



Ghana's mainstay Michael Essien walks past captain Stephen Appiah during a training session at the Kickers Stadium in Wurzburg on Monday.

Essien worry for USA



AFP, Nuremberg

Michael Essien is on the verge of leading World Cup stunner Ghana into the second round, the Chelsea midfielder having already convinced a worried US squad that he could destroy their Cup dreams. A victory over the Americans here Thursday in a Group E showdown would send the World Cup debutantes into the round of 16, possibly against reigning champion Brazil.

"It would be hard, but we are prepared for it," Essien said. "We're not afraid to meet the Brazilians. We are ready to play anyone. First we have to deal with the USA. They play good football and they will be

tough."

The 23-year-old star sparked Ghana past second-ranked Czech Republic 2-0 in the biggest Cup shocker so far, a landmark triumph for the Cup debutantes.

"It really shows what we are made of," Essien said. "The win was very important for Ghana and for African football."

A draw with the USA might be enough to send the Black Stars through, but with their destiny in their hands, Ghana players want to leave no doubts.

"We will go for a win against the US team," Essien said. "And our chances are good I think."

USA coach Bruce Arena agrees, seeing the control of Essien as a central factor in a game the 2002 quarterfinalists must win for any hope to advance.

"Essien is one of the top players in this tournament. He not only organised their attack, he played

well on defence," Arena said.

"He's a player who is brilliant. We can't let him do what he wants for 90 minutes or we're going to lose."

Chelsea paid 38 million Euros, the largest transfer fee for any African player, to bring Essien from French champion Lyon. Essien responded by helping Chelsea capture a second consecutive English Premiership crown.

Essien has the ability to orchestrate the backline and serve as the vital distributor on the attack, impressing US counterpart Landon Donovan.

"Essien is dynamic. He is the modern two-way player. He plays tough defence and he scores a lot of goals," Donovan said.

"He's going to hurt you if you're not aware of where he is all the time. So we're going to be aware."

While Ghana and the US squad have never played a full interna-

tional, they did meet in the 1999 under-17 world consolation final. Defender coordinator Essien helped Ghana get the best of attacker Donovan's US side to finish third.

Asked if he recalled Essien from the match, Donovan admitted, "No, I don't. But you can say I did."

Donovan might soon remember Essien as the man who sparked a poor African nation's side to a World Cup dream triumph over a team from one of the wealthiest and most powerful places on the planet to doom their Cup hopes.

Just ask Czech goalkeeper Peter Cech, who saw his own country's title hopes imperilled by his Chelsea teammate.

"Essien showed what a great player he is," Cech said.

A repeat performance could leave audiences dancing in the streets of Ghana.

PHOTO: AFP

Eriksson hails Ferdinand

AFP, Cologne

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson on Monday hailed Rio Ferdinand as the most elegant defender in the world as the Manchester United star prepared to win his 50th cap.

Ferdinand, an authoritative figure in England's back line alongside John Terry, made his debut against Cameroon in 1997 and has consistently proved cool under pressure and able to anticipate trouble.

"Rio is one of the most elegant central defenders in the world today," said Eriksson ahead of England's match with Sweden here on Tuesday.

"He's incredible, he's quick, a good header, good technique. He has everything and I'm very happy that he is playing like he is playing at the moment."

"Congratulations to him on 50 caps, it's a great number."

It has not all been roses between the two with Ferdinand dropped earlier this season after below-par performances for club and country.

He missed Euro 2004 due to an eight-month ban for failing to take a dope test at United's training ground.

Ribery eyes Lyon switch

AFP, Paris

France World Cup star Franck Ribery wants to leave Marseille and join French league champions Lyon.

"Lyon is clearly my priority for next season," the 23-year-old attacking midfielder tells Tuesday's edition of the Parisien newspaper.

"My wish is not to stay at Marseille next season. I dream of playing at a higher European level."

Ribery, who started the 0-0 draw with Switzerland but was demoted to the bench for the 1-1 draw with South Korea, made clear his desire to leave Marseille earlier in June with Manchester United also reportedly showing an interest in the player who had been tipped to make a major impression at the World Cup.

Marseille sports director Pape Diouf had claimed that Ribery would stay one more year at Marseille and that they have no intention of letting him go.

Ghana apologise for flag-waving



AFP, Accra

Ghana's World Cup team apologised on Monday after defender John Pantzil waved an Israeli flag to celebrate his team's goals.

Pantzil, who plays for Israeli club Hapoel Tel Aviv, celebrated both goals in Ghana's 2-0 win over the Czech Republic in Cologne on Saturday by pulling an Israeli flag out of his sock and waving it at the cameras.

Ghana team spokesman Randy Abbey said at the team's training base: "It was a thank you to his fans in the Israeli league."

"It was naive, he was not aware of the consequences of his actions. We apologise to everyone who felt offended by this."

"It was not an official message from the Ghanaian team. We do not represent Israeli politics or the politics of any other country. We are just here to play football."

Pantzil's action sparked a barrage of insults and furious reactions in newspapers in Egypt on Monday.

"The ignorant and stupid Pantzil, who spent 20 days in Egypt during the last African Nations Cup, plays for Hapoel," sports commentator Alaa Sadek wrote in the daily Al-Akhbar, explaining Pantzil's link to Israel.

"Egyptians supported the Ghanaian team all the way until the 82nd minute, and regretted it after the Israeli flag (waving)," screamed a bold red headline in the independent daily Al-Masry al-Yom.

The live commentator on the Arab satellite channel broadcasting all World Cup matches in the region abruptly cut short his trademark "goooooaaaaa!" when Pantzil brought out the flag.

"What are you doing, man?" the bewildered commentator said.

Some papers described 25-year-old Pantzil as a "Mossad agent", others said "an Israeli had paid him to do it" but the most elaborate theory was offered by the top-selling state-owned daily Al-Ahram.

Sports analyst Hassan el-Mestekawi said in the paper that

many Ghanaian players attend football training camps set up by an Israeli coach who "discovered the treasure of African talent, and abused the poverty of the continent's children" with the ultimate goal of selling them off to European clubs.

Football's governing body FIFA said they had taken note of the flag-waving and that although there was nothing in the rules to prevent it, they hoped not to see a repetition.

Egyptian football fans were equally rattled when the player produced the Israeli flag.

"We were totally supporting Ghana and we were so excited by how well they were doing," Ashraf al-Berri told AFP.

"We were screaming with joy, but the whole room went quiet when Pantzil took out the flag. We didn't really know how to react," he said.

Another fan, Osama Mohy, told AFP: "As an Egyptian I am very sensitive when it comes to Israel."

African champions Egypt failed to qualify for the World Cup finals.



Ghanaian defender John Pantzil's controversial celebration with the Israeli flag after their win against the Czechs on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

One for junior

INTERNET, undated

Adriano's first World Cup goal gave him the perfect gift to honour his first son, Adriano Junior, who was born in Rio de Janeiro 48 hours earlier.

Adriano scored with a left-footed shot from the top of penalty area in the 49th minute Sunday to help Brazil beat Australia 2-0 in Munich. The striker dedicated the goal to his son by doing the "rocking the baby" celebration along with other Brazilian players.

"It's an incredible feeling to become a father, and it's an incredible feeling to score my first World Cup goal," Adriano said.

The goal helped Brazil secure a berth in the second round.

Adriano has turned all his attention to his newborn son in the past two days. He even bought a notebook computer to be able to see the boy's pictures and communicate with his wife, Danielle.

"It's a big boy, very pretty," Adriano said on the Brazilian Soccer Confederation's Web site.

Adriano's celebration after his goal was similar to the one made by Brazil striker Bebeto in the 1994 World Cup in the United States following the birth of his son.

England's top fan chimes in

INTERNET, undated

British Prime Minister Tony Blair traded politics for soccer in a guest appearance on a call-in radio show for World Cup fans.

Blair advised that England's team needed to relax in order to be successful in upcoming matches.

"They just need to get out there and enjoy their football," he said Monday.

Asked about England's two unimpressive victories so far in Group B, Blair said: "If you don't play good football, then you won't win (the trophy) because in the end you're up against sides who are too good."

Blair was appearing on BBC Radio Five Live to take questions from callers to the "606" show.

Blair, a supporter of English Premier League team Newcastle, urged the country to support England in the time leading up to Tuesday's game against Sweden.

"At this stage the most important thing is we get behind the team," Blair said, warning that the Sweden match would mark "the first time we've had a really, really testing time from the opposition."

The prime minister believed England could win the tournament, and that the England players "only produce their best when they're up against it."

Called "Tony" by many callers to the show, Blair also praised the peaceful conduct so far of English fans at the World Cup.

Blair was asked if he would make sure the English got a public holiday if their team won the World Cup for the first time since 1966.

"I can't because there's a whole set of protocols you have to go through," he answered, before adding: "Let's win first."

Kewell cleared for Croat clash

AFP, Othringen

Liverpool striker Harry Kewell was Tuesday cleared by a FIFA disciplinary committee to play in Australia's crucial World Cup group match with Croatia for his full-time rant at the match referee, team officials said.

A team spokesman said FIFA dismissed the case against Kewell following his confrontation with German referee Markus Merk immediately after Australia had lost 2-0 to champions Brazil in Munich on Sunday.

FIFA head of communications Markus Sieglar said in Berlin Kewell had been cleared because of an "inconsistent report from the referee."

The Australian team, with legal input, submitted Kewell's side of the story, leaning heavily on the fact referee Merk refused to talk to Australian skipper Mark Viduka when approached during the game to explain certain decisions to him and his teammates, the team spokesman said.

Football Federation Australia (FFA) chief executive John O'Neill was delighted with the disciplinary let-off and looked forward to Kewell taking his place in the Australian squad for Thursday's showdown with Croatia in Stuttgart.

"The FFA and Harry Kewell are very appreciative of FIFA's careful consideration of our submission and are pleased that no action will be taken in relation to this incident," O'Neill said in a statement.

"As Harry said himself, the incident arose in the heat of the moment and was regretted by him."

"Harry has emphasised the respect he has for referees and the need for players to show this respect."

"The team can now look forward to the Croatian match with its full complement of players and we are now fully concentrating on the match ahead."

Crespo cools hype



AFP, Herzogenaurach

Argentina's veteran striker Hernan Crespo warned on Monday that "we've still not won anything," as he played down the euphoria of the 6-0 win over Serbia and Montenegro which guaranteed a place in the last 16 even before a Wednesday meeting with Holland.

The heady optimism following that success and the earlier 2-1 win over Ivory Coast "are part of the game but we are trying to stay detached from it all. The win over Serbia and Montenegro was very important -- but guarantees nothing," said Crespo, two goals to his name already at the tournament.

The Chelsea striker added that the two wins "do not change the way we are approaching things."

With Brazil struggling to find their form and Argentina on song the albiceleste are being talked up in some quarters as potential champions.

"Yes, we are playing very well but there's still a lot to do," said Crespo, who has bitter experience of two previously disappointing World Cup finals campaigns.

Coach Jose Pekerman has also been urging the squad to keep their feet on the ground.

Crespo's teammate Javier Saviola forecast that Argentina and The Netherlands would go all out for three points to win the group.

"The two teams are looking for a victory -- without speculating on who they will play thereafter," Saviola said.

A draw would see Argentina top the group, however, on goal difference and then play the runner-up of Group D -- either Portugal, Mexico or Angola.



Argentina forward Hernan Crespo speaks at a press conference in Herzogenaurach on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Football moving forward?



INTERNET, undated

Around the time of each World Cup a debate arises on how the new ball will affect the game, and also how refereeing directives will impact on the football. This time around, these tweaks have had varying degrees of success.

It's unlikely that any goalkeepers would agree, but the introduction of the new ball has added to the spectacle of the game, Torsten Frings' strike being the prime example in the opening match. As the new ball travels faster and also seems to maintain its speed for longer periods, we have seen many spectacular strikes hitting the back of the net. No longer is it necessary to have a hammer in your foot to blast it from 30 yards. As a spectator long-range goals are the kind that will make you jump out of your seat no matter who is playing. Thus the verdict on the new ball must be a positive one: more shots, more goals, more action.

The refereeing standards are, as usual, being met with a mixed

response. On the plus side, the majority seem to be very willing to play the advantage, and are avoiding the stopstart tendency that frequent free-kicks will lead to. The men in the middles also seem to have developed a keen eye for a diver, with a lot of play-acting being simply dismissed. Hence the game has been allowed to flow.

On the down side, common sense looks like it is no longer in the refereeing handbook. The impression given is that the letter of the law must be adhered to, and the situation at the time is irrelevant. We have seen numerous pedantic yellow cards when it may have been better to give the player a warning. Zidane's booking against Switzerland is an example of something totally unnecessary. Coupled with his yellow against the Koreans which was even more unfortunate, the viewers are deprived of the chance to watch the great man in action against the Czechs. The look he gave the referee in the Swiss game said it all about Zizou's disdain for the booking.

The so-called 'lunge' tackle has also fuelled great debate. The end result is that if a player makes a wholehearted attempt to win the ball with a slide tackle, a free kick is

given regardless of whether the ball has been won or not. It is almost like they are trying to stamp slide tackling out of the game altogether. A fundamental part of defending, the slide tackle gives a great deal to the sport. A player busting a gut to win the ball and putting his body on the line adds to the fires of a game. While taking the tackle from behind out of the game stopped players taking the man and then the ball, this is now a directive, which penalises a ball and man tackle. Protecting the players' safety is one thing but taking aggression out of the game is going too far. In 20 years time will they make all physical contact illegal?

One final point of interest is that there has been a distinct lack of penalties awarded in this tournament. This has been the knock-on effect of the new stance on diving, with referees not awarding penalties unless they are absolutely positive, similar to distribution of yellow cards to 'divers'. Togo were the unfortunate team against Switzerland where a stone-wall penalty wasn't awarded which would have changed the game completely had it been scored. Whether this is positive or negative for the game is debatable.

A global village of World Cup

AFP, New York

Three times a day, seven days a week, somewhere in New York, one of the city's myriad ethnic communities dances gleefully on the tables while another writhes in collective anguish.

The United States as a whole may be largely indifferent to the passions of the World Cup, but here at "the world's crossroads" every single team playing in Germany can claim a passionate pocket of expat support.

New York's demographic diversity is such that even Trinidad and Tobago -- the smallest nation ever to make it to the finals of football's biggest tournament -- boasts a substantial fan base.

And most of it was crammed six-deep, shoulder-to-shoulder in The Sugarane Bar in Brooklyn on Thursday afternoon, hoping for an upset against former colonial power England.

"This is the biggest thing ever for Trinidad," shouted Sheldon Bridgeman, a towering 38-year-old construction worker with a joyous disregard for what skipping a shift might mean to his employers.

"Do they mind? Who cares," he beamed. "I can find another job, but Trinidad might not get another World Cup."

For every game played in Germany, the scene in the Sugarane is replicated somewhere in New York, albeit with cultural variations.

Wildly gesticulating, caffeine-fuelled Italians cheer on "the Azzurri" at Fortunato Brothers Bakery in Brooklyn, Swedes toast their team with four different kinds of herring at the Good World Bar in lower Manhattan, and Czechs

knock back the obvious at the Bohemian Beer Garden in Queens.

Some gatherings are, inevitably, smaller than others.

At the In God We Trust African Restaurant in The Bronx, a de facto social centre for New York's Ghanaian community, Ahmed Belly, 20, punched the air as Ghana took an unlikely early lead Saturday against the Czech Republic and looked vainly around the empty dining room for someone to celebrate with.

"I don't think there was a lot of confidence we could win," he said with a sad shrug. "They should have had more confidence. They are missing something important here."

In stark contrast to Belly's lonely jubiliations, several thousand ecstatic South Koreans packed Manhattan's Koreatown along 32nd Street on Sunday to watch on a giant television screen as their team took on France.

"This is where the action is," said Byun Young, 49, who, along with his wife, son and daughter, opted to forgo the comfort of his couch at home for a hard, newspaper-covered square of sidewalk.

"We don't like to watch the game alone. Koreans feel more power when we are all together ... more strength," he said.

So large was the Korean gathering, that it even drew local politicians hoping to grab a slice of reflected goodwill.

"It's a great chance for the whole community to get together with spirit, emotion and pride," city councillor John Liu said as he handed out name cards with abandon.

"Today Koreatown is more Korean than ever," he added.

Across the East River in Brooklyn, opposing French fans crammed into the Bar Tabac bistro, only to leave dejected after Korea's last-gasp equaliser.

The bar's manager, Didier Chanteloup, believes the colour and passion surrounding the World Cup is finally starting to break down US resistance to the sport that dominates the rest of the globe.

"In Barcelona, you would only get Spanish fans and in Paris it would be nearly all French," Chanteloup said.

"In New York, there are so many different nationalities that each bar can adopt a different team."

"So you can't really avoid the cup here and even the locals are getting involved," he said.

New York-based football fans have benefited from the World Cup being played in Germany, which means group games being broadcast at 9:00am, midday and at three o'clock in the afternoon.

For the 2002 tournament in South Korea and Japan, most matches were shown in the middle of the night or very early in the morning.

All 64 cup games are being broadcast live on the ABC national network and ESPN sports network, as well as the Spanish-language Univision channel which caters to the big Hispanic population.

For Juan Pablo Munoz, newly arrived in New York from Ecuador, watching his team with a crowd of compatriots at the Lighthouse Tavern in Brooklyn, owned by a Costa Rican, is a bittersweet experience, tinged with homesickness.

"It's a way of being transported back home," Munoz said.

"It's like having a beer in Avenida Amazonas in Quito, where everybody goes for the football celebrations."