



A young Tunisian fan waves a flag during the African nation's training session at Saks Stadium in Schweinfurt on Saturday ahead of their match against Spain.

Poker faced Pekerman

INTERNET, undated

Jose Nestor Pekerman was an island of po-faced calm in the wake of Argentina's storming demolition of Serbia and Montenegro.

The tactician was pleased with the display given in Gelsenkirchen, highlighting the difficulty of playing a rival associated with more powerful football than was finally evinced against the Albiceleste.

"We resolved a match that promised to be very complicated against a rival of the footballing stature of Serbia and Montenegro", explained a sober Pekerman.

He also denied that the label 'group of death' had been overblown after the ease with which Argentina and Holland went through to the last sixteen with a game in hand.

"In the world of football all analyses are based on what's come before, then along comes the action and something other than what you expected occurs; which is one of the reasons that football inspires such passion. In the sense of historical results and confrontations the label wasn't unrealistic in my opinion", explained the taciturn tactician.

Pekerman went on to praise Lionel Messi. "The minutes he was given on the pitch gave us all a chance to enjoy his play; the public, his colleagues, the coaching staff...everybody" before a final word on the potential rival in the last sixteen. "It's a little premature to talk of rivals, but I must say that Mexico and Portugal are both very strong teams. Either of them will be difficult."

De Rossi apologises

AFP, Kaiserslautern

Italy midfielder Daniele De Rossi apologised for catching U.S. striker Brian McBride with his elbow in Saturday's 1-1 draw in World Cup Group E.

"I spread my arms and caught him," the 22-year-old De Rossi told reporters after being sent off in the 28th minute for an incident which left McBride needing three stitches under his left eye.

"I'm sorry. I certainly didn't want to hurt him and didn't want to give him an elbow, and I'm sorry for my team mates."

His colleagues rallied round De Rossi, who may receive a lengthy suspension.

Captain Fabio Cannavaro said: "When someone makes a mistake, they realise it straight away."

"But we mustn't crucify anyone. We're a tightly knit group. A mistake has been made and we'll learn from it."

Defender Alessandro Nesta said: "I feel sorry for him, he's a good lad. It's not easy to play in the World Cup when you're just a lad."

"He was probably too wound up with all the responsibility and that was the reaction. We're behind him."

Lippi makes excuses



AFP, Kaiserslautern

Italy are determined to make amends for their disastrous display against the USA by defeating the Czech Republic in their final first round match and reaching the World Cup's last 16.

The Italians were held to a 1-1 draw by Bruce Arena's battling side in a bad-tempered game here at the Fritz-Walter stadium on Saturday where three players were sent off - two for the US and one for Italy.

The result means that all four teams in Group E, which also includes Ghana and the Czechs, still have a chance of making the first knockout round.

A draw against the Czechs will be enough to see Italy through, but the Azzurri players want a victory to restore their battered pride.

"We've got to go for it and avoid making calculations," said tough-tackling midfielder Gennaro Gattuso.

"We must win, even if a draw is sufficient. It's dangerous playing

for a draw.

"We won't be hiding. It's time to keep our feet on the ground and let our football do the talking."

Alberto Gilardino, who put Italy ahead with a diving header only for Cristian Zaccardo to level the score with an own goal, was right behind Gattuso.

"Now we've got to beat the Czechs," said the AC Milan striker.

"It's a shame I scored the goal that opened up the match, only to end up with a draw. But we're still top of the group and our destiny is in our own hands. We can do it."

Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro insisted all was not lost.

"We've made life difficult for ourselves, but we can still do well," he said.

"Against the US we suffered a lot, but we have to stay focussed."

Italy coach Marcello Lippi blamed his team's lacklustre performance on tiredness.

"Obviously we expected a better result, but I feel we paid the price for the energy we used up in the Ghana match," he said.

Italy's Daniele De Rossi was the first player to be sent off, shown a straight red card in the 28th minute for elbowing Brian McBride in the face.

Pablo Mastroeni followed him

down the tunnel a minute before half time after clattering into Andrea Pirlo with a late lunge for another straight red.

The Americans were reduced to nine men a minute after half time when Eddie Pope picked up his second yellow card. It was only the fourth time in the history of the World Cup that three players had been sent off in the same match.

Italy were unable to make their numerical advantage count for the remaining 44 minutes and Kasey Keller pulled off two superb saves to deny Alessandro Del Piero as the US held on for a share of the spoils.

Keller picked up the man-of-the-match award, but paid tribute to his teammates.

"These guys bled today for our country and our team," he said. "I'm proud of everybody."

Italy's draw still left them top of the group on four points, followed by the Czech Republic and Ghana both on three and the USA on one.

Italy will qualify for the last 16 as group winners if they beat the Czechs.

The Italians will also finish top if they draw with the Czechs and Ghana fail to beat the USA.

'Refs favour superpowers'



REUTERS, Bad Duerkheim

United States coach Bruce Arena believes the world's established footballing powers still get an easier ride from match officials.

Speaking after his nine-man team held on for an epic 1-1 draw with Italy in Kaiserslautern on Saturday, Arena chose his words carefully but questioned whether Uruguayan referee Jorge Larrionda had been harsh on his players.

"It's natural, the powers in the game probably get a bit more respect on the officiating, it's not unusual in any sport," said Arena, who felt some of the Italian players had made a meal of certain tackles.

"One day the U.S. will get those calls in our favour. But we can't dwell on it, it is what is and I'm just pleased the way our guys responded in difficult conditions."

Italy's Daniele De Rossi was shown a straight red card for a blatant elbow into the face of Brian McBride after 28 minutes before Pablo Mastroeni and Eddie Pope joined him down the tunnel either side of half time.

"Eddie said he got the ball, it was a bit harsh," said Arena, of Pope's dismissal for a second yellow card following a tackle on Alberto Gilardino. "With Pablo's, I'm not sure if that was a straight red."

Of the 10 red cards shown in the tournament so far, only De Rossi's involved a player from football's traditional top table, and there could be little argument with the Italian's moment of madness.

The Americans also had a goal ruled out for offside in the most action-packed game of the World Cup so far and one which restored their reputation after the 3-0 mauling they suffered by the Czech Republic.

Not only that, it gives them a

realistic chance of reaching the last 16, providing they can beat Ghana in the final round of fixtures in what has become an intriguing group.

"I don't know if we lost our reputation against the Czechs, we lost to the number two ranked team in the world," he said.

"But we redeemed ourselves from day one, we are where we want to be. We wanted to be alive for the Ghana game and, who knows, four points might be good enough to get out of the group. We're gonna give it our best effort."

Ghana showed in their 2-0

victory against the Czechs on Saturday that they will be formidable opponents in Nuremberg.

However, Arena believes several of his players came of age against the Italians.

"Landon Donovan and DaMarcus Beasley were spectacular in midfield," he said. "Landon emerged today into the player we think he can be."

"He was spent at the end of the game the way he should be, he gave a great effort. I can't give enough praise to the players that wore our shirt today."



US coach Bruce Arena (R) and his assistant Glenn Myernick react against a referee's decision during their match against Italy at Kaiserslautern stadium on Saturday.

Take it game by game

AFP, Frankfurt

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari refused to get ahead of himself after taking Portugal into the World Cup knockout stages for the first time since 1966.

Scolari said Portugal would take it one game at a time after recording their second successive victory with a 2-0 win over Iran.

"It's only the second time Portugal has qualified for the second round in 40 years but we have to look at it game by game," he said.

"Against Mexico we can be calmer, we can rest some players and then we'll have to see what happens in the last 16."

"We always want more and we hope with today's performance, which was much more than against Angola, we might be viewed by our opponents as a team to be reckoned with."

Scolari would not be drawn on whether he would rather face Argentina or the Netherlands, who will fight it out for the top spot in Group C on Wednesday.

Portugal will play the runners up in that group if they are not beaten by Mexico the same day.

"I don't have a preference -- my preference is for Portugal to qualify," Scolari said.

But he said the Euro 2004 finalists, regarded as outsiders here, had the potential to spring a surprise in the last 16.

"All the teams are very balanced and very even, they're in good condition. There are five or six teams which I believe are the best, they might be playing very well but one day they can have an off-day and be eliminated."

"So there's no point in choosing, you have to play your game."

Deco, whose magical finish from 25 yards finally penetrated Iran's defence in the 63rd minute, said Scolari had drilled it into the team not to look too far ahead.

"Our objective was first to take each game one at a time. We won the first game, now we've qualified and following on from Euro 2004 we are just having to concentrate on one game at a time," Deco said.

"All the teams are balanced, I don't think any are above average but they're all playing at the same level."

Scolari joined Portugal after taking Brazil to the 2002 world title and has become their most successful coach, chalking up a record 29 victories and leading them to the Euro 2004 final.

They are now unbeaten in 16 competitive matches stretching back to February 2005.

Iran coach Branko Ivankovic said Deco's moment of class had been the difference between the two teams.

"It was an equal game between both teams until he scored a wonderful goal," he said.

"Exactly at that moment I was trying to make my substitutions to bolster the centre of midfield."

Professor's Failure!

AFP, Tehran

Iran's Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic was bombarded with criticism Sunday as the Iranian press unanimously declared him -- and not the players -- responsible for their limp exit from the World Cup.

"Awaiting Branko's tribunal," headlined leading sports daily Iran Varzeshi, which carried a stream of articles telling 'Professor' Ivankovic to "pack his bags" after two successive losses against Mexico (3-1) and Portugal (2-0).

"He has to be held accountable for all this extravagance and wasting of money," fumed the paper.

"Broken hearts, Branko to be sacked?" headlined another one of the football-mad Islamic republic's top sports newspaper, Khabar Varzeshi.

Even the mainstream Shargh newspaper joined in the chorus of criticism, branding Ivankovic a "cowardly coach whose name is smaller than even Iran's unknown players" -- although it also said Iran's players were "arrogant" and "ill-prepared" for the tournament.

The reformist daily Etamad-Melli called him "incompetent", arguing that "Iran's defeat was Branko's failure".

Ivankovic, who was Croatian assistant coach when they reached the 1998 World Cup semi-finals, took over as Iran coach after their failure to qualify for the 2002 finals and led them to the 2002 Asian Games title.

However his once bright star has dimmed as the press and fans have complained that he failed to vary his tactics and that each opponent knew what to expect.

Iran round off their campaign against African debutants Angola, who still have an outside chance of making the second round provided they beat the Iranians and already qualified Portugal beat Mexico convincingly as the Angolans have an inferior goal difference.

Cesc happy to play



AFP, Kamen

Arsenal's Cesc Fabregas left his fellow Spaniards bamboozled here Saturday two days before Spain bid to seal their place in the last 16 of the World Cup with victory over Group H rivals Tunisia in Stuttgart.

The teenage midfielder is however hoping to trade his impressive trilingual skills for more playing time as Spain look to build on their sizzling form which could lead them to the promised land of the latter stages.

Fabregas, one of the sensations of the English Premiership this season, was a pivotal part of Arsenal's charge towards the Champions League final in Paris where they were beat by his former club Barcelona.

But as the latest recruit to Luis Aragones' squad, the 19-year-old from Barcelona is only just finding his feet.

Fabregas was given a chance to prove himself after coming on as a second half substitute when Spain dismantled Ukraine 4-0 last Wednesday in Leipzig -- a result which has put them in with the contenders.

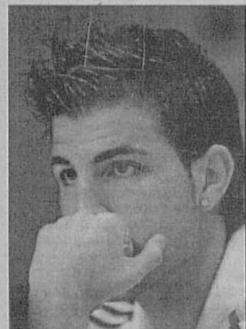
Speaking after their morning training session, Fabregas left teammates Sergio Ramos and Carlos Marchena, and the entire Spanish media, speechless when he first spoke Spanish, answered questions in near-perfect English and then waxed lyrical in his

regional tongue of Catalan -- which most Spanish cannot understand.

For most, it is no surprise. Fabregas is known for his language skills, and while living in London he combines his Arsenal career with studies in Economics.

The Spaniard would perhaps be tempted to ditch some of those qualities if it meant he could play a leading role in Aragones' side.

He admits his chances would improve if Spain, who are course to break their 56-year jinx of failing to get past the quarter-finals, keep hitting the net against Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.



CESC FABREGAS

"I think we just have to take things step by step. We had a great start and we're playing good football but we're not looking too far ahead," he told AFP.

"If we can win the next game it's always good for your confidence,

and then we can try to enjoy it as much as we can.

"But it's one step at a time. We have to concentrate on the next game so that we can finish top in the group. Then we can perhaps give some opportunities to other players in the team."

There's no point in fixing something that isn't broken, and so far Aragones' 4-3-3 formation looks to be running without a hitch.

Nevertheless Aragones has shown he will rest key players when possible.

Against Ukraine, he sent on Raul for two-goal hero David Villa in the 55th minute with David Albelda also replacing Xabi Alonso, who scored Spain's opener.

Fabregas made his World Cup entry when he came on for Liverpool's Luis Garcia for the final 23 minutes, an experience which, like the rest of his career, he appears to be taking in his stride.

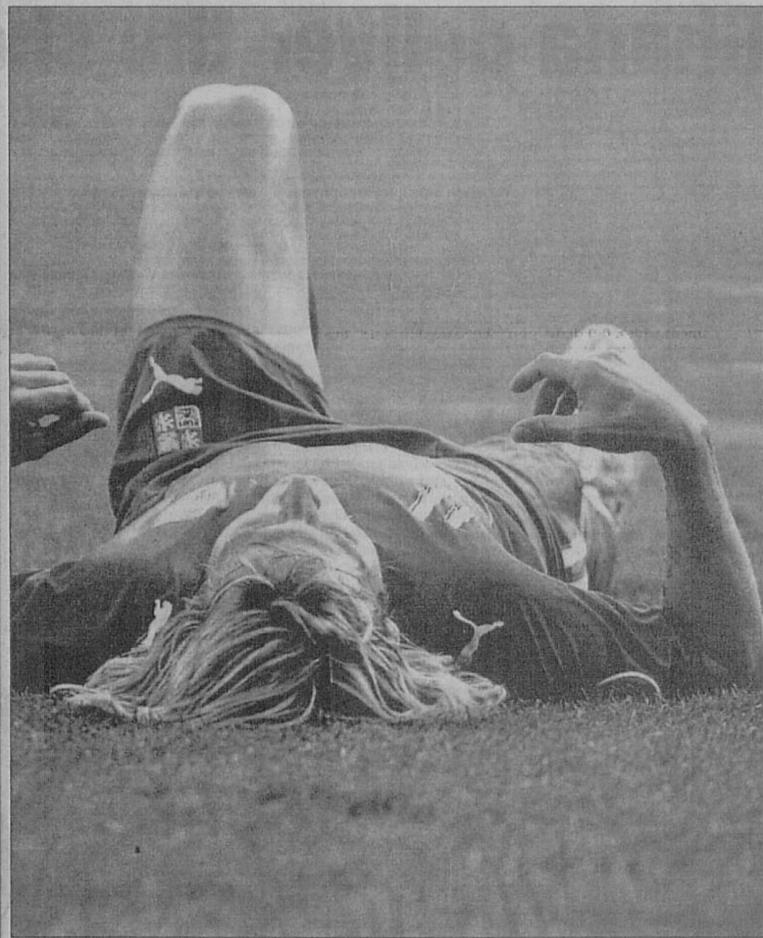
"We had a great match against Ukraine, but we can't allow ourselves to get carried away by one good result," he said.

On a personal note, Fabregas's chances of edging out any of Aragones' starting lineup may well depend on their goals rate.

And despite the possibility of being used elsewhere than the defensive midfield role he plays in at Arsenal, Fabregas said he is ready to adapt.

"It's sometime difficult to new systems or a new game, or switching from the left to the right," he added.

"But I'm happy doing what I'm doing now. It doesn't matter whether it's in an Arsenal style or a Spain style. I just want to play."



FALL FROM GRACE: Czech midfielder Pavel Nedved lies on the pitch after their 2-0 loss to Ghana in Cologne on Saturday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words. Includes a solution time of 25 mins and a small grid for CAT, HEN, BLUE, AMIGOS, SEWING MACHINE, ADS, TOONS, RON, MONA, REWS, STUNO, SPLES, PLUMBING, ASSE, AMO, KELLY, TUD, ROWLING MACHINE, NEWAGE HABIT, LAVER, IRIS, SER, CPA.

Cryptquip puzzle grid with letters K S F SKIPDU NKXD IFEU DFKIM SNCW FB KMIFBE BTFN MKXKIU, KM MDT F WFIPF -WKIICKBFKNT? Yesterday's Cryptquip: I JUST JOINED A LEAGUE THAT I USED TO BELONG TO. I SUPPOSE THAT MEANS I'M REMEMBERED. Today's Cryptquip Clue: S equals F

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.