



Portugal fans cheer during their team's friendly match against Cape Verde as part of World Cup campaign in Evora on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Easy ride for big guns



AFP, Paris

Germany fired a World Cup warning shot with a seven-goal demolition of Luxembourg as Europe's big guns rumbled into action on a busy night of international friendlies Saturday.

The World Cup hosts limbered up for their June 9 tournament opener against Costa Rica in fine style, sweeping aside Luxembourg with an imperious display in Freiburg that saw all their strikers find the net.

Werder Bremen forward Miroslav Klose chipped in with two goals while Polish-born attacker Lukas Podolski also notched a brace along with substitute Oliver Neuville, who scored twice in stoppage time.

Torsten Frings was also on target as Luxembourg suffered a repeat of the 7-0 thrashing inflicted on them by Germany ahead of the 1998 World Cup.

"It is good for us to overcome this hurdle in such convincing fashion," said coach Jurgen Klinsmann. "We told the strikers

before the match that they would have a lot of chances and should take them.

"They did just that and it was good for their confidence."

While Germany enjoyed a one-sided victory, France and the Netherlands both had to settle for victories by a single goal in their matches against Mexico and Cameroon respectively.

France had Florent Malouda to thank for their 1-0 victory at the Stade de France in a match which saw Zinedine Zidane clock up 100 appearances for his country.

It was the veteran midfielder's last match in Paris, the scene of his finest hour eight years ago when his two headed goals inspired France to their World Cup final victory over Brazil.

Malouda ensured it would be a happy farewell for Zidane with a spectacular finish from a Djibril Cisse cross.

The match was marred however by persistent jeers and whistles directed at French 'keeper Fabien Barthez, who had earlier this week been the subject of a controversy at France's World Cup base that saw goalkeeping rival Gregory Coupet storm out of the team hotel

only to return later, has never been popular with Parisian fans.

At one point chants of 'Coupet, Coupet' rang around the stadium to the disgust of members of the French squad.

"You just can't understand it," said coach Raymond Domenech. "The players were stunned. It just doesn't make any sense -- we're preparing for a World Cup and that sort of thing happens. You can't put it into words."

There were no such controversies in Rotterdam however, as the Netherlands served notice that they could be one of the teams to watch in Germany with a 1-0 win over the 'Indomitable Lions' of Cameroon.

Ruud van Nistelrooy marked his 50th international appearance with the winning goal as the Dutch downed the Africans with some stylish football.

Van Nistelrooy, who is reported to be heading for the exit at Manchester United after falling out with Sir Alex Ferguson, gave a reminder of his eye for goal by finishing from close range on 23 minutes.

It was van Nistelrooy's 26th goal in half a century of appearances for the Netherlands, a phenomenal strike rate that indicates why sev-

eral leading clubs are likely to pounce if he is forced out of Old Trafford.

"At times we were very good," said coach Marco van Basten. "We should be satisfied with that because we played well against a quality side. It didn't feel like a friendly match from a physical point of view."

Holland face Ivory Coast, Argentina and Serbia-Montenegro in Group C of the World Cup, and will have taken note of friendlies involving two of their first round opponents elsewhere Saturday.

The Ivory Coast impressed after coming from behind to thwart Switzerland with a 1-1 draw, while Serbia-Montenegro were held to an identical scoreline by Uruguay in Belgrade.

In other friendlies involving World Cup teams Saturday, Spain were held to a disappointing 0-0 draw against Russia in Albacete.

Two of England's first round opponents meanwhile, Paraguay and Trinidad and Tobago, both struggled. Trinidad and Tobago lost 2-1 to Wales while Paraguay were held to a 1-1 draw with Denmark, who failed to qualify for the World Cup.

Ukraine's century-old dream comes true



AFP, Kiev

Ukraine will finally get the chance to appear in a World Cup for the first time -- despite a proud footballing history that stretches back over a century.

The first documented evidence of introduction to the game comes from the western Ukrainian city Lviv, where the first football match between the hosts and the visitors Krakow was held on July 14, 1894.

It was a sudden-death match, held at a newly built 7,000-seat stadium in Strysky Park, which ended in the sixth minute when Wlodzimierz Gatsynsky of the host team netted the winning goal.

By the beginning of the 20th century, football was rapidly becoming popular in most regions of Ukraine, which was then part of the Russian empire.

Dozens of teams and leagues were established in almost every Ukrainian city due in large part to the influence of the British companies which were doing business in the region and are credited with popularising the game.

The visit of Turkish side Fenerbahce to Odessa just before the outbreak of World War I opened the international football era at Ukraine.

The guests played three matches in Odessa and two games in the neighbouring town of Mykolaiv, attracting thousands of fans to the overpacked venues.

This initial flourishing of the game however was interrupted by

the war and the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, along with the civil war that followed it, which conspired to bring sporting life in Ukraine to a virtual standstill for almost six years.

The revival of the game in Soviet Ukraine in the early 1920s was marked by domination of the team from the republic's new capital -- Kharkiv, which won seven Ukrainian titles between 1921 and 1931.

In 1934, Ukraine's capital was moved to Kiev, whose team quickly clinched the leading position in Ukrainian football. Dynamo Kiev became the flagship side of Ukraine's football and was, in essence, the national squad.

Dynamo was the only non-Russian team in the top division of the Soviet league, which was set up in 1936. Kiev managed to clinch the silver medals of the first domestic championship, which Dynamo Moscow won.

However, it took almost two decades for Dynamo to clinch their first serious national success in the Soviet Union when, in 1954, the squad won the Soviet Cup, defeating Spartak Yerevan 2-1 in the final match.

Shakhtar Donetsk repeated Kiev's success in 1961-62, winning two Soviet Cups in a row, while Dynamo Kiev became the first non-Moscow side to win the Soviet league in 1961.

In total during the Soviet era Ukrainian teams won 16 domestic titles and 16 Soviet Cups with Dynamo Kiev winning the European Cup Winners' Cup twice in 1975 and 1986 and the European Super Cup in 1975 in a two-leg showdown with Bayern Munich.

That run ended abruptly however in 1991 when the collapse of the Soviet Union plunged football in

Ukraine -- now an independent state -- into severe crisis.

With Ukraine yet to form a FIFA-affiliated national association, several of the countries top players elected to play for Russia as it was designated the official successor of the USSR.

Almost as damagingly, Ukrainian league clubs faced hard times because of cash shortages, which also forced many young, talented and skilled footballers to seek their fortunes abroad.

To complete the set of disasters, the country's flagship side Dynamo Kiev was thrown out of the Champions' League in 1995 after the Spanish referee Antonio Lopez Nieto accused the club officials of a bribery attempt.

However, the years that followed have seen a steady revival of the country's football and in 1996 Dynamo Kiev returned to the European football stage after UEFA lifted the ban.

Meanwhile, thoughtful planning and huge investment by Ukrainian billionaire businessman Rinat Akhmetov, the president of Shakhtar Donetsk, has taken his club to the top of the domestic table.

The government also took part in developing the game, making football an obligatory activity in schools.

A special football textbook was written for the schoolboys, while more than 550 football pitches were constructed around the entire country and over one million footballs were bought to fit the demands of the programme.

Ono puts team glory first

REUTERS, Bonn

Japan's Shinji Ono has resigned himself to a place on the bench for his country's World Cup opener against Australia.

Once an automatic choice, the former Feyenoord midfielder looks likely to be among the substitutes for Japan's Group F clash with Gus Hiddink's 'Socceroos' on June 12.

"It's not as if I've never been on the bench before," smiled Ono on Sunday, 48 hours before Japan meet World Cup hosts Germany in a warm-up game in Leverkusen.

"I'm on stand-by to play and just hope I get the chance to play at the World Cup."

Ono had a frustrating World Cup in 2002 after being struck down by appendicitis before the tournament. Co-hosts Japan went on to reach the last 16 without his help.

His career since then has been plagued by injuries but the 26-year-old has looked sharp since leaving Feyenoord to return to his former J-League club Urawa Reds at the start of the year.

Japan coach Zico still appears decided to start holding midfielder Takashi Fukunishi ahead of the mercurial Ono, however, for his team's crucial Group F opener in Kaiserslautern.

"I was a substitute in Lebanon (at the 2000 Asian Cup) and hopefully I'll still have a role to play," said Ono, who made a cameo appearance as an 18-year-old at the 1998 World Cup.

"But the team is more important than any single player. The whole country is behind us so the most important thing is not to let them down. I'm sure my chance will come."

Ballack set to miss Japan game

AFP, Geneva

Germany captain Michael Ballack and defender Robert Huth are both doubtful for the World Cup warm-up against Japan at Leverkusen on Tuesday through injury, team chiefs said.

Key midfielder Ballack has already missed Saturday's 7-0 thrashing of Luxembourg because of a right ankle injury dating back to Thursday's match against a Swiss junior team.

Joachim Low, the right-hand man of coach Jurgen Klinsmann, said at a press conference in Geneva on Sunday about Ballack's injury: "It's getting better but we will just have to wait and see how it develops. A final decision (on whether he plays against Japan) will be made on Monday."

Huth injured an ankle against Luxembourg and had to be substituted in the first half. "Luckily there is no tear or twist but we'll have to wait and see if he will be ready for Tuesday," added Low.

The other injured member of Germany's 23-man World Cup squad is left back Philipp Lahm who had an elbow operation 10 days ago. Hosts Germany face Costa Rica in the opening match of the World Cup finals on June 9 in Munich.

Aragones fears World Cup flop

AFP, Albacete

Spain coach Luis Aragones fears his team could be heading for another World Cup of underachievement after a disappointing 0-0 draw with Russia.

Despite boasting arguably the world's strongest domestic league, Spain have always struggled in major tournaments, with a fourth place finish at the 1950 World Cup their best performance in the tournament.

And Aragones is worried it could be deja vu all over again if his team can't improve upon Saturday's turgid display against Russia, who failed to qualify for the World Cup.

"I hope we don't mess up (our World Cup) like we messed up tonight," said Aragones.

And Russian coach Alexander Boroduk did little to allay Spanish fears ahead of the World Cup, where they meet Ukraine, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia in Group H.

"Spain are a team with great technical ability and it's clear they are used to playing together. But I don't think they have a winning mentality," said Boroduk.

Unlike England, Spain do not appear to have players at the peak of their careers with Raul, 29 next month, perhaps past his best having had a poor last couple of seasons with Real Madrid.

Aragones also tried to look on the positive side following the Russia game: "There were some good things about the game. We had more chances than them but I am not worried because goals will come if we keep having opportunities."

And in contradiction of Boroduk's negative comments on Spain's mental side of the game, Aragones added: "I was happy with our mental approach."

Dutch expect a fit Van der Vaart

REUTERS, Rotterdam

Midfielder Rafael van der Vaart, the only man missing from Dutch coach Marco van Basten's first-choice line-up in a 1-0 friendly win over Cameroon on Saturday, should be fit for the World Cup, his team said.

Van der Vaart chose to miss the match after feeling the effects of a recent ankle injury during training in Switzerland last week.

The only other injured player in the Netherlands squad is defender Kew Jaliens, who is recovering from a flesh wound in his thigh but is expected to join the team's training sessions this week.

Ruud van Nistelrooy scored the winning goal against Cameroon midway through the first half in the Dutch side's first warm-up match for the World Cup, which starts on June 9.

Cameroon, 15th on FIFA's ranking list, have not qualified for the finals in Germany.

The Netherlands will host Mexico in another warm-up match on Thursday and Australia three days later before they start their World Cup campaign on June 11 against Serbia and Montenegro in Leipzig.

No place for sulkers



REUTERS, Weggis

Brazil's players seem determined to prove that the days when a place on the bench resulted in a sulk and public criticism of the coach are buried in the past.

Earlier this month coach Carlos Alberto Parreira announced his starting line-up to face Croatia when the world champions begin the defence of their crown on June 13.

Unlike on numerous occasions over the years there has not been the remotest sign of complaint from the substitutes.

In-fighting and sulking has wrecked Brazilian campaigns in the past, notably in 1990 when players used television interviews to promote their case for a place in the team.

Two years later, Romario complained about starting a friendly on the bench and missed the 1994 World Cup qualifiers as a result.

Brazil struggled through without him and only qualified in their last match when he was brought back by popular acclaim to score both goals as they beat Uruguay 2-0 in their last match.

But Brazil appear to have

learned from the past and this time, as in 2002, unity is the key word.

The players even appear to have rehearsed their answers before facing the media.

"I know that Cafu is the first choice," said Cicinho, who is reserve right back to the Brazilian captain and has to fight for a place against a player who has appeared in the last three World Cup finals.

"I don't want to fight with him. I just want to have my own space in the squad because I know that the team wins with this."

Midfielder Juninho Pernambucano, who would almost certainly be guaranteed a start in any other national team but is routinely on the bench for Brazil, was equally diplomatic.

"I'm not worried about this," said the Olympique Lyon player. "Everyone has to be ready to play."

In attack, reserve striker Fred is also happy to wait in the queue behind Ronaldo, Adriano and Ronaldinho.

"The team has been picked," he said. "It's right that those guys play, they have been here for a long time. I've just arrived."

Even Gilberto Silva, who was ever-present in the triumphant 2002 campaign but now starts as reserve to Emerson, appeared happy with his lot.

"You spend several days going through practically the same routine

of hotel, practice and eating and if you haven't got your head in the right place, you could go a bit mad," he said.

"But it's something everyone would like to be doing. The guys who aren't here would like to be doing it and anyone who has played at the World Cup knows the importance of all this sacrifice."

"It's understandable that I'm not in the team because I had a long time out with injury. If it was another national team my comeback would be different."

"With Brazil's its different, first you have to get back into the group then fight for your place in the team."

Parreira said on May 3 that the world champions' team would be the one that started the World Cup qualifier against Venezuela in October, Brazil's last competitive match.

The team was Dida in goal, a back four of Cafu, Juan, Lucio and Roberto Carlos, Emerson and Ze Roberto as defensive midfielders, plus Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Adriano and Kaka.

After facing Croatia in their opener, Brazil will play Australia and Japan in Group F at the World Cup.

HOLDERS woo locals but at a price



GUARDIANONLINE

Brazil chose the idyllic lakeside village of Weggis in the Swiss Alps for some peace and quiet before the World Cup, only to find that it has been turned into a mini Rio de Janeiro.

A 5,000-capacity stand, named the Thermoplan Arena after a local coffee-machine maker, has been

built, in the style of an English non-league ground, around the training pitch, with the crowd only a couple of feet away. Every planned practice was sold out weeks before the team arrived, despite tickets costing about 10 pounds.

Fans reach the arena by a way of a 'party mile', lined with stands selling anything from kebabs to the more Brazilian capirinhas. Training sessions are watched by a 500-strong media corps and are broadcast live on television and radio in Brazil.

Coach Carlos Alberto Parreira said that he would shut out the public if they got too boisterous.

However, with the Brazilian confederation (CBF) having sold rights for just about everything, he is unlikely to have much say in the matter if he wants to keep his job.

"Where do you see peace and tranquility, with 5,000 people in the stands and hundreds of journalists?" Parreira asked. Later, possibly under pressure for 'upstairs', he said he was happy with the carnival atmosphere. "It's nice for the players to be applauded and recognised," said Parreira. "It has not, in any way, disturbed the rhythm of our work."

In fact, there was little for the fans to see. Brazil's players were restricted to warm-up exercises and some attack-versus-defence kickabouts. Possibly bored with this, four fans invaded the pitch on Friday and one hugged Ronaldinho.

Parreira has no big injury worries apart from Ronaldo, who has not played since 8 April, when he suffered a hamstring strain. The striker has recovered and has taken part in all the exercises but is yet to regain match fitness.

While the CBF have wasted no effort in cashing in on their team, they have not shown the same interest in arranging warm-up matches. Brazil will play only one full international, against New Zealand in Geneva on 4 June, before taking on Croatia on 13 June.

Parreira has announced that the team to play the East Europeans will be the same one that started Brazil's last competitive game, the 3-0 win at home to Venezuela in October, with Dida in goal, Cafu, Lucio, Juan and Roberto Carlos in defence, Emerson and Ze Roberto in midfield and Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Adriano and Kaka in attack.

Many feel that full-backs Cafu and Roberto Carlos, who have a combined age of 69, could be vulnerable, but Parreira does not. "You can see them as old or experienced and, as far as I'm concerned, they are experienced, which is fundamental if you're trying to win a World Cup," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Argentine football legend Diego Maradona shakes hands with popular British pop singer Robbie Williams before the start of a Soccer Aid charity match at Old Trafford in Manchester on Saturday. All financial proceeds from the match will be donated to the UNICEF.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP
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OEDJQ M TXCFHQEX KPKS!
Yesterday's Cryptquip: IF A GAS STATION WORKER WERE GIVEN ONLY FIVE CENTS, YOU MIGHT CALL THAT A PUMPERNICKEL.
 Today's Cryptquip Clue: C equals T
 The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.