made the most passes in South Africa - 669 - but the most accurate passes - 544 (81%).

He now holds Barça's record for appearances and, given that career achievements now guide the voting, he has been a world champion at youth and senior level with Spain, world champion with Barça, twice European Champion with his club and player of the tournament in winning the European Championship with the Furia Roja in 2008.

However, some would argue that Xavi's place on the throne tomorrow is merited simply because he is the embodiment of a philosophy so beautiful and seductive that, even in an era of utter greed and faithlessness in our sport, the world is falling in love with football all over again.

"What makes me happiest is that players such as Leo, Andrésito and I prove that talent remains more important than physical power in modern football," he said. "I am never afraid of receiving the ball in any situation, I have to get it and pass it a hundred times a match. It's a need.

"There is no greater sin at Barça than giving the ball away and I know from experience that there are many footballers who just don't understand or feel the same way these days. But when there is individual marking on me and the game goes badly, let's say I only make 50 passes, I am ready to kill someone when I get back to the dressing room. Even if we win.

"The greatest game I've ever played in was the season before last when we beat Real Madrid 6-2 at the Bernabéu, and not because of the scoreline. Had we won 2-1 I'd still describe it as the greatest in Barça's history because of the way we played. We were so good that it could have been 10-2 and Madrid didn't know whether they were coming or going".

Happily all the Scots eligible to vote included Xavi in their trio of Ballon d'Or candidates. Youth, talent, professionalism and career trajectory mean that both Iniesta and Messi, who would be worthy winners tomorrow, are going to compete for this podium many more times.

But this is the moment that the judges missed for Maldini, Raúl, Dalglish, Desailly and Henry. This man who so loves the football should be given a golden one of his own. Now that would be "progress".

All hail Xavi.