



STAND UP AND GET READY: Argentina's mercurial talent Lionel Messi plays with the ball at a training session in Herzogenaurach on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

WC awaits Messi



AFP, Herzogenaurach

Hailed by Beckenbauer, blessed by Maradona, endorsed by a sporting goods maker and generated by supporters as football's new messiah, Argentina's gifted teenage hope Lionel Messi is raring for a crack at the World Cup.

The 17-year-old broke ranks with the sheltered environment imposed on Argentina's players on a free afternoon Monday to signal he was ready to play after a thigh injury he suffered in March.

The day after he made his presence felt by standing on his hotel room balcony with music playing loudly, Messi insisted he had "completely recovered" and was fit.

"When I'm picked to play, if I'm picked, I hope things go well for me," he said, speaking for the first time since the squad arrived at their southern German base.

Messi's father complained that his son had not played during the 2-1 victory against Ivory Coast, raising the pressure on coach Jose

Pekerman ahead of Friday's match against Serbia-Montenegro.

Pekerman, a successful former coach of Argentina's youth team, has a track record of drafting youngsters into the senior side since he took over in 2001. But he has also made it clear he will adapt his team to suit each opponent, to the dismay of some Argentina supporters.

"God is Argentinian, the Messiah is too," read one banner at the Ivory Coast game.

World Cup 2006 organiser Franz Beckenbauer believes Argentina's number 19 will be "the star of the World Cup", while Diego Maradona declared recently "I have seen my heir".

"He has a head and his feet are firmly on the ground," said Argentina's former star, also highlighting Messi's dribbling and passing.

In Germany, Messi will wear boots with Argentina's sky-blue and white, and the inscription "El mano de Dios" -- the hand of God -- a reference to Maradona's notorious hand-assisted goal against England in the 1986 World Cup, his equipment maker confirmed.

Messi admitted he was in awe when Maradona called him after

Argentina won the Under-20 World Cup in the Netherlands, where the youngster scored six goals in seven games.

But he also insisted he did not face the same pressures as Maradona, whose career was later scarred by controversy.

"To have him as a friend is incredible," Messi told FIFA's magazine "Champions".

Messi has been nurtured by Barcelona since they snapped him up as a 13-year-old, when he was just 1.43 metres tall (four foot seven inches).

After receiving treatment to remedy a growth hormone deficiency, he made his senior debut for the Spanish side in the 2004-2005 season and became the club's youngest ever scorer aged 17.

He only made his debut for Argentina's senior team last August and flourished in Barcelona's Spanish title-winning team alongside Brazil's Ronaldinho this season.

"There was no jealousy at all, quite the opposite. Ronaldinho led the way," said Messi.

But he missed the final two months of the season after being injured.

He was also sent off in his first

match for Argentina after just three minutes on the pitch against Hungary, when he lashed out at an opponent following a clumsy challenge.

During training in Germany, Messi, his shoulders slightly hunched like a lazy teenager, stayed clear of the more boisterous play.

But where his undeniably skilled Argentine teammates needed two or three touches of the ball, the smiling teenager would casually use half as many.

His dribbling is hardly puritanical, however, and his close control is such that defenders find it extremely difficult to tackle him cleanly.

Messi's sponsor draped a huge picture of him on the side of a tall hotel block in Hamburg, a treatment otherwise reserved for more confirmed championship winners such as Arjen Robben, Zinedine Zidane, Raul or Oliver Kahn.

"We think he's a fantastic athlete. Although he hasn't played a lot, he has left a big mark on the field," said Adidas spokesman Thomas van Schaik, underlining that Messi was regarded as a long-term investment.

Croatia match sparks violence

AFP, Sarajevo

A man was seriously wounded by gunshots and six policemen were injured in clashes early Wednesday between Croat football fans and Muslims in an ethnically divided Bosnian town, police said.

The incident occurred in the southern town of Mostar shortly after midnight following Croatia's 1-0 loss to Brazil in their opening World Cup match on Tuesday night, police spokesman Srecko Bosnjak told AFP.

The violence flared after a number of Bosnian Croat fans of the Croatian national team gathered in downtown Mostar and started smashing cars and the windows of surrounding buildings.

A group of Muslims then began taunting the Bosnian Croats by celebrating Brazil's victory, before clashing with them, said Bosnjak.

A Bosnian Muslim man suffered serious wounds when fired at by an unknown gunman, while six of the special police officers who intervened sustained slight injuries, he said, adding 26 people were briefly detained.

Material damage caused by the incident was "enormous," Bosnjak said.

"We plan our activities in accordance with the World Cup schedule. Every Croatian match is a high risk event here," he said.

Bosnian Croats always cheer the national team of Croatia, which most of them consider as their homeland, while Muslims support Croatia's rivals.

No smoking on the bench



AFP, Berlin

Football is tense enough especially if your job depends on it, but Mexico's chain-smoking coach Ricardo Lavolpe has been firmly told that cigarettes are not the answer.

While FIFA have stepped in and declared that the 54-year-old Argentinian cannot be seen to be smoking on the touchline, his only option other than to quit is to be summarily dismissed to the stands where the spectators are allowed to puff on the old weed.

"We looked at the tape and in fact we realised he did smoke," FIFA's head of communications Markus Sieglar told a daily press briefing after reviewing the match between Mexico and Iran.

"An official letter will be sent to the Mexican federation underlining that neither the coaches nor anyone else on the sidelines is allowed to smoke," added Sieglar.

The present FIFA officials would have been aghast had they been around at the 1990 World Cup and witnessed Italy's Gianluca Vialli having been substituted lying below

the bench puffing away on a cigarette soon afterwards.

It is hard for a man like Lavolpe, who learnt from the master of the habit Cesar Luis Menotti as he sat with him in the dugout during Argentina's march to the 1978 World Cup title at home -- Menotti was captured endlessly on film lighting one cigarette after another.

Twenty-eight years on he has fallen prey to the permanent battle to stub out the habit that kills millions every year.

"It is a bad habit yes, but it is one that I indulge in and enjoy for my sins," said Lavolpe, who guided his side to an opening 3-1 victory over Iran in their Group D clash.

"It may be bad for you but hell it is not as if I am drinking on the job, which would make you incapable of performing your tasks. That would be a case for dismissal but smoking? I don't believe the last time I looked somebody had either been dismissed or arrested for being smoked out and disorderly," added Lavolpe.

Indeed some of his fellow World Cup coaches take an enlightened attitude to their players puffing away.

"Apparently it has not affected their health since they became top athletes and play for the national team," said

Croat coach Zlatko Kranjcar.

"But I don't see anything wrong if a player lights up a cigarette with a morning coffee."

And if FIFA were seeking medical advice on how to cut it out they should not consult Brazilian football legend Socrates, an alumni of the College of Surgeons in Dublin of all places but better known for his appearances at the 1982 and 1986 World Cups.

For a midfielder he must have had lungs of iron as he was as bad a chain-smoker as Menotti, but at least the latter only had to stroll around the touchline while Socrates rambled up and down the pitch.

"Did smoking affect my playing ability? I don't think so," said Socrates.

"I certainly don't imagine that people use that as an excuse for us not winning the World Cup in 1982 and 1986. Perhaps conceding silly goals to Italy in 1982 and the lottery of a penalty shootout to France in 1986 had more to do with it," he added. Ultimately Lavolpe has little choice in the matter and may follow the example of another former chain-smoking coach Johan Cruyff by sucking on lollipops, though, the great Dutchman gave up solely on medical grounds after a heart operation.

The cardboard fan

AFP, Baden-Baden

Three England fans and a cardboard cut-out were invited to the team's training camp in the Black Forest and it is a day they'll never forget.

For Michael Blake and three of his friends, a trip to Germany to watch the World Cup was a life-long dream.

But Michael died in a car crash near Liverpool last year, so his friends Scott Macmillan, Mick Killeen and Lee Maker decided to bring a life-size cardboard cut-out of their mate instead.

It caught the eye of Rio Ferdinand who when learning of their story invited them to the team's training camp at Buhlertal just outside Baden-Baden, normally out of bounds to everyone but accredited media.

There, Ferdinand, David Beckham, Owen Hargreaves and other England players chatted with the lucky trio, autographing the cut-out and their England shirts.

"We loved him so much that we couldn't go without him. We feel he's here with us now in Germany, living the dream. He drinks with us and even goes out dancing with us," said Macmillan, 27.

Killeen, 29, added: "His dad gave us his blessing to do this. Michael would see the humour in it."

More water for players

AFP, Berlin

Football's governing body FIFA have promised to give the 32 teams at the World Cup more opportunity to take in fluids to combat the searing heat sweeping through Germany.

"We will make more water available to the teams," FIFA media director Markus Sieglar said in Wednesday's edition of Die Welt.

England were furious at the regulations that prevented their players drinking water during breaks in their 1-0 group win over Paraguay and complained to FIFA.

FIFA regulations refused to allow the intake of fluids when the ball went out of play or when a player was injured, fearing the game would be disrupted on purpose to ensure regular water breaks.

Several teams have already cited the stifling heat as reason for their inability to maintain a high tempo in matches claiming they are dehydrated.

Gudjohnsen moving to Barcelona

AFP, London

European champions Barcelona reached an agreement Wednesday to buy Iceland captain Eidur Gudjohnsen from English Premiership champions Chelsea, according to the Spanish club.

Gudjohnsen has signed a four-year contract and will undergo a medical at the club on Wednesday.

A statement on the Barca website said: "FC Barcelona and Chelsea reached an agreement on Tuesday night for the transfer of the Iceland striker, subject to a medical on Wednesday."

"The club and the player have agreed in principle for the next few seasons. Gudjohnsen will take the place of Henrik Larsson, who has returned to his country."

It is thought the current Primera Liga champions will pay in the region of eight million pounds (14.7 million dollars) for Gudjohnsen.

The move was on the cards on Tuesday as the west London team gave Barca permission to talk to their striker.

"Chelsea Football Club has given permission for Eidur Gudjohnsen to travel to Spain for talks with Barcelona," a statement on Chelsea's official website claimed on Tuesday.

Iceland captain Gudjohnsen, had been an effective if often unsung performer with Chelsea since arriving at Stamford Bridge from Premiership rivals Bolton for four million pounds (7.35 million dollars) six years ago.

He made 263 appearances for the London club, starting 177 and coming on as a substitute in a further 86, and scored 78 goals.

But his path to a regular first-team spot was blocked by Argentina striker Hernan Crespo and Ivory Coast forward Didier Drogba in the last two seasons.

And since Chelsea's record signing of Ukraine's Andrei Shevchenko from AC Milan, it became increasingly clear that Gudjohnsen's first team opportunities would continue to diminish.

The 27-year-old Gudjohnsen won several winners' medals while at Chelsea, including two Premierships and a League Cup.

Becks wary of old mate



AFP, Baden-Baden

David Beckham is an old friend of Dwight Yorke and knows his game inside out, which is why the England captain is wary of the threat he poses despite being 34.

Yorke will captain Trinidad and Tobago against England on Thursday in Nuremberg and the English skipper knows it will be no walkover with his former Manchester United colleague rallying his troops.

Although the Sydney FC star now operates more in a midfield role than as a striker, Beckham says he needs to be stifled.

"Yorke is a good friend and has been for many years," said Beckham.

"He's not just a great person but one of the best players around. Yorke has always been a threat to any defenders, any team he comes up against."

"The time I spent with him at United was amazing, we won the Champions League, FA Cups, League Cups and the league."

"He was a huge part of that team and it will be nice to see him."

"He's a player you have to be aware of. A huge star, a player that all their players probably look up to

because of what he's done outside of his country."

Yorke bagged 64 goals in 144 games for United during a four-year spell that included him playing a key part in the 1999 treble-winning team, and the provider of many of them was Beckham.

As he has got older, Yorke has carved a new role for himself playing in defensive midfield, and anchored 10-man Trinidad and Tobago to a shock 0-0 draw against Sweden in their opening World Cup game.

Despite his advancing years, Yorke succeeded where many have failed by blunting the attacking edge of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Freddie Ljungberg and Henrik Larsson. He was voted man of the match for his steely performance.

Although they have three points in the bag after their less-than-convincing 1-0 win over Paraguay, England know they can't be complacent against the Caribbean islanders after witnessing Sweden's embarrassment.

"Trinidad and Tobago will be physically ready," said Beckham of the smallest nation ever to participate in the World Cup.

"The result against Sweden might have surprised some people but not me. They are a tough team and there will be a lot of respect on the pitch for us to them and them to us."

England appear set to start again with Peter Crouch and Michael

Owen up front despite the Newcastle forward's lack of match fitness that saw him wilt in the heat against Paraguay.

There had been speculation that Wayne Rooney could return, although it is now understood that Sven-Goran Eriksson is unlikely to play him.

Yorke is not fussed who takes the field, saying his side is ready for big teams like England.

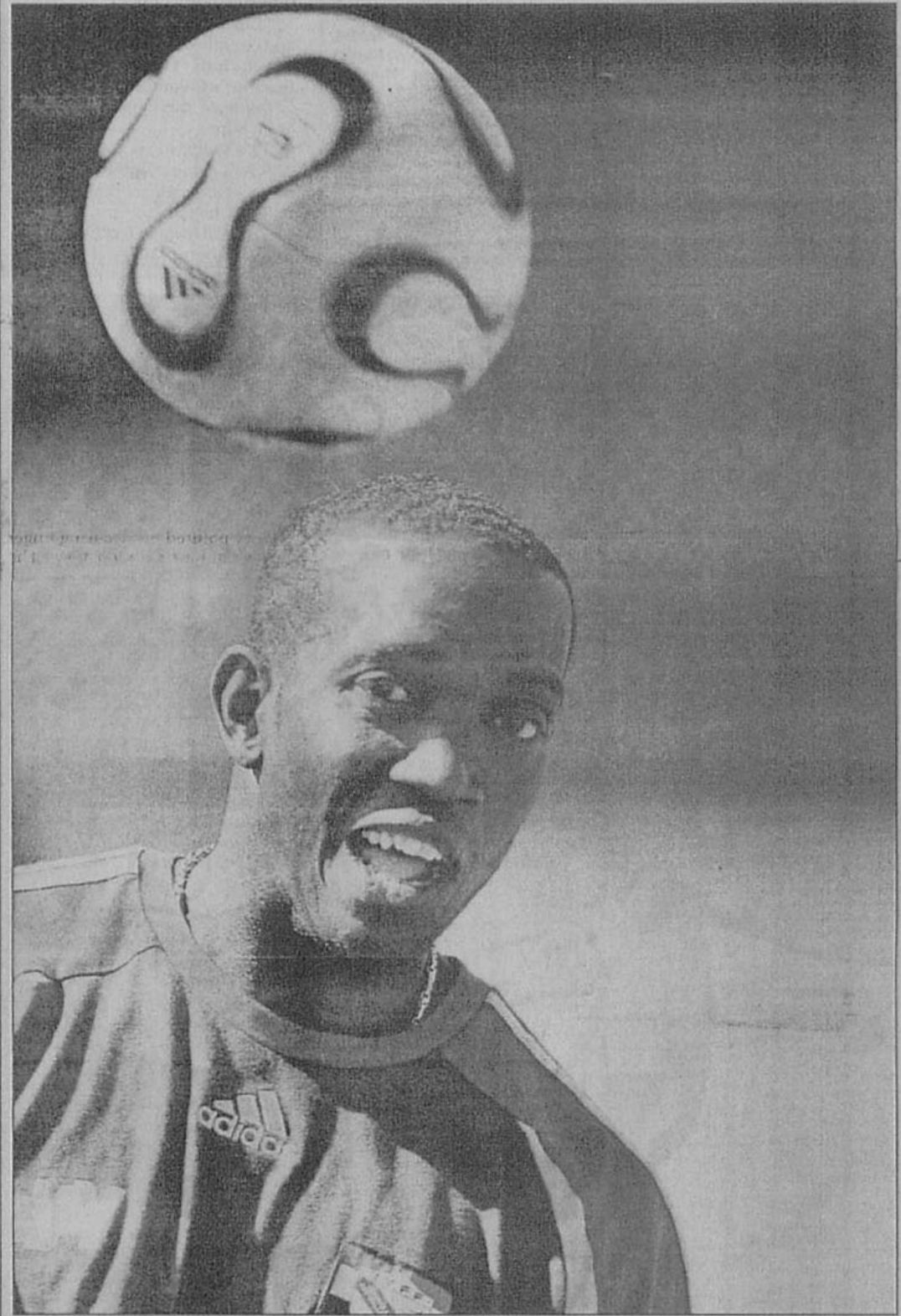
"The preparation was based on playing the best possible England team," Yorke told Sky Sports. "Of course Rooney is in that best possible team, everyone is talking about him, but whether he plays or not we're not too concerned."

"He deserves to be here because he's one of the most gifted and talented players in the world right now and that's what the World Cup is all about -- playing the best players in the best competition."

"Whether he plays or not though, I don't think that will affect our plans too much."

Trinidad's wily coach Leo Beenhacker, once in charge of mighty Real Madrid, says his side have shown they are not intimidated by facing superstar line-ups, and are ready for England.

"The Swedes played with strikers from Juventus, Arsenal and Barcelona. We had lads from Jablotche, Gillingham and Wrexham," he said.



Trinidad and Tobago striker Dwight Yorke looks focused in the training session ahead of the match against England.

PHOTO: AFP

A nightmare for 'keepers



AFP, Berlin

What's the biggest threat at the World Cup?

Ronaldinho's magical feet, Beckham's free-kicks or Henry's dazzling runs?

Ask any goalkeeper here and they are minor irritations compared to those being caused by the Teamgeist ball, whose revolutionary design has some of the world's best keepers bamboozled.

"You will see a lot of goals scored from 30m-35m at this World Cup," warned France's Fabien Barthez.

"And not just by those players who normally kick the ball the hardest. These balls are a catastrophe."

Germany's Torsten Frings was the first to show the ball's potential when he hit a screamer from around the 40-metre mark which veered away from its original trajectory and dipped right past a bemused Jose Porras in the Costa Rica goal last Friday.

The ball, designed by Adidas, has 14 panels instead of the 26 or 32 that

traditionally create the hexagonal pattern and Ken Bray, a sports scientist at the University of Bath in England, believes that makes the ball behave more like a baseball.

"With a very low spin rate, which occasionally happens in football, the panel pattern can have a big influence on the trajectory of the ball and make it more unpredictable for a goalkeeper," Bray said.

"Watch the slow motion replays on television to spot the rare occasions where the ball produces little or no rotation and where goalkeepers will frantically attempt to keep up with the ball's chaotic flight path."

USA keeper Casey Keller feels slighted by the establishment.

"Something is obviously going on with the ball. The rule changes in the last 20 years haven't been very goalkeeper-friendly. It might as well extend to the equipment as well. FIFA wants to see more goals," Keller said.

"It's a very light ball. The difference is only a fraction of a second but it's a big difference. This ball has a wobble. It's not an easy ball to catch. You are going to see times when a goalkeeper will overdrive because it will come back across."

He has now had first-hand knowledge of the problem with Tomas

Rosicky hitting a curler past him in his team's 3-1 defeat against the Czech Republic on Monday.

England's Paul Robinson says the ball is "goalkeeper-unfriendly".

"It's two pieces glued together. It moves a lot. It's light like a volleyball, and when it's wet it's even worse," he said.

Adidas, who supply the ball to the English, German and French leagues, have defended their product.

"It's also been used in the Champions League and no-one criticised it then," company spokesman Emmanuelle Gay told AFP.

"FIFA asked for a ball which would favour a good game as well as goals. The ball is rounder and smoother. It conforms to all regulations."

"If there had been a problem for a tournament as important as the World Cup, FIFA would have immediately come back to us. We are not worried. On the contrary, it's a World Cup with a lot of goals."

Not surprisingly, the strikers here are licking their lips in anticipation.

"With long shots, it floats and moves a lot which makes it difficult to read," said Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho.

"It's perfect for attackers."