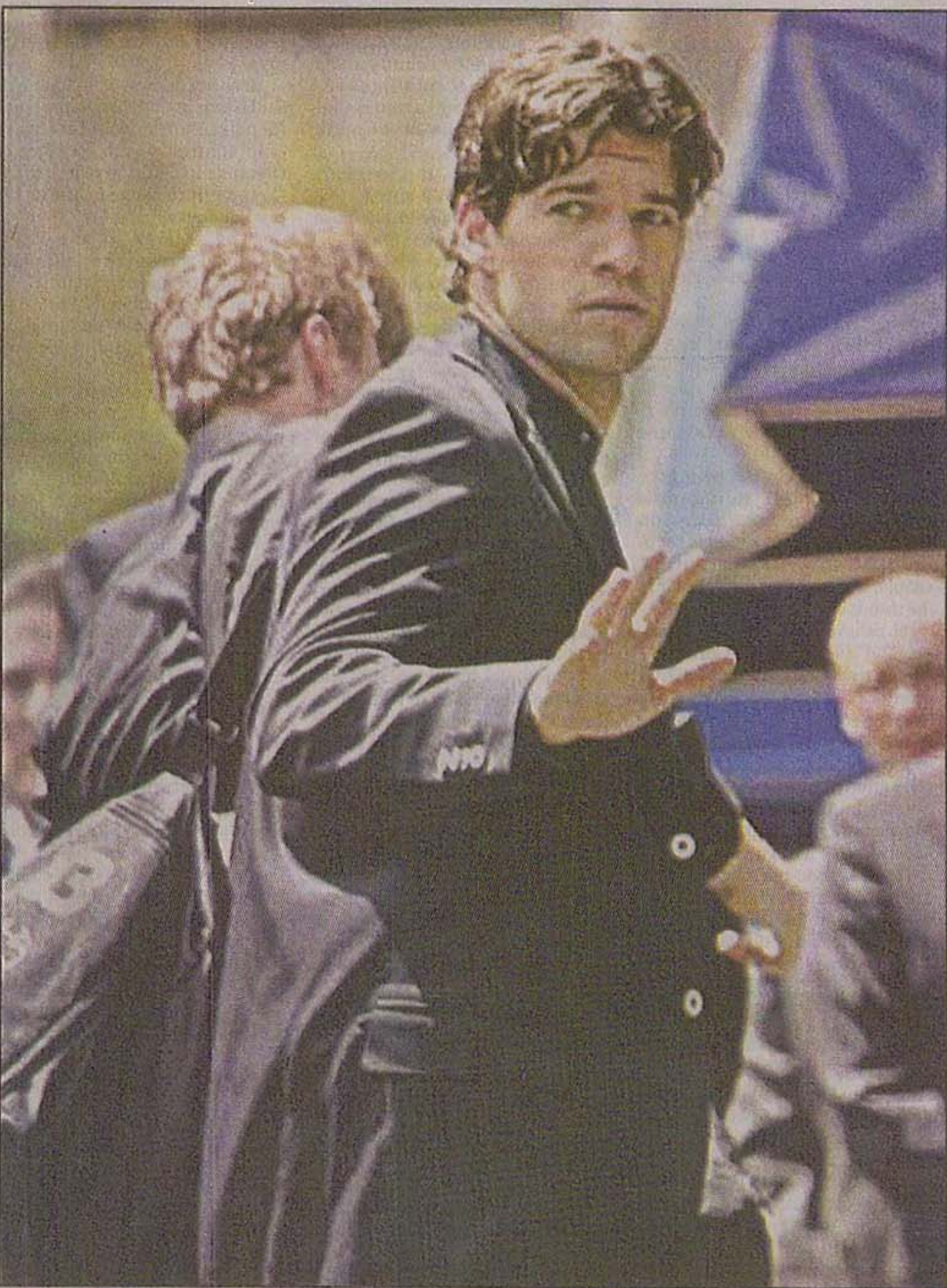


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DHAKA FRIDAY JUNE 9, 2006



Germany's captain Michael Ballack waves to supporters as he arrives at the Parkhotel Hilton in Munich on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Ballack loses fitness battle

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany will be deprived of their captain and midfield inspiration for the country's most important match in four years on Friday after Michael Ballack's calf injury stubbornly refused to heal in time.

It is hard to overestimate Ballack's influence on Jurgen Klinsmann's young team, which includes three 21-year-olds in Lukas Podolski, Bastian Schweinsteiger and Per Mertesacker and the 22-year-old Philipp Lahm.

Of the 11 players likely to line up against Costa Rica for Friday's World Cup opener only four -- Christoph Metzelder, Bernd Schneider, Torsten Frings and Miroslav Klose -- have played in previous World Cups.

"Of course, we would have liked to have him (Ballack) in the team," coach Jurgen Klinsmann said on

the eve of the Group A kickoff in Munich. "He's our captain and our leader."

Ballack tackles well, has an eye for a subtle pass and is a prodigious header of the ball.

His greatest asset is the ability to drag the team out of trouble when they are playing badly, throwing himself forward to win a crucial header or provoke a penalty when it is needed most.

Those qualities persuaded Chelsea to sign him on a free transfer at the end of his Bayern Munich contract and he will be one of the highest paid players in the world next season.

Ballack was one of the outstanding forces at the last World Cup, improving with every game before a yellow card in the semi-final against South Korea cost him his place in the final.

Without him, Germany lacked

their most dependable source of goals, as well as direction in midfield, and they were beaten 2-0 by Brazil.

Germans are all too aware of the importance of Ballack. For the last few days, television and newspapers have been fretting over what they have called "the country's calf muscle".

There have been some hints of criticism for his decision to wait two days before seeking treatment on the injury but Klinsmann was quick to forgive his leading man.

"Michael has underestimated the extent of the injury...but of course no one is cross with him," Klinsmann said. "Michael would give his right arm to be playing, so to speak."

Ballack will now concentrate on getting fit for Germany's other group games against Poland on Wednesday and Ecuador on the following Tuesday.

GERMANY V COSTA RICA

Cometh the hour

AGENCIES, Munich

Germany manager Jurgen Klinsmann says the World Cup hosts are more than capable of defeating Costa Rica in Friday's opener in Munich even without their injured captain Michael Ballack.

Ballack has been ruled out of the game with a calf injury but, while acknowledging the importance of his skipper, Klinsmann is confident his team still have the ammunition to gun down Costa Rica.

"It seems that Michael Ballack can not play against Costa Rica," Klinsmann said at a press conference Thursday. "Of course we wanted him on board as he is our captain and leader but it is important that the recovers."

"It is not a problem as we have different options with (Tim) Borowski and (Sebastian) Kehl."

Germany are outsiders this time but one of their three World Cup triumphs came in 1974 when they last had the tournament on home soil and they are confident of beating Costa Rica, who have struggled

in their recent warm-up games.

"It's crucial to have a good start because we play in our own country," Klinsmann said in a recent chat with reporters.

"We'll try to give the fans confidence and the players self-belief."

Germany will not be complacent, especially considering what happened in the opening match of the last World Cup.

Defending champions France had the honour of opening that tournament and with Zinedine Zidane unavailable through injury they went down to a shock 1-0 defeat by Senegal. It was a similar story in Italy in 1990 when Cameroon upset Argentina.

Germany are expected to cruise past Costa Rica but Klinsmann says the players are not feeling the burden of expectation from their demanding public and media.

"We can not influence the expectation level and the opinion that we are going to march through this group," Klinsmann admitted.

"I do not know how many newspapers the players are reading but I

can assure you it is not disturbing them. The team knows what it wants.

"We want to start with a win and three points against Costa Rica."

In contrast to the plights of Argentina and France, Germany started the 2002 World Cup with an 8-0 thrashing of Saudi Arabia as they surged to the final where Brazil won 2-0.

Miroslav Klose scored a hat-trick in that win over the Saudis and

will hope for a repeat against Costa Rica on Friday when he celebrates his 28th birthday.

"We will be pumped up from the first whistle and play at a high tempo," Klose declared.

"If we can keep Costa Rica penned in their own half then we have a great chance of scoring the first goal."

It is also a special game for goalkeeper Jens Lehmann who will make his World Cup debut at the age of 36.

"I have waited a long time for this and can not wait to get out there," Lehmann said.

Arsenal custodian Lehmann was deputy to Oliver Kahn at the 1998 and 2002 World Cups but now it is Kahn's turn to play second fiddle.

It will be particularly painful for Bayern Munich man Kahn as the game is being played on his home ground in Munich.

Costa Rica, playing in their third World Cup, are expected to roll over against three-time winners Germany but former West Ham United and Manchester City striker Paolo

Wanchope believes his team are capable of pulling off a major shock.

"I don't see any problem with Costa Rica being able to beat Germany," said Wanchope, his country's all-time top-scorer with 43 goals.

The Ticos reached the second round in 1990 and were unlucky not to match the achievement four years ago, when they lost out on goal difference to eventual semi-finalists Turkey.

"We are a better organised team," the striker told reporters this week. "Defensively we are stronger and we can also play good football and score goals."

"Regardless of it being Germany that we're up against you just have to get out there and win the game. Our way of doing things is to try to play good, attractive football."

Costa Rica will probably pack the midfield in a 3-5-2 formation and wait for their chance.

"I know these players," said coach Alexandre Guimaraes. "They'll go out and play the game that they know how, the way it suits us."

SQUADS

Germany (4-4-2)
 1-Jens Lehmann, 3-Arne Friedrich, 21-Christoph Metzelder, 17-Per Mertesacker, 16-Philipp Lahm, 18-Bernd Schneider, 8-Torsten Frings, 18-Tim Borowski, 7-Bastian Schweinsteiger, 20-Lukas Podolski, 11-Miroslav Klose

Costa Rica (3-5-2)
 18-Jose Francisco Porras, 4-Michael Umana, 3-Luis Marin, 12-Leonardo Gonzalez, 20-Douglas Sequeira, 5-Gilberto Martinez, 8-Mauricio Solis, 10-Walter Centeno, 6-Danny Fonseca, 11-Ronald Gomez, 9-Paulo Wanchope

Ronaldo misses training

REUTERS, Koenigstein

Ronaldo will miss training with Brazil on Thursday with a fever, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said.

Forward Ronaldo woke up with a slight fever, he is being treated and will be rested from Brazil's training session this Thursday," said the CBF in a statement on its official website.

No further details were immediately available.

Brazil, who face Croatia on June 13 in Berlin in their opening World Cup game, were due to start training at 1645 local time (1445 GMT) in the Kickers stadium in Offenbach.

Ronaldo limped out of Sunday's 4-0 friendly against New Zealand in Geneva at half-time complaining of blisters on his feet after scoring the first goal.

On Tuesday, team doctor Jose Luis Runco said he had made a full recovery from the blisters.

Brazil have already named their squad for the Croatia game with Ronaldo due to partner Adriano in attack.

His Real Madrid team mate Robinho would be the likely replacement if Ronaldo was unable to play. Japan and Australia complete the group.

POLAND V ECUADOR

Zurawski magic could be the key

AGENCIES, Gelsenkirchen

Former Poland great Zbigniew Boniek believes 'Magic' Maciej Zurawski can be the current team's inspiration at the World Cup and especially in Friday's Group A opener here against Ecuador.

Appearing in the finals for the seventh time, Poland take on the South Americans before facing tournament hosts and Group A favourites Germany and then Costa Rica.

"It's about time Poland had a big name to make people sit up and take notice and I think we've found him in Zurawski," said Boniek, the driving force behind the Poles' third place finish at the 1982 finals in Spain and regarded as one of the greatest ever players from Eastern Europe.

"In my opinion, Zurawski is a complete player."

In other team news, Celtic goalkeeper Artur Boruc will start against the South Americans according to fellow keeper and teammate Lukasz Fabianski.

Boruc's main rival for the spot had been Tomasz Kuszczak, but the West Brom player allowed a freak goal to get past him in the friendly against Colombia last week and that is believed to have nudged coach Pawel Janas in Boruc's direction.

guided Legia Warsaw to two Polish league titles and the quarter-finals of the Champions League in 1996.

He took control of Poland in 2002 and steered them to the runners-up spot in their qualifying group behind England.

Ecuador, finished a commendable third in their qualifying group Brazil and Argentina.

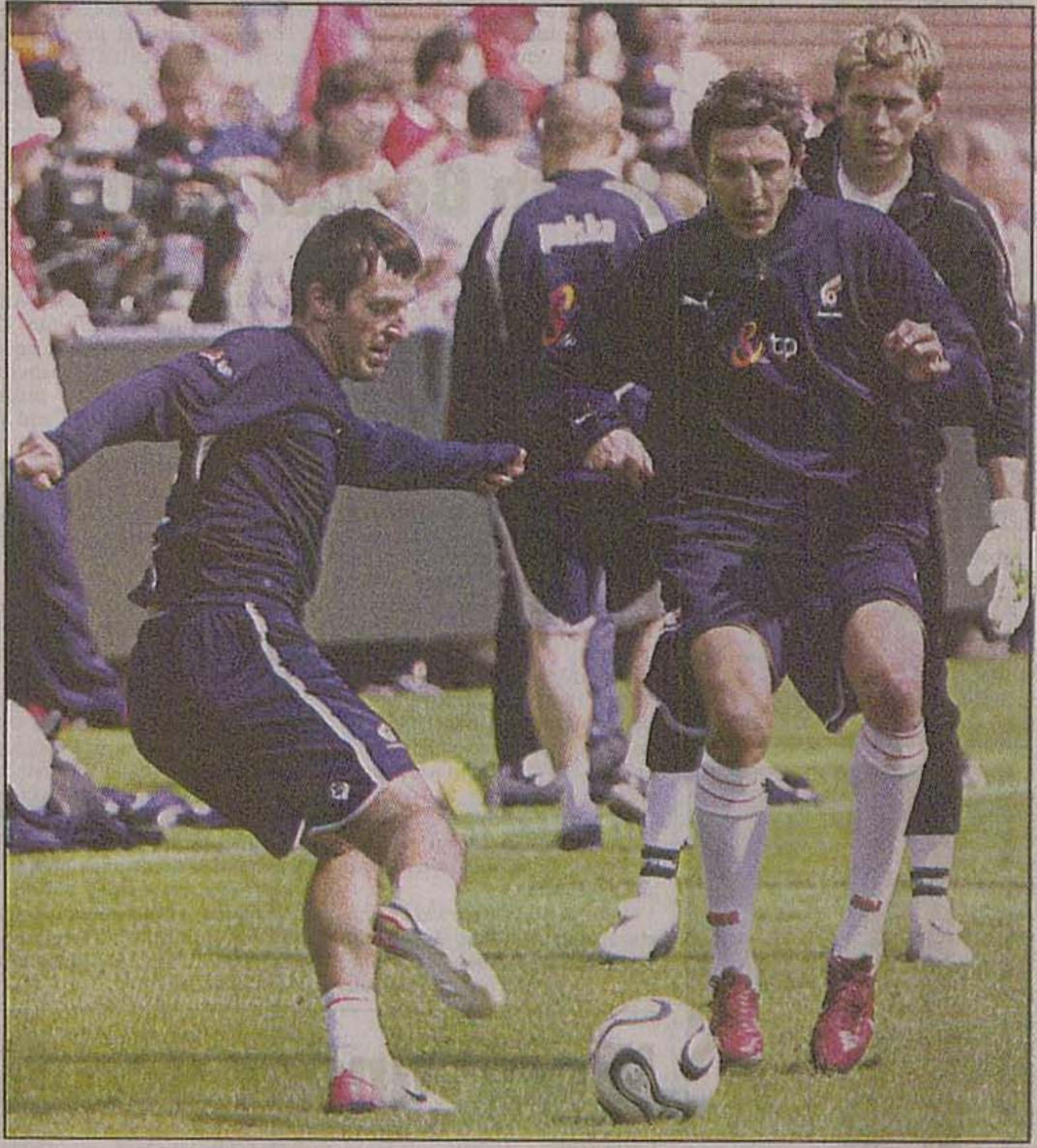
Their impressive finish was due largely to their formidable home form where they had the advantage of playing at high altitude. They

were unbeaten in Quito, claiming 23 of their 28 points.

Ecuador's main attacking threat will come from striker Edison Mendez, whose five goals helped secure qualification, while the experience of 31-year-old Ivan Hurtado will be invaluable to their defence.

Highly-driven coach Luis Suarez has revitalised Ecuador by axing many of the old guard and replacing them with hungry

Polish forward Maciej Zurawski (R), defender Jacek Bak (C) and goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak (L) play with the ball during a training session at the August-Wenzel-Stadion in Barsinghausen on Wednesday.



Polish forward Maciej Zurawski (R), defender Jacek Bak (C) and goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak (L) play with the ball during a training session at the August-Wenzel-Stadion in Barsinghausen on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

North Bengal towns feel Cup fever

SPORTS REPORTER

With the World Cup football all set to kick off, north-Bengal towns have put aside their daily life miseries like power-crisis and price-hike to watch the showpiece event. Like elsewhere in the country, the northern part has also been gripped by World Cup fever and people are preparing to watch all the excitement on television.

However, Bangladesh Television's decision to show only 25 matches live will deprive the fans in remote places where cable-TV is unavailable. The state-run BTV, which has been telecasting World Cup matches live since 1982, beamed more than 50 matches live in 1998 and 2002 but this time around, it has failed to live up to the expectation.

Still, nothing could stop the football lovers from showing their enthusiasm during the build-up.

Our Bogra Correspondent adds: "I will enter the TV room obviously for viewing World Cup football although my test examination starts June 11 because I will not be able to enjoy this type of fascinating games within four years," said honours student Ruma Islam.

Despite being a small town, World Cup has gripped almost all the houses and a huge number of flags of different participating nations have been hoisted, especially on high-rise buildings. A large number of flags have been sold with the blue and white of Argentina in high demand. Television sets are also being sold a greater number than normal time.

Jahangir Hossain, a barber who is an Italian fan, decided to keep his shop open whole night to witness matches. He has also made sure

SQUADS

Poland (4-5-1)
 1-Artur Boruc, 6-Jacek Bak, 2-Mariusz Jop, 14-Michal Zewiakov, 4-Marcin Baszczyński, 8-Jacek Krzynowek, 16-Arkadiusz Ra-domski, 10-Miroslaw Szymkowiak, 7-Radoslaw Sobolewski, 15-Euzebiusz Smolarek, 9-Maciej Zurawski.

Ecuador (4-4-2)
 12-Cristian Mora, 4-Ulises de la Cruz, 3-Ivan Hurtado, 17-Giovanny Espinoza, 18-Neicer Reasco, 8-Edison Mendez, 20-Edwin Tenorio, 14-Segundo Castillo, 16-Luis Antonio Valencia, 11-Agustin Delgado, 21-Carlos Tenorio or 10-Ivan Kaviedes.

World Cup takes over

BISHWAJIT ROY

The biggest challenge the government is going to face over the next one month is the smooth supply of power as the whole nation sets its eyes beyond yet another ambitious budget or other pressing issues and difficulties in the everyday life to a nightly fantasy ride -- the World Cup in Germany.

The country has already been gripped by the 'World Cup fever' and with the first match between hosts Germany and Costa Rica taking place tonight in Munich, the

sports-crazy millions might erupt at the drop of a hat if the otherwise evil load-shedding rears its ugly head till the July 9 final in Berlin.

The World Cup may be taking place thousands of miles away, but the frenzy that is emanating from every nook and corner of Bangladesh is nothing less than what Munich or Berlin is experiencing at the moment.

In line with the team's colours, ordinary citizens are not only hoisting their favourite teams' flags -- mostly of Brazil and Argentina -- but also even wearing their

adopted team shirts in a show of their support.

From the cattle market to a business house everywhere you will feel the heat of the 'fever'. The degree of excitement has no bounds it seems, as even a system of informal betting has started among World Cup watchers in Dhaka. This was not even thought of, even a couple of years ago. The organisers, who are not willing to mention their identity because of legal wrangles, are following the betting rates of popular betting companies to use in their system.

To promote their products and raise sell, television companies have already come up with various offers. The other big and small companies are also trying their best to take the chance, the news-stands have already been hit by World Cup magazines and online quiz competition is another addition to the event where even some renowned houses are involved to add a new dimension to it.

But the most interesting thing is that even a few salons and restaurants have published colourful fixtures of the tournament for not any business purpose but simply because of sharing their excitement with the customers.

"Business interest didn't play any role rather we published it out of passion. We just wanted to share the excitement with our customers," said Mohammad Imdad, manager of a popular restaurant in the city.

When the excitement has

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TODAY'S MATCHES

First Round

Channel	Team	Time	Venue
ESPN	Germany v Costa Rica	9:50 pm	Munich
ESPN	Poland v Ecuador	12:50 am (Saturday)	Gelsenkirchen

(BTV & ESPN will telecast World Cup opening ceremony live from Munich at 8:20 pm)

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