



Australian players are being portrayed on a giant screen as they celebrate their victory over Japan in Kaiserslautern on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Aussies go wild



AFP, Sydney

"Goal! Goal! Goal!" screamed a headline after the Socceroos' come-from-behind 3-1 World Cup victory over Japan sparked street celebrations across Australia early Tuesday.

Jubilant fans tooted car horns and yelled "Carn (Come on Aussie)" after three late goals secured a victory sweetened by the fact that the Socceroos looked finished as they trailed 1-0 just six minutes from the end of normal time.

"I'm still in shock," Genesis Valentini told AFP moments after the whistle in Kaiserslautern brought roaring crowds to their feet from Sydney to Perth.

"I thought we were sliding down, we were gone -- then three goals. Awesome," he said as green-and-gold clad fans streamed from the Beach Road Hotel at Sydney's Bondi to the tune of Men at Work's

"Down Under".

The match marked the Socceroos' return to World Cup football after 32 years in the wilderness and locals did not allow chilly weather and a finish in the early hours of a working day Tuesday to dampen their celebrations.

More than 3,000 went wild after watching the victory on big screens at Melbourne's Federation Square, with revellers singing "Waltzing Matilda" at the city's Lonsdale Street restaurant area.

Traffic was brought to a standstill in central Sydney after more than 300 chanting fans jammed the streets in a boisterous celebration that police eventually dispersed after an hour with no arrests.

Bleary-eyed commuters making their way to work were still pinching themselves over the stunning victory, the first ever for a nation that has never scored a goal in the World Cup finals before.

Prime Minister John Howard praised Australia's "absolutely fantastic, spectacular start" to the tournament against a difficult opponent.

"A wonderful performance and

it would have thrilled millions of Australians," he said. "But its only the first step, they have a long way to go, but they've got off to a fantastic start."

New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma urged employers to go easy on workers who turned up late.

"Give them a break," he said. "It's been 32 years of frustration and disappointment."

Soccer often struggles for the coverage given to oval-ball football codes and cricket in Australia, but the win over Japan sent the media into overdrive.

"It was the most amazing victory in the history of Australian sport," Sydney's Daily Telegraph said under its "Goal! Goal! Goal!" headline, describing the Socceroos' win as a miracle.

The Australian Associated Press news service likened it to a fairy tale, declaring: "Australia has arrived at the World Cup ball, not as one of the ugly sisters but as a stunning Cinderella set to wow them on the dance floor."

Replays of Australia's late brace of goals from Tim Cahill and the

third from John Aloisi enjoyed high rotation on Sky News, which described the comeback as "perhaps the greatest in World Cup history".

"Pure magic" trumpeted Melbourne's Herald Sun while The Australian hailed a Socceroos' "Rain of goals". It also pointed out an "outrageous" refereeing decision in allowing Japan's 26-minute goal which almost cost Australia dear.

As it was, the gripes were largely forgotten in the afterglow of victory and Australia's Dutch coach Gus Hiddink was applauded for the late introduction of goalscoring substitutes Cahill and Aloisi.

"Clearly he's a genius and I don't profess to understand him," ABC radio football commentator Lex Marinos said. "I just wish he'd do it a bit earlier."

Among the pundits there was also relief that the win over Japan means Australia's hopes of progressing do not now hinge on trying to secure a result against defending champions Brazil. The Socceroos face them Sunday, German time.

Brazil's media under pressure



AFP, Berlin

The World Cup pressure on holders Brazil was reaching boiling point in the hours counting down to Tuesday's Group F encounter with Croatia in Berlin.

But while the team insisted they were impervious to the weight of expectation, the legions of Brazilian journalists covering individuals whose celebrity knows no bounds in a country whose 180 million inhabitants lap up every column inch, were also feeling the heat.

Monday afternoon's appearance at the Olympic Stadium brought a bigger than ever media crush as some 500 journalists clamoured to seek words of wisdom from those willing to have several dozen microphones, assorted mobile phones and

as many camera lenses thrust into their faces.

Ronaldo, tired of trying to tell the world he isn't carrying too much around the midriff, raced through the scrum, pausing only to insist "I'm fine" before jogging to the sanctuary of the team bus.

As serial champions the Brazilians are used to matchday pressure while their media have to adopt a siege mentality with deadlines constantly appearing.

"It's true, we are under big pressure. I have to file five bulletins minimum per day. Then there are four programme editions of 20 minutes each and as much news surrounding the 'Selecao' as I can get my hands on," said Fabio Moraes of Rio radio station Radio Litoral.

If the broadcast media are struggling, their workload is no worse than that of their written press counterparts.

"Our papers have all brought out 24-page supplements and there are special editions to fill," Gerson

Nogueira of Diario do Para based in the city of Belem, told AFP.

"We have to keep them up to date with a whole raft of news -- I think there are well over 400 journalists covering Brazil from around the country," he said, dodging several camera crews and their equipment as they chased after the final squad members still lingering for interview.

For Moraes, "this is the Brazilian journalist's lot at a major event -- and they don't come bigger than the World Cup."

"The supporters are such fanatics, and we must transmit the emotion, the passion, the euphoria of being at the World Cup."

"Anything less and the listeners, the viewers and the readers would feel disappointed."

As Nogueira put it, when it comes to football the whole nation has zero desire to "shoot the messenger."

"They're hanging on virtually our every word. A Brazilian win is the whole country's dream."

Pushed around



SPORTSILLUSTRATED

When it came down to game time, the Czech Republic were the school-yard bully, and USA were the wimpy kid in the corner handing over his lunch money.

Of course, it didn't help that the wimpy kid was holding wads of hundreds in his hands, essentially asking for a punch in the face.

That was more or less the case when the Americans were throttled by the Czechs 3-0 on Monday in a match where nothing worked for USA. The Yanks were sluggish, mistake-prone and completely out of sorts against the No. 2 team in the world, who basically did what they wanted.

The tempo was set from the opening kick. In the months leading up to this match, USA coach Bruce Arena had stressed that one of the Czechs' biggest threats was 6-foot-7 striker Jan Koller. Barely five minutes into the game, Zdenek Grygera sent in a perfect cross from the right wing. Koller slipped between US defenders Eddie Pope and Oguchi Onyewu and, predictably, put his bald pate on the ball, sending it past Kasey Keller. The US defenders started pointing fingers, accusing one another of losing his man. And that was your ball game.

From that point on, the Yanks barely mustered any scoring opportunities, handled the ball poorly and, essentially, looked very little like the No. 5 team in the world (what they never were) and even less like a team

that will advance to the second round (which probably won't happen). Over the past two World Cups, only one team -- Turkey in 2002 -- moved on after dropping its first game in the group stage.

"I'm very disappointed," the soft-spoken Arena said after the game in one of his biggest-ever understatements. "The Czech Republic took advantage of every play offered them tonight. Our players played pretty hard, but they didn't play well enough. The better team certainly won."

The Czech Republic put on a clinic in near-perfect soccer, demonstrating discipline and patience while relying on its stars to do the damage. Besides Koller, world-class midfielders Pavel Nedved and Tomas Rosicky -- who scored the Czechs' other two goals -- had full run of the pitch, darting in and out of USA defence. On the other side, the Czechs' unwavering defence broke up nearly every play that came its way.

"They just played textbook soccer," said U.S. defender Pablo Mastroeni. "Give them credit -- for as badly as we played, they had more to do with (the result)."

Give Arena credit for taking a gamble, however. After being thoroughly outclassed in the first half, he could have elected to protect the score line in order to save further embarrassment and a further deficit in goal-differential (a key determinant in group-stage tiebreakers). Instead, Arena shifted to a more attack-heavy line-up, a 3-5-2 formation that brought passing whiz John O'Brien into the midfield and 22-year-old Eddie Johnson on as a second striker.

While USA still couldn't get much going in the second half, Johnson showed some promising signs in his first World Cup appearance. He came out aggressive, firing on his first possession and adding another shot on goal later in the half. Neither could pierce the armour of Petr Cech, but Johnson's courage on the big stage could be a surprise weapon for USA in their final two matches -- if Arena chooses to take advantage of it.

But now the going gets really tough. Up next are Italy (who beat Ghana 2-0 on Monday) a team that, when they're clicking, can suffocate their opposition with top-notch possession and bruising defence. That's to say nothing of the Azzurri's Luca Toni, another tall striker who has the flair and mobility to cause the US more problems than Koller did on Monday before he was forced out of the match with a hamstring injury.

"We had been saying all along that hopefully, four points would be enough to get out of the group," said USA defender Eddie Lewis. "Now we put this behind us and focus on getting a win and a draw out of the next two games."

Simple as that, right? A draw against Italy and a win against Ghana. We knew all along USA were going to have problems with their killer group. But if things do not improve for the Americans, they're looking at the very real possibility that they may not win a game in Germany. That would be a disaster of epic proportions.

If USA are to continue the growing respect they had started to enjoy throughout the world, it's time to grow up. No one respects the wimpy kid in the corner.

Crouch to hang up dancing feet

AFP, Baden Baden

England striker Peter Crouch has sent the "robot" into retirement and will only revive it if England win the World Cup.

The gangling Liverpool forward emerged as a cult figure amongst fans with his bizarre goal celebrations during friendly wins over Jamaica and Hungary.

But as England knuckle down to the task of trying to win the World Cup for the first time in 40 years, Crouch says he is his hanging up his dancing feet.

"It's not about robotic dancing," Crouch said. "It's about scoring goals and winning matches. It's an important time for everyone now."

"It's serious business, though we might all do it if we win the World Cup." Crouch said although teammates had encouraged him to continue his goal celebrations, he wanted to ensure he was focused on winning.

"If you can enjoy yourself, all well and good, but the first thing we must concentrate on winning football matches," said Crouch.

"The lads are keen for me to keep it going, but I'm not sure about that. I hope to get as many goals as I can, but I'm not sure about that celebration."

Crouch meanwhile is certain his strike partner Michael Owen will come good at some point in the tournament after being hauled off against Paraguay.

"Over the years Michael has been playing, he has always scored goals and I believe he will always score goals," Crouch said.

"He is a goalscorer and a finisher and when he is given chances he will score. Michael is one of our main threats, so there is no problem with him."

England's next Group B match is against Trinidad and Tobago in Nuremberg on Thursday.

Foreign connection



AFP, Berlin

If things had worked out differently, Germany would have drawn 2-2 with Costa Rica and Mexico may well have ended level with Iran.

As for Tunisia, they may not have been here at all.

The reason? All have turned to a foreign imports to boost their title dreams.

Polish-born Miroslav Klose grabbed two goals in Germany's 4-2 opening win while Brazilian-born Zinha came off the bench to turn a 1-1 halftime scoreline into a 3-1 triumph for Mexico.

Tunisia handed a passport to Santos, also born in Brazil, and the scorer has repaid that faith leading the north Africans to the Nations Cup in 2004 as well as bagging the bulk of the goals in the World Cup qualifiers.

Germany manager Jurgen Klinsmann admitted his country were fortunate to have Polish-born forwards Klose and Lukas Podolski.

"We are happy with the Polish players as they are of a high quality," said Klinsmann whose side face Poland on Wednesday.

"It is a special moment for them as they have family ties. Playing against their homeland could motivate 'Miro' and Lukas even more."

The 28-year-old Klose's father played for Auxerre in

France, but only when his parents moved from Poland to Germany when he was nine did he start to carve out a love of the game.

The 20-year-old Podolski, born in Gliwice, admits to having close ties to Poland but says his loyalties lie with Germany.

"I feel like I have two homelands. I hope Poland get through the group -- but by finishing behind Germany," Bayern Munich's Podolski said.

German Player of the Year Klose, who was born in Opole, and plays at Werder Bremen, has admitted that the duo even speak in Polish on the pitch.

Antonio Naelson Matiasar, better known as Zinha, was born in Sao Paulo, but is now a naturalised Mexican.

On Sunday, with his team locked at 1-1 with Iran, he came off the bench to score one goal and create another for Omar Bravo.

Zinha played in the second division in Mexico before gaining recognition as a midfield dynamo with Toluca in 1999. He played in 12 of the qualification matches, scoring three goals.

Mexico coach Ricardo Lavolpe said his substitutions, replacing both strikers Jared Borgetti and Guillermo Franco, and bringing on Jose Fonseca and Zinha, did the trick.

"I think the substitutions were perfect and the team was better, more ordered on the field and better organised," he said.

Meanwhile, Trinidad and Tobago midfielder Chris

Birchall has mixed emotions about facing England on Thursday -- he was born in the pottery-making town of Stafford in the English Midlands.

Birchall is the first white player to represent the Caribbean side for 60 years as well as the first Port Vale player to appear in the finals.

"If I score against England, I won't celebrate," said Birchall.

Birchall's appearance at the finals started out at a fixture in the third tier of English football between Vale and Wrexham last year.

Wrexham's Trinidad defender Dennis Lawrence sidled up to Birchall and asked him where his mother was born.

"Port of Spain, Trinidad," a puzzled Birchall replied and the rest is history.

The 27-year-old Santos has also crossed continents to make the international grade and he has become one of Africa's top marksmen even bagging four goals in the same World Cup qualifier against Malawi which helped Tunisia to the finals.

Arriving in Europe aged 16, he started out with Standard Liege in Belgium but eventually signed for Etoile Sahel and became a prolific scorer with 32 goals in 50 matches.

"Santos is one of the most natural goalscorers I have come across," said Jean Fernandez, who subsequently took Santos with him to French outfit Sochaux and where the Brazilian scored 21 goals to gain them promotion.

Zambrotta is back

INTERNET, undated

There is more good news for Italy after their 2-0 win over Ghana on Monday as Gianluca Zambrotta has been declared injury-free.

The Juventus stopper missed the Hanover tie because of a thigh strain, but medics have handed him back to boss Marcello Lippi on Tuesday.

"Zambrotta joined the rest of the squad this morning and is getting back to full fitness," stated doctor Enrico Castellacci.

"I think we can now all consider him to be back at the disposal of the Italian national coach."

Zambrotta featured in a very light practice game this morning and he could return to action on Saturday against America.

The tactician will now use the next few days to assess his options, given that the marauding Zambrotta can play both as a full-back on the right and left.

Meanwhile, Casrellacci has ruled out any significant problems for Francesco Totti after the knock he picked up against the Africans.

"He suffered a slight twist to his knee, but there are no problems and we are tranquil," he continued. "He'll be fine for the immediate future."

The Azzurri now have just one injury problem to resolve in the form of dynamic midfielder Gennaro Gattuso.

"He's working hard to get back," added the medic. "He'll undergo more tests on Wednesday. We are going forward with caution, yet with optimism."

Gattuso, who picked up a thigh strain in a friendly with Switzerland, may miss the entire group phase.

Toni rues crossbar

INTERNET, undated

The crossbar stopped cracking goal Luca Toni from netting a cracking goal against Ghana, while Fabio Cannavaro and Gigi Buffon are happy with the performance.

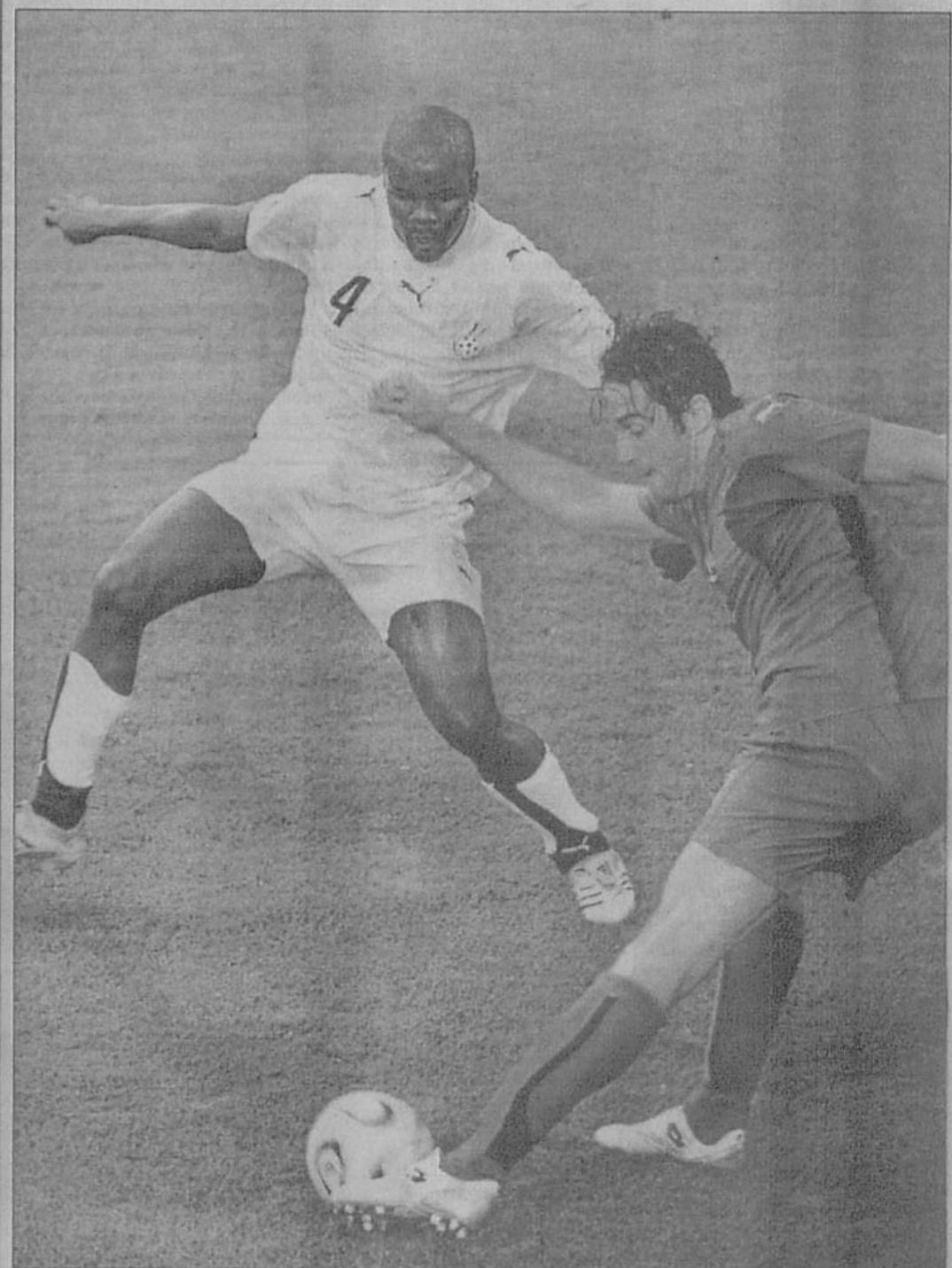
"I gave it a go, but unfortunately was unable to score. The important thing was to win and we did it, while it was a very emotional World Cup debut for me and we all tried to pour our frustrations into the game," said the Fiorentina striker.

He was fielded in a trident with Francesco Totti and Alberto Gilardino, who also struck the woodwork in the 2-0 win.

"I think we moved well with Francesco and Alberto, just failing to score by a couple of inches, so we're still working on this partnership and will improve. We tried to spread the central defenders as far as possible so that Totti could break into the middle."

Toni, who scored 31 goals in Serie A this season, was replaced by Alessandro Del Piero eight minutes from time.

"I feel pretty good physically and we had to move around a lot of the ball to create space, so some tiredness was inevitable. It was very hot, but that caused problems for everyone, including Ghana. The fact we scored a goal in the final minutes suggests our fitness levels are good."



Italian forward Luca Toni tries to dribble past Ghanaian defender Samuel Kuffour (L) during their World Cup 2006 group E in Hanover match on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP