

Ubiquitous Kaiser takes to the skies

AFP, Berlin

As a co-organiser and one, moreover, who has lifted the trophy both as player and coach German legend Frank Beckenbauer is keen not to miss out on any of the action.

So much so, that the man nicknamed 'The Kaiser' has taken to the skies to ensure he is literally ubiquitous as he takes in three matches a day.

Nearly a week into the tournament and Beckenbauer has been everywhere, criss-crossing the country in a helicopter at his personal disposal.

After attending the opening ceremony on Friday when Germany beat Costa Rica Beckenbauer took his seat alongside Britain's Prince William the following day for England's win over Paraguay in the central-southern city of Frankfurt.

Three hours later he turned up in the western city of Dortmund to see the goalless draw between Sweden and Trinidad and Tobago and the same evening he was in the northern metropolis of Hamburg watching as Argentina defeated Ivory Coast.

Sunday, he took in the match between 1974 final rivals Holland as they saw off Serbia and Montenegro in the eastern town of Leipzig and that same day saw Mexico beat Iran in Nuremberg in the south and Portugal edge Angola at Cologne in the west.

"Is that really always Franz - or does he have a double?" asked Bild daily.

So far, the paper says, the 60-year-old has clocked up 2594 kilometres - and there's still almost a month to go.

"I want to see at least every team once in the opening phase," explained the Kaiser.

"We're seeing a lot of Germany - and a lot of good football," he said.

A shrine of soccer

REUTERS, Stockholm

A Swedish man gripped by World Cup fever painted his whole house in the blue and yellow colours of the national flag while his wife was at work.

"I knew she would say no, so there was no point in asking her about it," Janne Pettersson said on Thursday.

"It was really fun to see her face when she got home."

He decided to paint the two-storey building, in a suburb of Stockholm, as a tribute to the Swedish team and win a newspaper competition for tickets to the World Cup final.

Sweden faces Paraguay on Thursday in its second game in the tournament's Group B and is in dire need of a win if it is to advance to the second round after playing a goalless draw with Trinidad & Tobago in its opening game.

Pettersson said his wife has told him he can keep the house emblazoned with Sweden's national colours as long as the national side stays in the tournament.

He said he was expecting a draw against Paraguay.

'Points are vital'

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Wesley Sneijder, largely ineffective against the Serbs.

"He is 100 percent fit," the coach said of van der Vaart. "It's very good for us because he is a big player. He is getting closer to the first eleven and that's only positive for the team."

Dutch aiming

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the Netherlands are the Ivory Coast strike force of Didier Drogba, Kone and Bonaventure Kalou.

"It's going to be a hard game trying to contain that trio," defender John Heitinga said.

"It promises to be a really tough game against their strikers but I think that if we play football we'll win."

Dutch coach Marco van Basten added: "They have a lot of good players, experienced players who play in big competitions in England and Spain so they are very strong."

"We saw their games in the African Nations Cup (where they lost in the final) and we know a lot about that. It will be a tough and very important game for us."

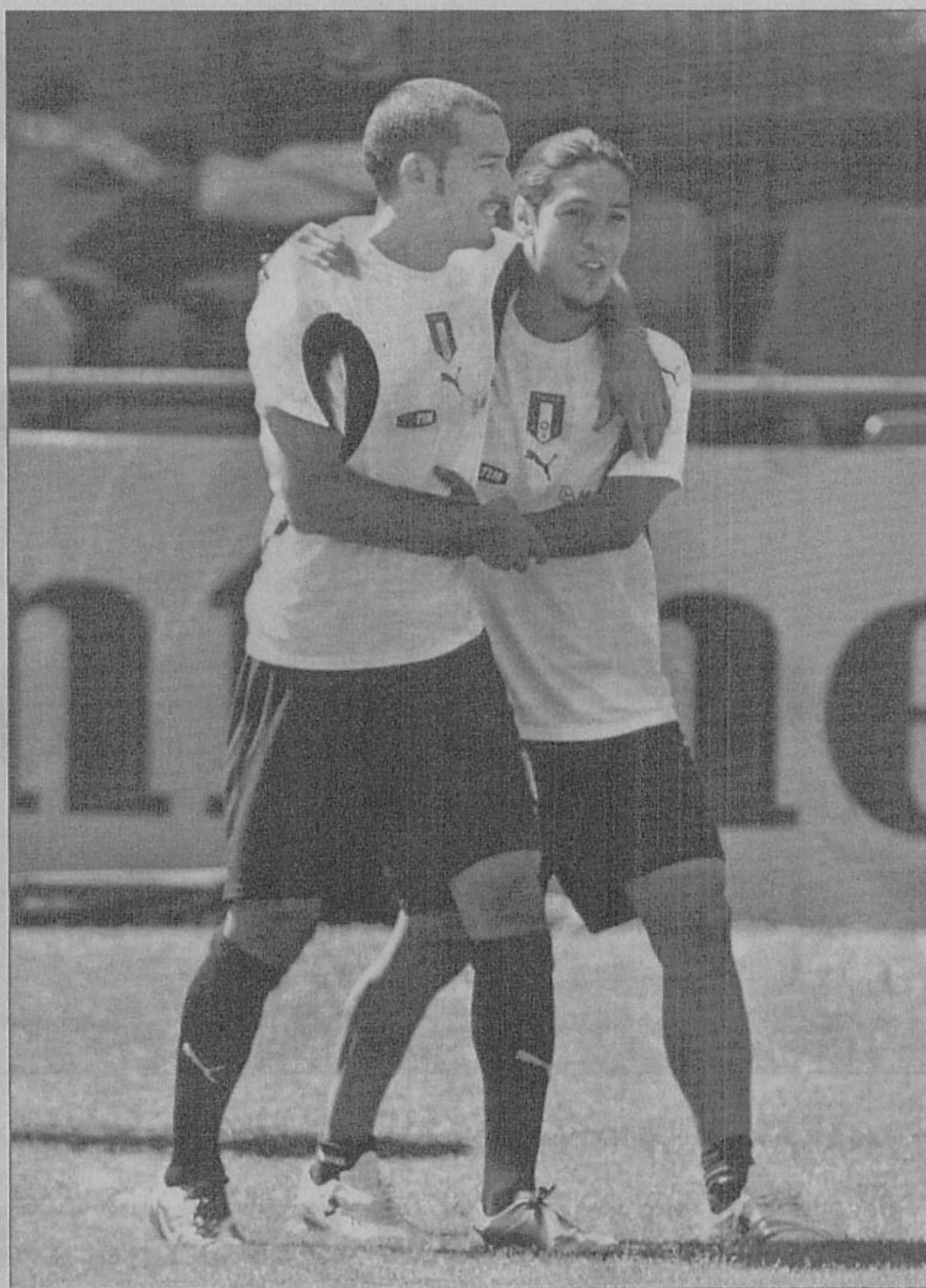
As for the specific threat posed by captain and Chelsea striker Drogba, van Basten was resolute.

"We know he's a very good player, very strong. And technically he can make goals."

"But we don't change everything for one player."

Concerns over the calf problem suffered by Dutch captain Edwin van der Sar during the Serbia match have been allayed, and the Manchester United goalkeeper will start against Ivory Coast.

And van Basten also hinted that influential Hamburg midfielder Rafael van der Vaart might be in line for a call-up, possibly at the expense of Wesley Sneijder, largely ineffective against the Serbs.



Argentine-born Italian winger Mauro Camoranesi (L) embraced by teammate Gianluca Zambrotta during a training session in Duisburg on Tuesday.

Mauro sparks controversy



AFP, Duisburg

Mauro Camoranesi's loyalty to Italy has been called into question after the Argentina-born midfielder explained why he doesn't sing the national anthem before matches.

When asked why he stands silently during 'L'Inno di Mameli', Camoranesi, who has dual nationality, replied: "I don't even sing my own. I don't know it (the Italian anthem), but my children sing it."

"The decision to play with this

shirt has been taken. At the World Cup I am Italian. It's not worth asking me if I would like to play for Argentina."

Born in Tandil, Camoranesi, who has Italian grandparents, moved to Italy from Argentina in 2001 to join Verona before securing a move to Juventus.

He won his first call-up for Italy in January 2003 and made his debut against Portugal on February 12.

Camoranesi's original selection for the squad caused outrage.

At the time, international goalkeeper Francesco Toldo said it could set a dangerous precedent.

Camoranesi's decision was made easier by Argentina coach Marcelo Bielsa's decision to omit

the player from his squad for a friendly against the Netherlands.

But Toldo said such manoeuvres should be kept to an absolute minimum.

"I'll say just one thing - Italy is for Italians," Toldo said.

"The team must be representative of its national identity. To give the shirt to a foreigner, even if he has an Italian grandparent, is a delicate situation and has to be properly evaluated."

Equally unhappy at the time was Italian star Roberto Baggio who was being tipped for an international recall at the time.

Baggio told the daily Corriere della Sera: "Leave me alone - I am going to play for Argentina."

Africa struggles to fulfil Pele prophecy



REUTERS, Hattings

Pele's 1990 prediction that an African team would soon win the World Cup has again been made to look wildly optimistic after what already looks to be another wholesale failure by the continent.

Four African teams were making their World Cup debuts this year but Ivory Coast, Angola, Ghana and Togo all began with defeats.

Only Tunisia, in their fourth tournament, were left to buck the trend when they play Saudi Arabia on Tuesday.

Pele made his bold claim that an African nation would conquer the world by the end of the century after Cameroon reached the last eight in 1990 before losing to England after extra-time.

However, in the next three tournaments only Senegal in 2002 matched that level of success, forcing the great Brazilian to row back and say that drastic investment was needed in the continent's infrastructure if they were ever to compete on a level playing field.

Senegal, who stunned holders France on their debut, eventually lost to Turkey but their progress masked the fact that Nigeria, Tunisia, South Africa and Cameroon all failed to get past the first round, mustering just two victories between them.

Four years on three of those traditional African powers failed to make it to Germany but, despite some encouraging performances in the first round, their replace-

ments look set for a similarly miserable return.

Ivory Coast arrived as probably the strongest of the Africans having reached this year's Nations Cup final, losing on penalties to hosts Egypt.

They can count themselves unlucky to have lost 2-1 to Argentina but with the Netherlands and Serbia & Montenegro also in the group, progress will be difficult.

Angola performed miracles even to qualify and looked completely overawed in the opening stages against Portugal when they conceded what turned out to be the only goal of the game.

They eventually settled the nerves enough to walk away relatively pleased - all they could have realistically expected from the tournament as a whole.

Ghana, four times African champions, finally made it to the World Cup after years of frustrating and sometimes mystifying qualifying failures.

They looked comfortably at home against the aristocrats of Italy and only after a late error by Sami Koufouri gifted a second goal did they lose heart in a 2-0 defeat.

Togo's farcical preparation was all too familiar for African nations at the World Cup and it was not a huge surprise to see them blow a 1-0 lead to lose 2-1 to South Korea.

Why Africa struggles to make an impact remains something of a mystery.

There is no shortage of talented players, many of them now plying their trade in Europe, and many African teams have been led by high quality coaches well versed in how to prepare for and handle a big tournament.

Tactical naivety, weak goalkeeping poor home pitches,

internal strife, individualism, lack of confidence and even an inferiority complex have all been put forward as explanations.

Perhaps when the tournament reaches South Africa in four years things will finally change.

Cine refuge for Bosnia wives

AFP, Bosnia-herzegovina

Bosnian cinemas are offering refuge to the wives and children of the country's football-mad men during the World Cup with a series of "soft" films.

A number of cinemas in the northwestern city of Banja Luka said they were putting on a special selection of romantic flicks and cartoons to accommodate the World Cup "refugees".

Although Bosnia failed to qualify for the tournament being staged in Germany, most men in Banja Luka, the administrative centre of Bosnia's Serb entity, are ardent supporters of Serbia and Montenegro.

Among the movies on offer for the women abandoned during the World Cup are "Casanova," a saga of the world's best known lover, a big-screen version Jane Austen's novel "Pride and Prejudice" and "Memoirs of a Geisha".

A series of cartoons were also being provided for children in the city, including "Ice Age 2".

"We've organised this so that husbands would be able to watch football games at home or in cafe bars without being interrupted," a cinema employee told AFP.

Due to strong demand, Banja Luka's many cafe bars have been forced to bring in extra television sets for the World Cup, which began on Friday last week and continues until July 9.

War easier than soccer

AFP, Warsaw

Polish football fans on Thursday lamented their side's 1-0 loss to Germany, with one supporter wondering on the Internet why Poland could "win a war against the Germans but not a soccer match."

That lament was one of many posted on Poland's biggest Internet portal, onet.pl, the morning after Poland's Group A outing in the World Cup against the host nation, Germany.

Germany largely dominated the match, and substitute Oliver Neuville slammed the ball into the 10-man Polish side's goal in the closing seconds.

"It was a pitiful spectacle. We were unable to create goal-scoring situations for ourselves. The big-headed coach, Pawel Janas, so utterly sure of himself, was a mistake from the very start," wrote another disappointed fan.

Others were less critical, and even admitted that the national side had put up a good fight against a tough opponent.

"It's a shame that they were so lax and laid back against Ecuador" who beat Poland 2-0 one of the opening matches of the Cup, posted another fan.

"To save face, we have to beat Costa Rica," that supporter wrote.

Former Poland coach Jerzy Engel praised the Polish squad for playing "as an equal partner" against Germany.

"Bartosz Bosacki and Ireneusz Jelen played very well, and goalkeeper Artur Boruc showed great class," Engel said in a post-match commentary on public television TVP.

But Janas was downbeat and pessimistic.

"That goal at the very end of the match robbed us of the possibility of continuing in the World Cup. I feel awful," he said.

Newspapers were not published Thursday in Poland, as the overwhelmingly Catholic nation marked the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Streakers in full flight

AFP, Berlin

The World Cup organisers said they were doing everything in their power to stop streakers or pitch invaders after young men ran onto the playing surface at two matches in two days.

A naked 19-year-old Tunisian man was the culprit at half-time of the Tunisia v Saudi Arabia game in Munich on Wednesday, the day after a fully clothed 20-year-old Croat disrupted his country's opener against Brazil at Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

"We have said there is no guarantee against this sort of thing," Organising Committee Vice-President Wolfgang Niersbach told a press briefing on Thursday.

"No one wants to see a return to fences around pitches, but we do not find this sort of thing funny at all."

He added: "The day one of them is holding a weapon, we'll say 'the fun is over'."

Niersbach clarified later that he was confident that security checks at the entrance to stadiums would prevent weapons being brought in.

The offenders were fined a sum roughly equivalent to their monthly income and banned from any other matches at the tournament.

FIFA spokesman Markus Siegler said: "We are satisfied that the Germans are doing everything they can."

A colourful

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less-than-spectacular performance against the Serbs, van Basten said the Manchester United striker may have been overwhelmed by the fact that he was making his World Cup debut in Leipzig.

"He wanted to prove himself and perhaps he was too eager. But he has always fulfilled his role as a striker well during training and I have no reason to replace him," van Basten said.

Michel, for his part, will once again field Didier Drogba at the apex of his attacking line-up.

The striker, on target against Argentina, is recovering from a minor ankle injury but should be fit enough to play on Friday.

In Stuttgart, he will be meeting his Chelsea team-mate Robben, the hero of the day for the Netherlands in Leipzig.

African defenders Emmanuel Eboué and Kolo Habib Toure will of course know all about van Persie's attacking skills as they all play together at Premiership side Arsenal while Arouna Kone is well versed in Dutch things as he plays his football with PSV Eindhoven, along with Dutch veteran Phillip Cocu and two other members of the Dutch squad.

Bonaventure Kalou, formerly at Dutch side Feyenoord, has been spared the trouble of having to play against his younger brother Salomon in Stuttgart after Salomon's application for Dutch citizenship was turned down ahead of the Germany 2006 campaign.

Siesta turns to fiesta



REUTERS, Madrid

Spain's impressive 4-0 demolition of Ukraine in their opening game of the World Cup finals on Wednesday has set expectations soaring back home.

Despite entering the tournament on the back of a 22-game unbeaten streak most Spanish fans were lukewarm about their side's chances in Germany.

Divisive debates about formations, whether or not captain Raul should play, and above all a feeling that they did not have enough firepower up front had even led coach Luis Aragonés to call for everyone to pull together behind the side.

But all that changed after David Villa scored twice and Fernando Torres and Xabi Alonso scored one apiece to give Spain a stylish win over the side believed to be their strongest opponents in Group H.

Thousands who had gathered to watch the match on screens set up in

Madrid's Plaza de Colon celebrated wildly after the win, singing "We are on our way to Berlin," while jumping in the fountains.

"We've seen Brazil, England, Argentina, Germany... and the result is that we are the best. Bet we win the World Cup..." said the front page of sports daily Marca on Thursday.

"You (the team) have left the world open-mouthed."

Aragonés received special acclaim for having chosen an attacking line up that saw the side play with three forwards in Villa, Torres and Luis Garcia, regularly leaving just two defenders at the back.

"It was the most offensive system Spain have played in recent years. The coach's choice was brave," said sports daily Sport.

"After the disappointment of Brazil against Croatia, Spain are now in charge of carrying the flag for beautiful football."

Sports daily AS likened Aragonés to Captain Ahab in his quest for Moby Dick.

"His obsession is starting to be ours now. It is starting from the players that for the first time that I can remember really seem to believe," said AS.

Gay icon CRon

AFP, The Hague

Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo has been anointed the pin up boy of the World Cup by Dutch gay magazine Gay Krant.

It is the second successive major championships that the Manchester United star has won the accolade.

While Ronaldo ended the opening 1-0 win over Angola on the bench shaking his head at coach

Luis Felipe Scolari's decision to take him off, his appearance certainly met with the approval of the 3000 readers of the twice-monthly magazine.

They judged the 21-year-old - who was also adjudged the finest male specimen at Euro 2004 - to be "the most beautiful, the most attractive and the sexiest" player at the showpiece event.

Sweden's Markus Rosenberg took second place in the poll of the



CRISTIANO RONALDO

Eriksson hails Aussies



AFP, Nuremberg

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson was impressed with Australia's performance against Japan and has tipped them to beat Brazil.

Australia scored three goals in the last eight minutes to silence Japan and their approach to the game won over the Swede.

"I didn't actually see the Australia game because we were training or travelling, but I heard that they played very well, and congratulations," said Eriksson.

"Can they beat Brazil? Yes, why

not. You have to believe it."

Australia take on the defending champions on Sunday in a highly anticipated clash following Brazil's less-than-convincing opening 1-0 win over Croatia.

Despite being ranked 42 in the world, Australia can take heart that they've beaten Brazil 1-0 in the 2001 Confederations Cup in Korea and had a scoreless draw with them in the 1997 Confederations Cup in Riyadh.

The Aussies go into the game with four players on yellow cards - midfielder Vince Grella, defender Craig Moore, two-goal hero Tim Cahill and striker John Aloisi, who got the third goal.

Eriksson said he would play them despite the risk that another yellow could rule them out of their third match against Croatia.

Juventus picks new board

AFP, Rome

Juventus, the Italian football club at the centre of match-fixing allegations that have plunged the country's top league into crisis, on Wednesday announced a new nine-member board.

While the club statement revealed only board members' names, the ANSA news agency said it was likely to be headed by 1982 world champion Marco Tardelli, 51.

The club's previous manager Luciano Moggi and his fellow board members resigned after the country's biggest football scandal, involving allegations of tainted referees, match fixing, gambling and falsifying financial records, erupted last month.

Tardelli, 51, played as a midfielder with the club from 1975 to 1985.

Others members of the board announced by the firm holding company, owner of the Fiat auto maker and Juventus, include Italian volleyball coach Gian Paolo Montali and Frenchman Jean-Claude Blanc, an ex-Tour de France cyclist.

sexiest team - otherwise known as the 'FC Hunks' which also was made up of England's Michael Owen and David Beckham and Dutch wing Robin Persie.

That might make up for his disappointment at being shoved out of the limelight on the pitch by Arjen Robben who fails to make it.

Another Premiership player and an Arsenal team-mate of van Persie's Sweden's Fredrik Ljungberg makes the list as does Brazil match winner Kaka, another goalscorer Fernando Torres of Spain, Liverpool FA Cup winner Jan Kromkamp of the Netherlands and Spanish captain Iker Casillas.

Ronaldo's United team-mate Ruud van Nistelrooy may be set to start against the Ivory Coast on Friday despite a below par performance against Serbia and Montenegro but he only makes the bench here.

Alongside him the Dutch striker finds Nelson Haedo Valdez of Paraguay, Italian icon Francesco Totti and Mexico's Oswaldo Sanchez.

Gay Krant featured the poll and its team of the tournament on the main page of its website alongside a small digest of football speak.

Korea's 'Vacuum Cleaner' out to suck up France



AFP, Leverkusen

The 'Oxygen Tank' wants to show he has more lung power than Claude Makelele and the 'Vacuum Cleaner' will be looking to sweep up the midfield threat posed by Zinedine Zidane and Patrick Vieira.

South Korean midfielder cum winger Park Ji-Sung, aka the 'Oxygen Tank', and Kim Nam-Il, alias the 'Vacuum Cleaner', could be central figures in the 2002 semi-finals Group G clash with France on Sunday in Leipzig.

The nicknames given to South Korean players by their passionate fans may not always translate that well but they are still quite revealing.

Manchester United's Park is known as the 'Oxygen Tank' because of his energetic style and seemingly endless reserves of stamina.

Midfield enforcer Kim earned his nickname for his cleaning-up job in the centre of the park during South Korea's glory run to the semi-finals of the 2002 World Cup.

Zidane knows all about Kim as he was shadowed by the Korean hard-man in a warm-up match before the last World Cup with the legendary French midfielder coming off injured after 38 minutes following some hefty challenges.

Striker Ahn Jung-Hwan, who hit the winner in South Korea's 2-1 victory over Togo on Tuesday, is known as the 'Lord of the Ring' due to his habit of kissing his wedding ring in celebration of a goal.

Ahn, the poster boy of Korean football who is married to a former 'Miss Korea', started the practice at the 2002 World Cup when his golden goal winner booted Italy out of the competition and the moniker has stuck.

The brash, blond-haired Lee Chun-Soo, whose viciously swinging free kick brought South Korea level with Togo, has been called a

lot of names by the Korean public because of his outspoken views but the nickname that has endured is 'Millennium Special'.

Lee, a favourite of South Korean coach Dick Advocaat, rose to prominence with some thrilling performances as a teenager in 2000 and the stage name was born.

Youngster Park Chu-Young, a former Asian Young Player of the Year, is known as 'Football Genius' by his adoring public.

The gifted youngster did not feature in the Togo match but Advocaat might use Park, who scored several vital goals in the 2006 World Cup qualifiers, as an impact player later in the tournament.

While most of the nicknames given to South Korean players are complimentary in nature, winger Seol Ki-Hyeon has been less fortunate with his alias.

He is called 'Seovaldo' because those that nicknamed him reckon that, in common with Brazilian star Rivaldo, he is not the prettiest footballer on the planet.