

Birthday Boy Capello Says Russian Team's Fighting Spirit 'Best Present'

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Russia's coach Fabio Capello shouts during their 2014 World Cup Group H football match against South Korea.

SAO PAULO, Brazil — Fabio Capello was so pleased that Russia battled back to secure a 1-1 draw against South Korea in their World Cup Group H opener on Tuesday that he even allowed for an uncharacteristic birthday celebration.

Capello turns 68 on Wednesday and had said in a gruff tone a mere 24 hours before the match that he expected no presents from anyone. But their second-half equalizer, six minutes after a goalkeeping blunder allowed South Korea to take the lead, softened up the Italian manager, a renowned disciplinarian.

"I thanked the team for their reaction and told them that was the greatest birthday gift I could receive," Capello told reporters after his first World Cup finals match as the Russia coach.

"It means the team is great, and they can do it."

Looking for a new challenge after a storied career, Capello took over the Russia squad two years ago and has earned praise from players for his no-nonsense approach. He even banned them from using Twitter during the World Cup for fear it would be a "nuisance."

But Capello was not able to calm the nerves of a team making their first World Cup finals appearance since 2002.

"In the first part of the game we were quite narrow, we were concerned, we were worried, we had problems getting the ball around," he said.

The wake-up call came in the second half when Russia keeper Igor Akinfeyev allowed Lee Keun-ho's shot after 68 minutes to slip through his hands for the opening goal at Cuiaba's Pantanal arena.

Alexander Kerzhakov came to the rescue for Russia, scoring three minutes after coming on as a substitute.

"We could have won the game," Capello said. "[But] there was a wonderful reaction by our team after the goal we suffered. We developed a crescendo, we grew."

The equalizer also made it easier for Capello to accept Akinfeyev's mistake.

"I am very happy with the work of Akinfeyev because he is a great goalkeeper," Capello said. "People can make mistakes."

See also:

[Capello's Russian World Cup Team Banned From Twitter](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/06/18/birthday-boy-capello-says-russian-teams-fighting-spirit-best-present-a36500)

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