

Hosts enjoying sunshine

REUTERS, Berlin
Summer has finally arrived in Berlin and the sunshine seems to have brought the Californian out in Juergen Klinsmann.

The Germany World Cup coach gave his players the day off to enjoy the sweltering heat on Sunday, telling his team to relax and clear the heads rather than worry about training.

"They've been playing tennis, football and basketball," Klinsmann said at a news conference on Sunday. "They've been scattered about the hotel."

Germany have just three days to prepare for their next Group A game against Poland but Klinsmann said his players deserved the break after a rousing 4-2 win over Costa Rica in the tournament's opening match on Friday.

"They need a little mental relaxation," the coach said. "They gave the world a great opening match. They made everyone very happy and collected the three points."

Klinsmann has continued to commute from his home in California since taking over as Germany coach in 2004.

His refusal to move back to Germany brought him fierce criticism from club bosses, other coaches and the media but the performance on Friday should have lifted some of the pressure.

The 41-year-old was certainly in relaxed mood on Sunday as he looked ahead to the remaining group games against Poland on June 14 and Ecuador on June 20.

"I think people's respect for us is growing," Klinsmann said. "Of course we made mistakes and we will continue to do so but we have to quality to make up for any errors."



Brazilian Ronaldo (R) having a chat with coach Carlos Alberto Parreira during Sunday's training session in Konigsstein ahead of their World Cup opener against Croatia today.

Olic boosts Croatia

AFP, undated
Croatia received a welcome boost ahead of Tuesday's World Cup Group F opener against five-time champions Brazil on Saturday when it was revealed striker Ivica Olic would be fit to play.

The 26-year-old CSKA Moscow forward had been suffering from a right thigh injury but returned to full training on Saturday.

"I think he is now at 80 per cent and he will be available for the Brazil match," said coach Zlatko Kranjcar.

Olic participated in the whole training session today (Saturday) and the shooting session at the end. It seems to be going well, even if he didn't put too much pressure on his right leg.

Olic, who had a serious knee injury last August, is vital to Kranjcar's plans, as he prefers to pair him up front with the veteran Dado Prso, in preference to Ivan Klasnic.

After the Brazil clash Croatia meet Japan in Nuremberg on 18 June and finally Australia in Stuttgart on 22 June.

Group of Death is alive

REUTERS, Leipzig
Whenever there is a World Cup, there is talk of a difficult group that stands out from the rest and is almost impossible to predict.

This time that billing has gone to Group C featuring Argentina, Netherlands, Ivory Coast and Serbia & Montenegro.

Argentina's 2-1 win over Ivory Coast on Saturday suggested the pre-tournament claims were justified and a 1-0 victory by the Dutch over the Serbs on Sunday added further reinforcement.

Both games had plenty of top-class football on display and while the conventional wisdom is that Argentina and the Dutch have the edge, the first two fixtures showed every team in the group will have to fight for every point.

The Dutch sparked on Sunday with a masterclass in quick-passing, skilful football and the outstanding individual display of the tournament so far from Arjen Robben.

But the fact remains they won by a single goal, scored by Robben in the 18th minute.

The Dutch could not relax until the final whistle, despite having most of the possession and scoring chances.

Serbia looked dangerous on the break and could have punished the Dutch if their finishing and final balls into the penalty box had been a little better.

The match essentially hinged on Robben's rampant performance and Serbia's failure to contain the Chelsea winger until it was too late.

As part of a defensive rejig caused by centre back Nemanja Vidic's suspension, Serb coach Ilija Petkovic had been expected to play experienced midfielder Igor Duljaj in the full back's role against Robben.

Instead, Petkovic kept Duljaj in midfield and brought in Nenad Djordjevic.

Serbia looked much more threatening after that, further reinforcing the idea Group C is indeed the most competitive of the eight first-round sections in Germany.

For us, the Cup is work, and lots of it," said Genival Silva, the bar's manager. "After all, people need something to drink while they watch the games."

When life comes to a halt



REUTERS, Sao Paulo
When Brazil take the field in Berlin on Tuesday for their first game of the 2006 World Cup, this continent-sized country of 185 million people will grind to a halt.

Nationwide, banks have received government approval to close early on game days. Courts and schools will shut down after a half day. And the Sao Paulo stock market will ring the closing bell two hours early so investors can watch Brazil's so-called magical quartet -- Ronaldo, Ronaldo, Adriano and Kaka -- work their magic in Germany.

In the capital Brasilia, the Senate and the House of Deputies have

cancelled afternoon sessions on days when Brazil is scheduled to play. Government agencies, with the exception of the police and public hospitals, will close their doors two hours before kick-off times.

Even in Sao Paulo, a bustling metropolis with a workaholic streak, city officials expect the normally traffic-clogged streets to be virtually deserted when Brazil takes the field.

Rather than run the risk of having hordes of employees call in sick, many private companies are allowing staff to head home early. Others, like chemicals company DuPont, have also installed big-screen televisions for those employees that stick around.

"Soccer is an integral part of the culture in Brazil and people would be thinking about it anyway," said Jose Perdomo, a vice-president at DuPont in Sao Paulo. "This is about balancing

the employees' needs and our businesses."

Brazil has plenty of reasons to be excited about its national team. It has won the World Cup a record five times, most recently in 2002 in Japan. It is the only country to have participated in all 17 World Cups, and it has played in the past three finals, winning two of them.

It is also the country that produced Pele, arguably the greatest to ever play the "beautiful game," although that is an honor that archival Argentina tends to bestow on its own Diego Maradona.

Soccer is so ingrained in the national psyche that Brazilians of all ages still speak of the country's shocking loss to Uruguay in the 1950 World Cup final in Rio de Janeiro's famed Maracana stadium as a national tragedy.

All across this soccer-crazed

nation, cars, streets, apartment and office buildings are festooned with Brazilian flags and green-and-yellow banners that proclaim in Portuguese, "On Our Way to the Sixth." Vendors swarm cars at intersections, hawk flags, Brazil soccer jerseys and other World Cup paraphernalia.

For some, especially bar and restaurant workers, the World Cup means big business and twice the work.

Bar Astor, a popular pub in Sao Paulo's bohemian Vila Madalena district, installed six flat-screen plasma TVs just for the Cup. Every seat in the bar -- almost 250 of them -- has already been reserved for all of Brazil's games.

"For us, the Cup is work, and lots of it," said Genival Silva, the bar's manager. "After all, people need something to drink while they watch the games."

'It's just a game'



AFP, Cologne
Angola coach Luis Oliveira Goncalves took issue with legendary Liverpool manager Bill Shankly's famous remark that football's not about life and death, it's more important than that.

The man who has masterminded a resurgence in the country's football fortunes was asked how he felt about Angola's next World Cup run out against Mexico being a matter of life and death given their opening loss here Sunday to Portugal.

The Professor as he's affectionately known back in the south west African nation replied: "I don't look at things in those terms. This isn't about that, it's about a football game, but a good one."

An understandable sentiment coming from someone whose country is just emerging from a near three decade long civil war that left about one million dead and crippled its infrastructure and economy.

Goncalves said he was proud of Angola's first foray into the World Cup after seeing his team recover from a nervy start to push Portugal all the way to the line.

Portugal took the spoils 1-0 thanks to Paulista's fourth minute goal but Angola had chances too, notably from their top scorer Akwa

and keeper Joao Ricard produced some fine saves.

"We are the most humble team but my players played with extreme pride.

"Our objective is to complicate matters for the major powers in world football.

"We studied Portugal, we taped all their games. All teams have weak points and Portugal showed some of theirs.

"Our aim was to control their big players and we were able to do that, apart from the goal."

Angola, who owe their presence in Germany to finishing ahead of Nigeria in qualifying, came into the finals with a series of friendly defeats against Argentina, Turkey and the United States, but Goncalves insisted his men were

progressing.

"We showed improvement after each warm-up, and against Portugal we improved further.

"I recognise the Mexicans are strong but we'll be trying to counter balance a tough adversary."

Goncalves was magnanimous in defeat.

"Portugal started well, sometimes the way another team starts forces the other side to make mistakes.

"We paid a heavy penalty with the goal but we came back and pressurised them a lot in the second half.

"We weren't able to score in the end and so I congratulate Portugal, they won deservedly."

Angola, who foot the group, take on Mexico in Hanover on Friday with their final group game against Iran in Leipzig on June 21.

Messi not for Madrid!

INTERNET, undated
Leo Messi's father has dismissed rumours that his son could sign for Real Madrid in the summer and insisted that he will stay with FC Barcelona.

Reports surfaced that Madrid presidential candidate Juan Miguel Villar Mir was considering matching the Argentine star's 150 million buy-out clause.

Despite Villar Mir's denial that he wanted to break the bank for Messi, the move sounded ominously like the one that Luis Figo made in 2000 after Florentino Perez made a similar promise in the run up to the elections.

Jorge Messi, Leo's father and agent, though has moved to quash the stories.

"Leo is not going to leave Barca, the idea is offensive," he said. "With everything that the club has done for us it would be impossible to do something like this to them."

After moving up to the first team last summer, Leo Messi was given a new contract and has since signed a second improved deal with a higher buy-out clause.

The family also feeling a debt towards the club as Barca paid for Messi's growth hormone treatment when he first joined the club.

Spotlight on Robben



AFP, Leipzig
Arjen Robben was hailed in the same category as Brazilian star Ronaldinho after dismantling the armour-plated defence of Serbia and Montenegro in the Netherlands' vital 1-0 World Cup win.

But Robben insisted that the most important thing for him was not being rated the best individual at the tournament but helping the Dutch to win football's showpiece tournament for the first time.

Robben, who consistently puts in better performances for his nation than his club Chelsea, added that he had not been given a carte blanche by Dutch coach Marco van Basten, though the Serb defence -- which only conceded one goal in qualifying -- might wish to argue that point.

"It doesn't make a difference to me whether I'm playing for Chelsea or the national team," the 22-year-old said.

"The player I am I need some freedom in my game and I've got that from every manager."

The Dutch team monopolised possession in Sunday's clash and Robben terrorised his opposite number Nenad Djordjevic to such an extent that Serb coach Ilija Petkovic replaced him after 43 minutes with the far more effective Ognjen Koroman.

Robben broke the deadlock when he collected a perfectly weighted pass from Robin van Persie and steered the ball past Serb keeper Dragoslav Jevric in the 18th minute.

Petkovic said Robben was at the top of his game.

"During the first half, the defenders did not disappoint, but sometimes there are players you cannot stop from taking directions," Petkovic said.

"Robben is in that category, players like Ronaldinho, who know how to dribble and how to shoot."

"Robben is a very good player, an extraordinary one and it is very difficult to stop such a player."

Van Basten said he hoped his young winger could reproduce his form.

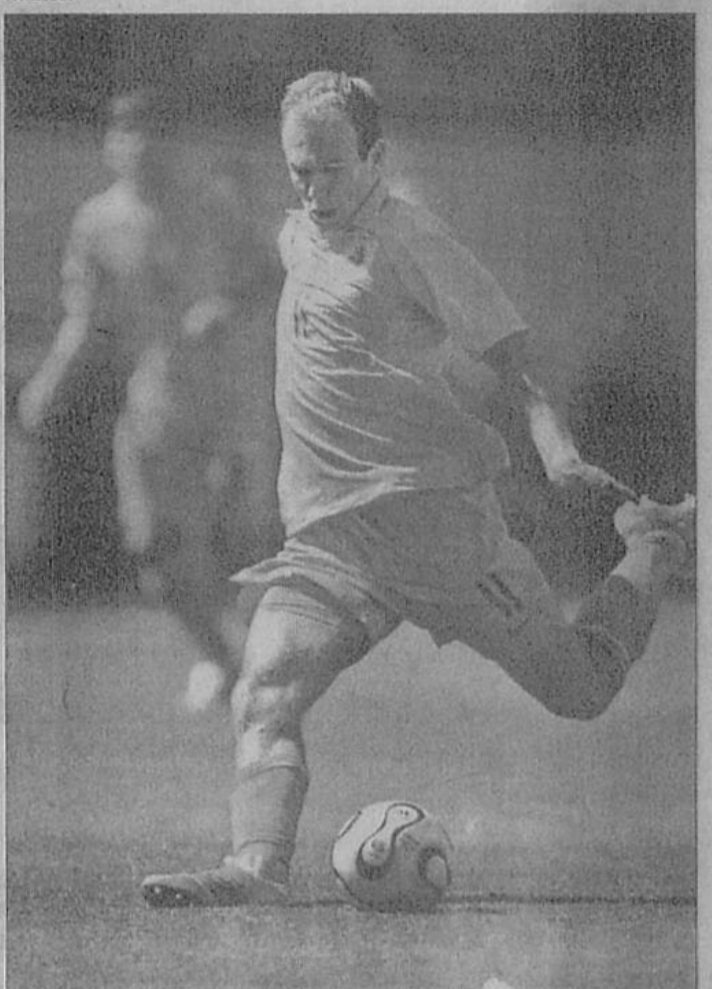
"I'm happy for Arjen. He's one of our top players. Today he was very important for us and I hope that he'll continue to be in the rest of the tournament."

However, there were signs that not all Robben's teammates were happy with his dominating performance.

"Together we hope to play six matches (in the World Cup) and that he can't do all by himself," van Persie told the Dutch ANP news agency.

"He must take into account his teammates. Sometimes he makes decisions for himself and not the team."

The next fixtures in the so-called Group of Death come on Friday, when the Dutch meet Ivory Coast in Stuttgart and the Serbs take on Argentina in Gelsenkirchen.



Dutch winger Arjen Robben in action during their World Cup match against Serbia & Montenegro at Leipzig Stadium on Sunday.

Italians in doubt



REUTERS, Rome
Italian media and fans, disillusioned by a domestic soccer scandal, were divided on Monday over whether to support the national team in their opening World Cup match with Ghana.

Allegations of match-fixing in Serie A have left many Italian fans sceptical about the sport and uncertain whether or not to support the Azzurri.

Daily newspaper La Repubblica identified three types of fan: those who had remained loyal to the Italian team; those who had decided to support their opponents; and those who had simply turned their backs on the whole thing.

Leading the anti-Italy brigade was La Padania, the paper of the right-wing Northern League party.

"I hope they go out quickly. They are arrogant, shameful and above all without balls -- at least the kind of balls you need to win," it said in a front page opinion piece.

"The national team is the mirror of a sick sporting environment. It is a drag for players, coaches and staff. And many fans prefer the colours of their local team to those of the Azzurri."

Communist-founded newspaper Il Manifesto for once found

common ground with La Padania. Its message to its readers was simple. "Support the Africans," it said.

Even Italy's specialist sports press was more than usually reserved in its support.

"Having thrown away two (World Cups) in a row in France and then in Japan, we should treasure this one in Germany," ran the editorial on the front page of Corriere dello Sport.

"There are many reasons why, more than usual, we need a good tournament to showcase Italian football."

"First there is the collective need to wash our hands after this shameful scandal. Then there is the desire to rediscover the joy of football and to celebrate it, far from the backstabbing and disappointments."

Gazzetta dello Sport also recalled the match-fixing scandal as well as inglorious episodes in Italy's recent history, such as Francesco Totti's ban for spitting at Denmark's Christian Poulsen at Euro 2004.

The paper called on Italy's players to be examples of fair play to help rebuild the national team's tarnished image.

"It will not be enough to say that we are going out simply to play football while pretending to have forgotten what has happened in the past few weeks," it said.

"The television cameras of the world will be pointed on each tackle, on every gesture.

Happy time in Germany

AFP, Berlin
Despite political tensions between the United States and much of the world, US players at the World Cup have received a warm reception from their German hosts and supporters of rival nations.

"I've never had an incident or problem. People are very respectful of the United States," US captain Claudio Reynas said.

"They're interested in the nation and the sport. We're soccer players and that's it. We're not here to make political decisions."

US coach Bruce Arena made it clear that Americans proudly represent their homeland and people without regard to US government political decisions.

"We believe in our country," Arena said. "It's not politics and patriotism. It's sport."

US coach Bruce Arena was in the stands in Florence, Italy, in 1990 when the US team ended a 40-year World Cup drought. The Czechs beat the Americans 5-1 in their only meeting until Monday's Group E opener here.

"In a sense it was embarrassing how far behind we were," Arena said. "We were dominated that day. We didn't belong on the field that day. Hopefully, 16 years later we can have a better showing."

US goalkeeper Kasey Keller, a hero on the 1990 squad now set to retire, recalled just how far off the scouting was for a US collection of amateurs and neophytes back then.



Angolan supporters cheer the national team during their 2006 World Cup match against Portugal in Cologne on Sunday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS 36 Muralist 1 Small store's co-owner? 4 Capitol output 8 Remnants 12 Copper head 13 Mid-eastern land 14 Source 15 Trattoria dessert 17 Excessive revelry 18 They lead to punch-lines 19 Curvy character 21 Conk out 22 Insight 26 Hydrophobic 29 Raggae-like music 30 Grecian vessel 31 Sandwich treat 32 Weep 33 Dressed 34 Tin Man's need 35 Discoverer's word
DOWN 25 Destroy 26 Leeway 27 Bocelli rendition award 28 Symbol of liberty 29 Box office sign 32 Laugh a little 33 Approximately 35 Sapporo sash 36 Sank a two-pointer 38 Pruritic 39 Mold and mildew 42 Open slightly 43 Ralph Lauren trademark 44 Sought damages 45 Payable 46 Impossible 47 Easy mark 49 "And -- the opposite shore ..."

Solution time: 25 mins.

Grid for crossword puzzle with letters filled in.

Grid for Cryptquip puzzle.

CRYPTOQUIP
IX NMUFYFMOU PKOWG YND
N IFKS DMOBBSKX ITNMOHX
HF OH, DF O P UNMM
OH N DMOUGSK MOJTFK
Yesterday's Cryptquip: IF A FELLOW CHOSE TO TERMINATE HIS LEATHER-TANNING CAREER, WOULD HE COME OUT OF HIDING?
Today's Cryptquip Clue: O equals I
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.