The Head-Butting Butthead  
Zinedine Zidane caps off his brilliant, violent career.  
By Robert Weintraub  
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French cinema has always been far grittier than the American version. It’s only fitting, then, that France’s star midfielder, Zinedine Zidane, went with vérité rather than opting for a Hollywood ending to his soccer career. After a run of brilliant play in the knockout stages that brought about fond remembrance of his former glory, “Zizou” was all set to retire after a triumph in Sunday’s World Cup final. And then he turned a seemingly innocuous extra-time encounter with Italian defender Marco Materazzi into a scene from a French gangster flick. Zidane powered a header into the Italian’s chest, earning an immediate red card. The man who had been celebrated as a venerable footballing god all tournament had transformed into Cardinal Richelieu.

When the game fell to penalties, defeat for France—which was by then without Zidane and subbed-out attackers Thierry Henry and Franck Ribéry—seemed inevitable. When Italy’s Fabio (Grosso) beat France’s Fabien (Barthez) with the clincher, the Azzuri started to party as the rest of us pondered the miserable Zidane, shoulders slumped, wiping at tears, shuffling past the Jules Rimet Cup on his way to the locker room. He didn’t even pick up his second-place medal.

Casual fans who bought into the nonstop Zidane hype are likely unaware that this is hardly his first bit of on-pitch thuggishness. During France’s romp to the 1998 World Cup title, Zidane stomped on a Saudi Arabian opponent, earning a suspension that his heroics in the final handily obscured. In 2001, Zidane offered a foreshadowing of Sunday’s assault and battery, head-butting a player from SV Hamburg during a Champions League match. The following season he again wallpapered over the past unpleasantness by uncorking one of the greatest goals ever seen in the Champions League.

Despite Zidane’s red card, he was handed the Golden Ball as the tournament’s best player. It’s a testament to his both his brilliance against Spain and Brazil, and also to his personality. Remember, the French barely scraped into the Round of 16, beating Togo in a must-win affair—without Zidane, who missed the match because of accumulated yellow cards. Given a reprieve, Zidou picked up his squad by the scruff of the neck.

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