

SPAIN V UKRAINE Doubts over stars

AGENCIES, Kamen/Berlin

Group H favourites Spain could be given an unexpected boost ahead of their opener against Ukraine - if Andriy Shevchenko decides to sit out Wednesday's afternoon match in Leipzig.

Shevchenko is recovering from a month old knee injury he picked up in his last match for AC Milan before his move to English champions Chelsea last week.

And despite playing for 30 minutes and scoring in the 3-0 friendly victory over Luxembourg last week, 'Sheva' appears pessimistic over his chances.

"I do not know if I will be 100 percent against Spain," he said Sunday.

Whether a sign of their supreme confidence, or indeed a fine piece of bluffing, Shevchenko's absence on Ukraine's World Cup debut is not causing too much concern.

Having sailed through qualifying, Ukraine coach Oleg Blokhin said he can do without his star forward, who will expect to return in time for the other group matches against Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.

"Of course, with Shevchenko Ukraine are one team but without him they are a completely different one," he said. "Am I worried? It's the Spaniards who should be worried."

But all eyes will be on a star-studded Spain side who are bidding to shake off a 56-year hoodoo which has seen them failing to get as far as the semi-finals.

Spain coach Luis Aragones has come nearer to naming his team for the match, which for the Spanish will kick off at the inhumane time of 1500 (1300 GMT).

And ahead of their final team training session - held behind closed doors - at their camp here before travelling to Leipzig Tuesday it appeared that national icon and team skipper Raul could be left out.

Aragones on Sunday lined up an apparent blueprint during an 11-a-side training game in which Atletico Madrid's Fernando Torres, Valencia's David Villa and Luis Garcia of Liverpool spearheaded a 4-3-3 formation.

Torres' goalscoring record is solid if a little inconsistent, while Villa finished behind Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o in the Primera Liga scoring charts this season.

Garcia has also proven his goalscoring abilities, the Liverpool winger hitting a hat-trick past Slovakia in the 5-1 qualifying play-off win when Aragones lined up a 4-3-3 for the first time.

Raul meanwhile was on the opposing side, and after receiving two knocks to his thigh and his ankle he left the training session early.

TEAMS

Spain (4-3-3)

1-Iker Casillas, 15-Sergio Ramos, 5-Carlos Puyol, 22-Pablo Ibanez, 3-Mariano Pernia, 16-Marcos Senna, 14-Xabi Alonso, 8-Xavi, 11-Luis Garcia, 9-Fernando Torres, 21-David Villa

Ukraine (4-4-2)

1-Oleksander Shovkovsky, 5-Volodymyr Yezersky, 6-Andriy Rusol, 17-Vladislav Vashchychuk, 2-Andriy Nesmachnyy, 14-Andriy Husin, 4-Anatoly Tymoshchuk, 8-Oleg Shelayev, 21-Rustan Rotan, 11-Serhiy Rebrov, 20-Olexiy Belik

"It was just a couple of knocks," said the 28-year-old Real Madrid striker, whose World Cup preparations have been severely hit by a three-month layoff due to a cruciate ligament injury.

The debate over the availability of Spain's record goalscorer (43 goals) comes second in importance to the overall challenge which awaits.

Spain can boast perhaps one of the most competitive and technically astute domestic leagues in the world, but their record in major competitions has been comparatively poor.

Four years ago it was South Korea who stopped Spain in their tracks at the quarter-final stage, a hurdle which they had failed to get over since they finished fourth in the 1950 World Cup.

However, with youth and the experience of some players playing in the tougher English Premiership, Spain are being tipped to at least make the last eight.

World Cup debutant Cesc Fabregas feels Spain can even cause a surprise.

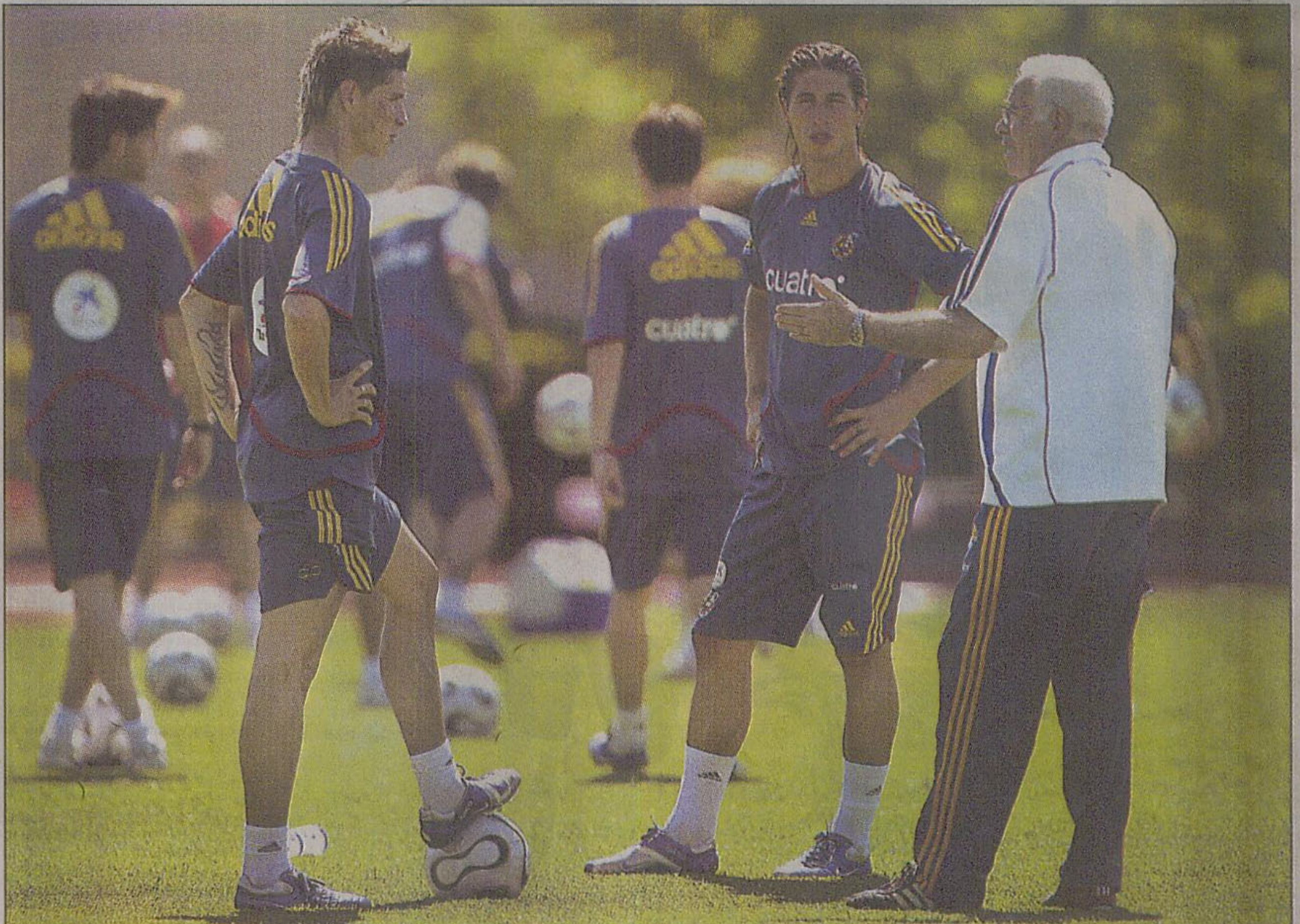
"I believe we have one of the best technical teams in the world and we know it. I think we can do something here in Germany," said the Arsenal midfielder.

A potential meeting with Brazil awaits at the quarter-finals stage, but Spain have already resigned themselves to that challenge.

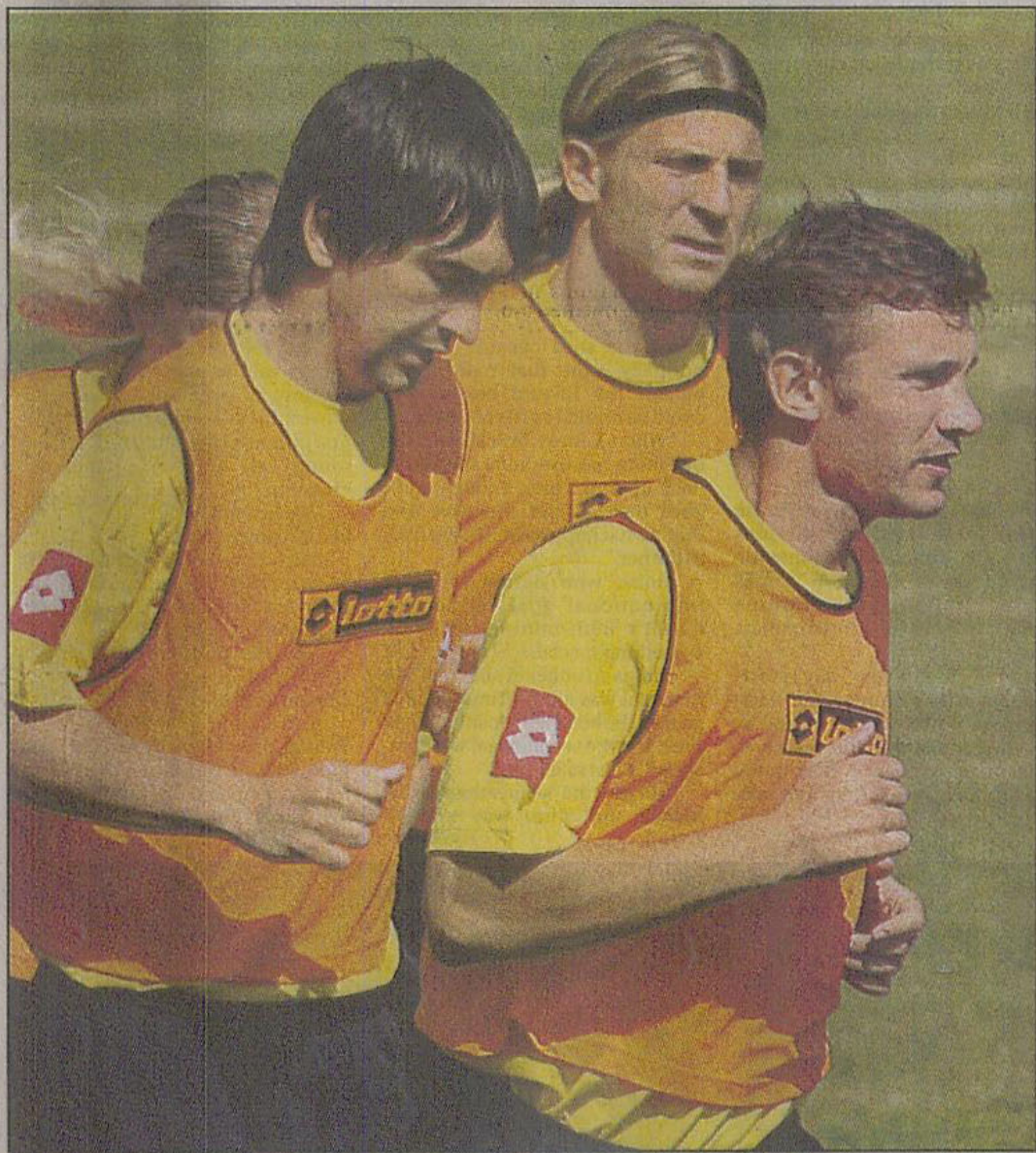
"It's very important for us to play against Brazil," said veteran defender Michel Salgado.

"If we meet them in the quarter-final, no problem. If you want to win the World Cup, you have to beat all the teams.

"We are not afraid."



A LOT DEPENDS ON YOU GUYS: Spanish coach Luis Aragones (R) chats with his youngsters Sergio Ramos (C) and Fernando Torres (L) during the team's training session in Kamen on Monday.



THE BIG QUESTION MARK: Ukraine's striker supreme Andriy Shevchenko (R) leads his teammates in a jogging session in Potsdam on Monday. Ukraine play Spain today.

Casillas wants to end Spanish pain

AFP, Kamen

Spain goalkeeper Iker Casillas is confident a win against Ukraine in their Group H opener in Leipzig on Wednesday could help kickstart a new era for international football's biggest underachievers.

The Real Madrid 'keeper will start behind a 4-3-3 formation as coach Luis Aragones hopes his team can break a 56-year hoodoo by making it to the semi-finals.

Spain's best World Cup performance was a fourth-place finish in 1950.

The 67-year-old coach is set to leave out-of-form skipper Raul out of his starting line-up, instead going with Atletico Madrid's Fernando Torres, Valencia's on-form David Villa and Liverpool's Luis Garcia.

That three-pronged attack has an average age over just under 25 years, and for Casillas, who was called up for the World Cup four years ago after a freak accident to Santiago Canizares saw the then

number one drop an aftershave bottle on his foot, it could prove an omen.

He believes Spain's 12th World Cup campaign could herald both a new beginning, and give them the impetus to finally go all the way to the final.

"Bad luck seems to have followed the Spain team around for the past few major tournaments," said Casillas after the team's final training session here before they travel to Leipzig for Wednesday's match.

"We are a major footballing nation but for various reasons we haven't had good luck on the international stage.

"Sometimes we didn't have much luck from the officials," he added in what was seen as a reference to their quarter-final exit at the hands of South Korea in 2002.

Casillas kept Spain's bid alive at the World Cup in 2002 when he performed heroics to deny the Republic of Ireland in a penalty shoot-out in the second round.

A subsequent penalty shoot-out against South Korea in the last eight went the other way.

Spain were sent packing, but Casillas's performances cemented his position as number one.

As one of the team's most experienced, but still young players, he can appreciate the arrival of players close to his age.

But having suffered the battle scars four years ago, Casillas is experienced enough to know that it's time for Spain to end their World Cup agony.

"The national team has always played to achieve something, not just to make up the numbers," he added.

"But we have to end this cycle of bad luck, get to the final and play to our full potential."

Ukraine sailed through the qualifiers to become the first European zone team to book their World Cup ticket but could start without leading striker Andriy Shevchenko.

Blokhin adamant about success

AFP, Potsdam

Ukraine coach Oleg Blokhin will be forgiven if he is suffering from a case of debutant's delusions, but the former Soviet great is adamant his side can punch well above their weight at the World Cup.

Blokhin became a national hero when he led Ukraine to their first World Cup finals in September when the former Soviets became the first Europe-based qualifier to book their ticket for Germany.

And despite going into their Group H opener against favourites Spain possibly without their star striker Andriy Shevchenko, Blokhin appears unfazed.

Shevchenko could miss their opener due to a lack of match fitness following a recent injury, but Blokhin insists the collective force of his side will prevail.

"Germany played without Ballack against Costa Rica and that didn't prevent them from winning," he said after it emerged Sunday that Shevchenko, who recently signed for Chelsea from AC Milan could miss their opening match.

Blokhin had boldly declared Ukraine's World Cup winning

potential after qualifying, with two games still to play, following a 1-1 draw with Georgia last September.

Having emerged from Sunday's training session, the 1975 world footballer of the year's belief appears to be one he firmly believes in.

"We could be world champions. A soldier who does not want to become a general is not a good soldier," added Blokhin, paraphrasing Napoleon, who declared that 'in every soldier's backpack lies a marshal's baton'.

Ukraine move on from the Spain clash to play Asian giants Saudi Arabia on June 19 in Hamburg then cap their first round campaign against 2004 African Nations champions Tunisia in Berlin on June 23.

But it is the opening match with Luis Aragones' talent-rich Spain in Leipzig this Wednesday that could best indicate just how crucial Shevchenko is to Ukraine.

While his defence could be said to be shaky, Blokhin has plenty of options in attack.

"Apart from Shevchenko we have quite a few more players who are dangerous in front of goal," Blokhin said recently.

Blokhin usually plays Bayer

Leverkusen's Andriy Voronin as an attacking partner of Shevchenko in a 4-4-2 formation in which Spartak Moscow midfielder Maksim Kalinichenko can push forward into the hole.

However while Shevchenko scored six goals in qualifying, Voronin only managed one.

It was 33-year-old midfield general Andriy Gusin who came second in scoring during the qualifiers, scoring the match winner in a 1-0 win against Greece to add to a goal in the 2-0 win over Albania and the goal he scored in the 1-1 draw with Denmark.

Promising attacking midfielder Ruslan Rotan also chipped in with a trio of goals during qualifying, while Shakhtar Donetsk striker Oleksiy Byelik scored two goals.

If Shevchenko recovers in time, it could provide a psychological advantage against a side which has won only two opening round World Cup matches in their past 10 appearances.

In he does not, it could prove to be an indication of Blokhin's long-term plans for the 29-year-old Shevchenko who he will be hoping to field for the remainder of the competition.

Spain's Hall of Shame

AFP, Kamen

Spain's World Cup history is littered with dashed hopes and false dawns. Ahead of their opening Group H match against Ukraine in Leipzig on Wednesday here is a catalogue of their past failures:-

Last five World Cups

2002 - eliminated by South Korea in the quarter-finals after winning all three group matches, convincingly against Slovenia (3-1) and Paraguay (3-1) and rather less convincingly against South Africa (3-2).

1998 - failed to make the quarter-finals after losing 3-2 to Nigeria in opening group match. A catastrophic 0-0 draw with Paraguay was then followed by an ultimately futile 6-1 demolition of Bulgaria.

1994 - quarter-final appearance was secured by a crucial 3-1 win over Bolivia after two consecutive draws against South Korea and Germany. Italy beat Spain 2-1 to claim a place in the last four.

1990 - failed to make quarter-finals after last 16 defeat to Yugoslavia. In group stages a scoreless draw with Uruguay was followed by 3-0 defeat of South Korea and a 2-1 win over Belgium.

1986 - failed to make the semis after quarter-final defeat to

Belgium having crushed Denmark 5-1 in the last 16. In the group stages Spain recovered from an opening match defeat to Brazil with wins over Algeria and Northern Ireland. Last 10 World Cup opening group match results

2002 - beat Slovenia 3-1

1998 - lost 3-2 to Nigeria

1994 - drew 2-2 with South Korea

1990 - drew 0-0 with Uruguay

1986 - lost 1-0 to Brazil

1982 - drew 1-1 with Honduras

1978 - lost 2-1 to Austria

1966 - lost 2-1 to Argentina

1962 - lost 1-0 to Czechoslovakia

1950 - beat United States 3-1

Senna tips Spain for glory

INTERNET, undated

Marcos Senna believes Spain have a side capable of going all the way at this summer's World Cup.

The Villarreal midfielder is delighted by the squad's preparation and believes the team, who have so often flattered to deceive in the past, could be set to fulfil their

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Henry over Sheva: Puyol

INTERNET, undated

Puyol has played five times against Shevchenko over the last couple of years (4 times in Champions League, once in the Joan Gamper trophy) and just once against Henry during the period (Champions League final).

But while placing the Ukrainian in the top bracket along with the likes of Ronaldo, Henry and Crespo, he singled out the Frenchman as the one he has had most problems against.

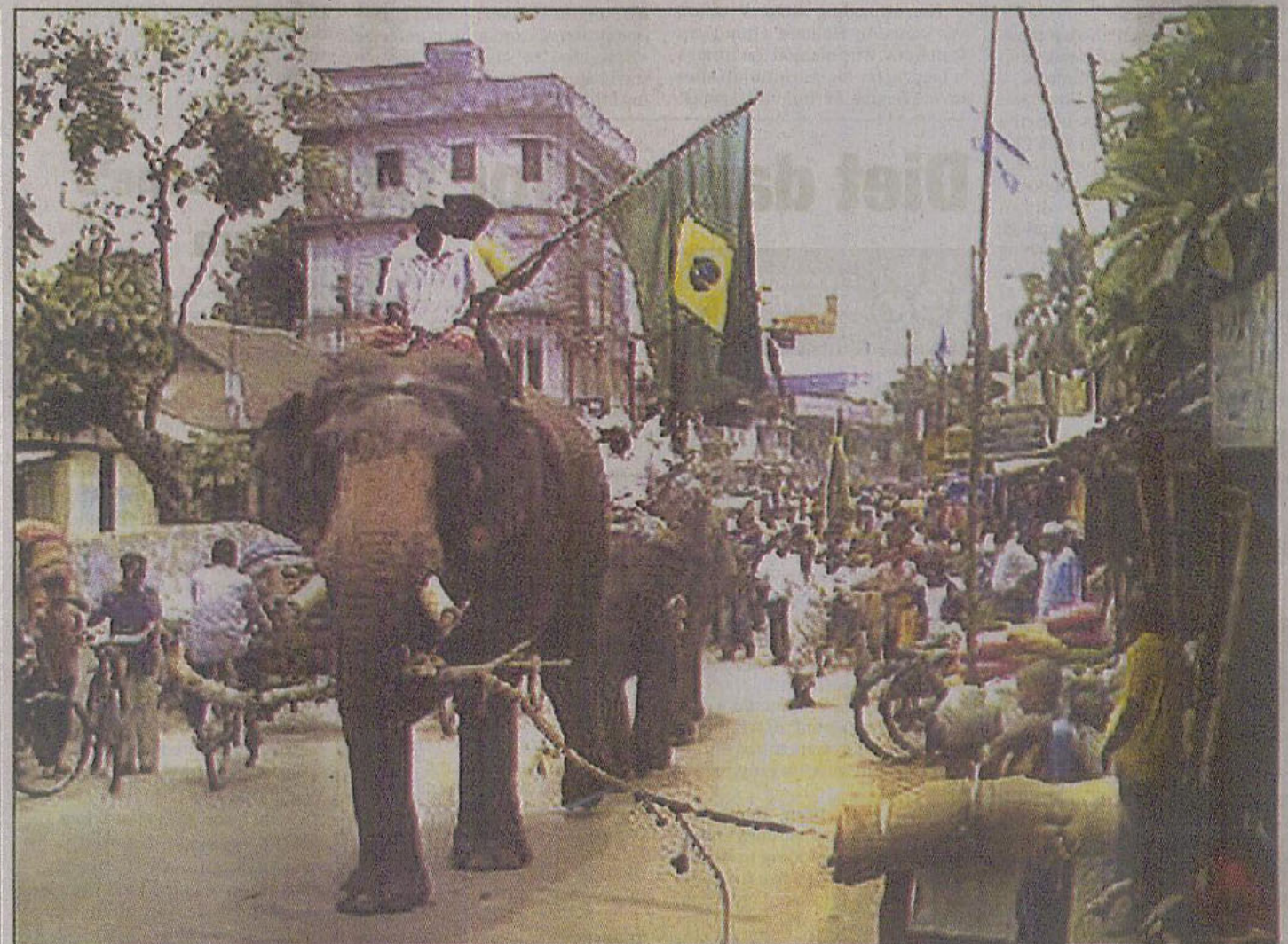
"After the Champions League final, I am familiar with Thierry's characteristics. If you leave spaces behind your defence, it is almost impossible to restrain him, and that is what happened when they took the lead.

"He is the fastest and the most powerful forward, and the one I have had most problems marking in my life."

However, he also described Shevchenko as "a complete forward. He has talent, speed, he finishes, and has a good aerial game."

But he continued to insist that the goal Shevchenko had annulled in the Camp Nou, in the return leg of the Champions League semi-finals, was rightly so. "In his attempt to get clear was when the contact took place," he said. "I tried to continue, but was unbalanced, and slipped and fell. There is no scope for controversy. It was not a goal/period."

"But if he says that he wants to have a go at me again, I also want to have a go at him too."



BRAZIL COMES TO NILPHAMARI: Brazil fans in the tiny northern district of Nilphamari yesterday brought out colourful processions that included three elephants. World champions Brazil launched their title defence against Croatia on Tuesday.