

Colombia Bet Too Much on the World Cup

By James Reston Jr.

PITY POOR Colombia. The World Cup was supposed to be that country's giant leap forward into world respect. With the tragic murder of its star-crossed soccer player, Andres Escobar in Medellin July 2, after its surprising collapse in the tournament, fate has waylaid that tormented country once again. It shows what can happen when a nation invests mere athletes with its national honor and its national salvation.

Colombia had the most elegant of entries in this year's World Cup. Even the fabled Pele declared last December that the Colombia team was the best in the world. The World Cup draw

(where Colombia fell into the apparently easy group of the United States, Romania and Switzerland) took place in Las Vegas, only a few weeks after the rooftop killing of the drug kingpin, Pablo Escobar (no relation to Andres). If the death of Pablo Escobar was the last act in the 10-year agony of crushing the Medellin cartel, it had huge significance for Colombia. The end of a terrible era was proclaimed.

The new era was supposed to begin with the world-class artistry of its athletes. Soccer was to be the next act in national self-respect and international redemption. In these unlikely ambassadors, the *presidencia* of Colombia saw a way to change the horrid image of its country in the United States. For years, well-meaning Colombians had bridled under the stereotypes: cocaine supplier to the world, poisoner of American youth, home to the world-class Medellin thugs, highest murder rate in the world. It was deeply resented that a few hundred gangsters in Medellin and Cali could determine the reputation of a

country. When the graceful Colombian team waltzed into the finals, writers and officials told me last January in Bogota and Medellin, the world would see a different Colombia: a complex and colorful land as well as a country of energy, inventiveness and hard work. And Colombians were beginning to look at themselves in a new positive light.

To the Nobel laureate of Colombia, soccer and music are the most positive and unifying forces in Colombian culture. "Colombia will be judged by the goals it scores," Gabriel Garcia Marquez told



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me in January in Cartagena, when I asked about the stereotypes. "I am one of the best-selling and most-studied authors in the United States. Nobody says, 'I won't buy one of his books because he comes from that drug-traffick-

ing country.'" He imagined Colombia's victory in the World Cup would occasion a celebration not unlike the one given for him in Stockholm when he won the Nobel Prize.

And the president of Colombia, Cesar Gaviria, spoke of how economic progress, the discovery of oil in the hinterland, the successes against the Medellin cartel were changing his country's image. With some pride, he noted that kidnappings in Medellin had dropped from five to three a day. "We have worked hard to create a more balanced view of Colombia in the United States," the president told me in Bogota. "We see this World Cup event as an opportunity to reach the average American whom we have not been able to reach until now."

With its weighty mission to achieve international respect and deluded by advance sheets that proclaimed the Colombians the most skilled players in the world, the Colombia team came to America and forgot to play. Their loss to a pesky Romanian team was no disgrace, but the defeat seemed to

discombobulate the Colombians. Then came the true national humiliation: the 2-1 loss to the United States.

After its balloon burst, the murder of Andres Escobar becomes just another episode of random violence in Colombia. Perhaps high-rollers in the Medellin cartel ordered the killing; perhaps it happened in a spontaneous bar argument. It hardly seems to matter. To Americans, the mur-

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der simply confirms stereotypes. But the thousands who wept over Escobar's body in a Medellin sports coliseum this past weekend were grieving for themselves as much as for a soccer star. They dreamt of change. They believed in the magic of sport to transform a society where politicians and police have failed.

But their hopes for a quick deliverance from their harsh social realities rested too much upon the shoulders of their athletes. Pity Colombia and Andres Escobar. Solid players sometimes make mistakes. Star players do wilt. Upstarts step forward.

Soccer is a wonderful game, but don't bet your national honor on it. Sometimes it's better to make the national game a leisurely pastime rather than a passion of love and sudden death.