

A Korean apology

INTERNET, undated

South Korea goalkeeper Lee Woon-jae apologised to fans at home for not beating 1998 world champion France as he had promised.

"I'd like to say sorry to all the Korean people who are supporting us," Lee said after South Korea's 1-1 draw with France on Sunday. "I failed to keep my promise that we would get to the second round with nine points."

The 2002 semifinalists came into this year's tournament having never won a World Cup match outside South Korea. After a 2-1 victory over Togo and the tie with France, the Swiss and Koreans both sit atop Group G with four points. South Korea faces Switzerland on Friday in Hanover.

Lee helped preserve the tie against the French, stopping a point-blank attempt by France striker Thierry Henry.

The goalkeeper also got lucky late in the first half when the referee did not award a goal to Patrick Vieira, whose header Lee appeared to have pushed back into play after it had crossed the goal line.

"The game is over, it doesn't matter now," Lee said. "The main thing is that the referee said no goal and none of the players complained about it."

Abedi Pele

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underdogs. Pele, who won the European Cup with Olympique Marseille, said he would like to see the team remain quiet and focused and to do their talking on the pitch.

Ghana face a decisive encounter with United States in Nuremberg on Thursday and, if successful, they could play Brazil in the second round.

While not wanting to look too far ahead, former Ghana captain Pele said the world champions had not been entirely convincing in their first two wins over Croatia and Australia.

"But be careful," he said. "Brazil is Brazil. They go slowly and then they improve to the end so you have to be very careful."

"They have the greatest players in the world."

Pele is working as an ambassador for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Referee with

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"He's (Tomas) been a good friend of mine," said Viduka.

"When I came to play in Zagreb (in the mid-1990s) he and I were both on our own, his parents at the time were in a refugee camp of the (Balkans) war and we were living next to each other and hanging out every day," Viduka recalled.

"He's very special and I am very happy for him that he's going to be playing because everyone wants to play in the World Cup, but I will be going out there to win."

Asked if Kranjcar was trying mind games by pitting Tomas against him, Viduka responded: "Robert Kovac got two yellow cards and it was a situation to put in a replacement and he's (Tomas) a good defender, there's nothing more in it."

Viduka, who has only scored six goals in 35 internationals, said it will be a cherished moment to score a goal against Croatia to help Australia progress in their first World Cup finals in 32 years.

"It will be quality, personally for me. I obviously know all the players in the Croatia team and it would be a personal pleasure to score, put it that way," he said.

"This is what we've been waiting for a long time in Australia to be playing in the World Cup and we have a real good chance of getting through to the next round."

"There's always that thing where a lot of them (Croatians) think that we should lean a little bit towards them, but that's not the case at all, we want to go out and really show that we can really play football."

Simunic has

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against us, but unfortunately he's playing.

Simunic, 28, said he had no regrets on spurning Australia to play for Croatia.

Asked whether some Australians might resent his taxpayer-funded training at the Australian Institute of Sport, the Hertha Berlin defender said: "That doesn't interest me."

"I'm a professional," he said. "I'm here to get into the second round and hopefully make history. I've got to put that out of my head for 90 minutes."

"I chose to play for Croatia because I feel I am Croatian," he said. "It was a dream of mine as a kid."

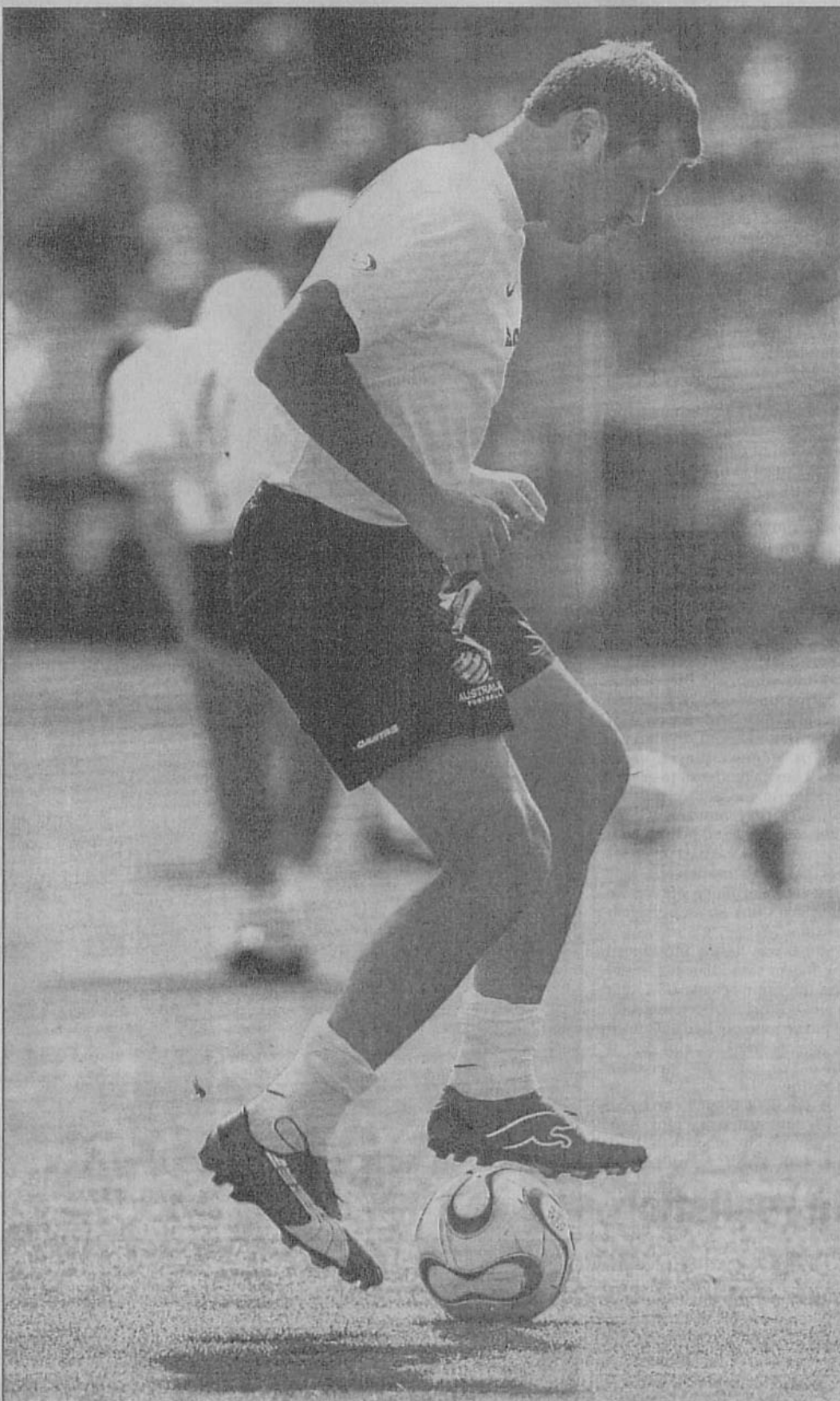
"I'm very proud I was born in Australia and grateful for the upbringing I was given in Australia. The fact this game is against Australia is destiny."

Croatian coach Zlatko Kranjcar told reporters Kewell's availability made no difference to his game tactics.

"He wasn't on my thoughts and combinations because I always considered he would play anyway," Kranjcar said.

He said the fact both teams had Australian-born players was not an issue.

"For me, it's only a football game. Croatia against Australia, and nothing more."



Australia forward Mark Viduka steps on the ball during a Socceroo training session in Ohringen on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

A battle of friends



AFP, Sydney

Australia's Croatian community says it can't lose in the crunch World Cup match between the two countries on Thursday because the Soccerooos are stacked with players of Croatian descent.

Soccerooos captain Mark Viduka heads the six Australians with Croatian ancestry who are hoping their performance will see them become the first team from Down Under to reach the second round at the World Cup.

Lining up against them will be a Croatian team which boasts three players who grew up in Australia.

The ties go even deeper because Viduka -- who as a teenager dreamed of playing for Croatia and was wooed by the country's then president Franjo Tudjman to play for Dynamo Zagreb in the 1990s -- may be marked by one of his closest friends from those days, defender Sijepan Tomas.

Australia's Croatian community, estimated at 200,000, is viewing the deciding World Cup match as a "win-win" situation whatever the outcome.

"It doesn't really matter (who wins)," said Australian Croatian National Hall spokesman Paul Saric. "We've decked out the club

rooms with the red, white and blue and also the green and gold. We are sort of a bit undecided on who to go for," he told AFP.

"I suspect our hearts are for Croatia but living in Australia, we support (the Soccerooos). I am personally going for both."

Saric said the Croatian community, like other ethnic groups in Australia, could be proud of its role in growing the sport in a country where the traditions of cricket and rugby are much stronger.

"We are really proud of all that," he said.

But the community's involvement, particularly in junior teams, means that some of the Soccerooos played here as juniors alongside the very footballers who will form their opposition in Thursday's Group F match in Stuttgart.

Socceroo midfielder Josip Skoko and Croatia's Joey Didulica both played for the Croatian community's North Geelong team as juniors, Saric said.

"Josip Skoko... continued playing for Australia but Joey thought his chance of playing in the World Cup would be better (if)... he went to play for Croatia," Saric said.

Bob Barisic, manager of the Croatian Club in Sydney, said he expected most of those who came to his club to watch the match would support Croatia. But he agreed that the crowd would also have a soft spot for the Soccerooos.

"I was so happy they were in the same group, I thought it would be

fantastic. But now it's terrible," he said.

Australia must at least draw with Croatia to advance to the round of 16, after losing 2-0 to Brazil in their second game. However, Japan could upset the table in the unlikely event they beat the South American champions by two goals.

Viduka, who now plays for English side Middlesbrough, has said Australia will be playing to win, despite the team's close links to the Croatian side.

"I am Aussie through and through, mate," he said Tuesday.

"The national anthem on Sunday (against Brazil) was great. I was in heaven, seeing the Munich stadium in green and gold was fantastic."

But the close links between the two teams and their common Croatian heritage could be used as a psychological tactic during the game.

Asked whether Soccerooos with Croatian backgrounds could be accused by their rivals of being a "traitor" on the field, Australia's coach Guus Hiddink said: "Yeah, it can be -- I don't know, I don't know."

"But I think nowadays patriotism is not that rigid anymore as it was, let's say, five or 10 or 20 years ago," he told Australian broadcaster ABC.

"I think the world... has become more international and there's more understanding there in various nations. I don't see that as a big problem."

club bosses opted for Capello. "I'm very aware of what happened in 2004 and I don't want to go through that again," he said. "I'm always cautious, I've always functioned in this way both in my playing career and as a coach. As long as nothing has been signed yet..."

Meanwhile, the anti-corruption judge investigating Italy's match-fixing scandal handed his report to the Italian Football Federation's (FIGC) disciplinary tribunal prosecutor on Monday.

The 180-page report will form the basis of prosecutor Stefano Palazzi's case, with the five implicated Serie A clubs Juventus, AC Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio and Sampdoria facing possible relegation if found guilty.

'Put me in please'

INTERNET, undated

Being at the World Cup is a memorable experience, but not playing once you arrive can be frustrating.

"I'm very disappointed, obviously, like anybody would be," said Australian midfielder Josip Skoko, who has yet to get into a game. "I'd like to get some time out there. I think I deserve a go. I think I've played well in the games leading up. I think I've done enough to get a little run."

Goalkeeper Zeljko Kalac is also waiting to see his first World Cup experience.

"I'm still hopeful," he said.

"I was very confident that I was going to play against Brazil, as well, and then I had to take another uppercut across the chin," he added. "It's part of my life. You always go into the team talk and go, 'Come on, say my name, say my name.' And it doesn't happen. You take the knockout and you pick yourself up, brush yourself off and get out there and train like I've been training and keep hoping."

Kalac knows that the players who don't make it onto the field are still playing their part.

"All 23 players here are involved in this tournament, involved in getting us here in some way or another," he said. "Just because we don't go out on the park, it doesn't mean we're not involved."

Kalac, who plays in Italy for AC Milan, was able to offer teammates advice on Inter Milan's Brazilian striker Adriano. Not that it helped, though.

"I kept on saying to them 'Don't let Adriano get on his left foot, don't get it on his left foot.' And the one time he got on his left foot, he scored," he said. Brazil beat Australia 2-0 on Sunday.

Croatia firing

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anyone would be," he said Tuesday. "I would love to get some time out there."

"I think I have deserved a go, I think I've played well in the leadup games and done enough to get a little run, so it's been disappointing in that sense."

"It is frustrating not to know until just before you get out there (whether you are in the team), but in another way it's good as well because it keeps everyone on their toes."

Africans dream

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team that left McBride bloody in a physical confrontation that saw three ejections.

"I'm rooting for Italy for the rest of the week. As far as I'm concerned they are the nicest guys in the world," Donovan said. "If it's 4-0 for Italy at half-time, I would probably want to know. If not, don't tell me."

If the Czechs draw Italy, the Americans must win by at least four goals to advance over the Czechs. If the Czechs win, the US team must win with at least five goals, and three more than Italy makes, to advance over the Azzurri.

"The amount of goals we score is probably immaterial," Arena said. "Whatever the scenarios, we have to win."

We need

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Gennaro Gattuso is determined to prolong his stay in Germany.

"We need to go through at all costs I'm not going home at this stage," said the AC Milan hard man known as 'The growler'.

"We respect the Czech Republic, but we're not scared of them."

'Be realistic'

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At the European championships in Portugal two years ago they were eliminated in the first round from a group that included Denmark, Sweden and Bulgaria.

Two years earlier at the 2002 World Cup, Italy were bundled out in the last 16 by South Korea.

In fairness to the Italians, their preparations for this World Cup haven't exactly been ideal.

A wide-ranging corruption scandal erupted in Serie A during the closing weeks of the season with four teams - Juventus, AC Milan, Fiorentina and Lazio - accused of match-fixing.

The alleged rigging of games during the 2004-05 season allegedly involves club officials, referees, high-ranked federation staff, and players' agents.

This has added to the pressure on the Italians, but if omens are anything to go by they may go all the way to this year's final.

Cristian Zaccardo scored an own goal in last Saturday's draw with the US, and in two previous World Cups when an Italian has scored an own goal, Italy have reached the final.

Fulvio Collovati put through his own net in a 1-1 draw against Peru in the first round at the 1982 World Cup, which Italy won.

And in 1994, Antonio Benarrivo was similarly embarrassed in Italy's 2-1 win over Spain in the quarterfinals. Italy lost the 1994 final against Brazil on penalties,

Brueckner praises Italians



REUTERS, Westerborg

Czech Republic coach Karel Brueckner praised Italy's defensive play on Tuesday ahead of their World Cup Group E match. "Their defensive play, especially 20 or 30 metres from their box, is very good," Brueckner told reporters. "Italy are definitely the strongest opponents (in the group)."

Struggling with injuries and suspensions, the Czechs will not be at full strength for Thursday's game, which they need to win to guarantee qualification for the knockout stages.

But on Tuesday they received a boost with the return to training of injured striker Milan Baros and the

news that he could be fit for the match.

A tough gap to fill will be that left by suspended defender Tomas Ujfalusi, whose Serie A experience would have been useful against the Italians. Brueckner acknowledged two obvious choices of replacement but would not say whom he would pick.

"(Radoslav) Kovac and (Martin) Jiranek have equal chances of playing," he said.

In an effort to lift the team's spirits after Saturday's surprise 2-0 loss to Ghana, influential forward Vladimir Smicer, who pulled out of the squad with an injury before the tournament, came to Germany to cheer them on.

"I will be helping the guys to change the atmosphere a little bit because they had a big disappointment after the Ghana game," he said at the training ground.

Yorke looks back in despair



AFP, Kaiserslautern

Trinidad and Tobago talisman Dwight Yorke said he was still in the dark over his future after the West Indians' dramatic exit from the World Cup on Tuesday.

Leo Beenakker's tournament romancers lost their final Group B clash to Paraguay 2-0 thus failing to score a goal or win a game on their historic debut.

After a relatively disastrous first half in which they conceded an own goal from the head of defender Brent Sancho, Trinidad emerged fired up for the second half.

But after continually forcing Paraguay on the defensive through smart, incisive play down the flanks, Beenakker's motley crew of mostly lower league players could not find an opening and Paraguay's second goal came in the dying minutes.

While globally disappointed at their impending return home, the Caribbeans are more upset about not winning a game or scoring a goal.

Sydney FC striker Yorke, who only returned to the national setup in February after a four-year absence, has enjoyed glory nights in Europe with Manchester United having won the famous treble in 1999.

And he was among the first to admit: "It's a massive disappointment for us. It has been successful for the country but from a team point of view we would have liked to score a goal and certainly would have liked to win a game."

"That would have made the campaign a huge success." England were leading Sweden 2-1 during the second half and that prompted Beenakker to bring on the lively 38-year-old striker Russell Latapy who is still playing professional for Falkirk in Scotland.

His vibrant play, coupled with the probing of Kenwyne Jones continually pressed the Paraguayans back, however T and T still could not find the net.

Yorke added: "We knew about

the score at Sweden v England and that prompted the manager to make some changes and turn the formation around a bit, and it made sure we stayed in the game."

"That was the key to it, obviously whoever got that second goal was going to win the game."

Yorke admitted his first World Cup experience had left him speechless.

But after months of focusing on the country's biggest football challenge to date, he will only think about both his club and international future once he has gathered his thoughts and fond memories.

Gambling arrests in Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

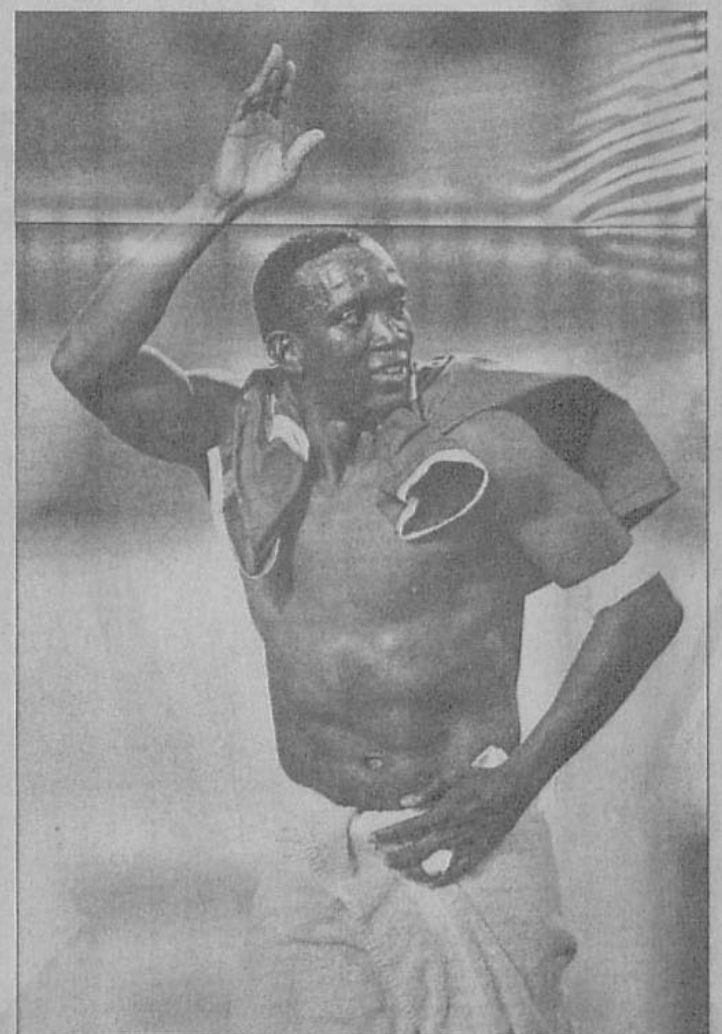
More than 300 people have been arrested in Thailand for illegal gambling on football matches during the first 11 days of the World Cup, police said Wednesday.

Since the June 9 kick-off in Germany, 361 bookies and gamblers have been arrested over bets valued at more than 185 million baht (4.8 million dollars), Colonel Pinit Maneerat said.

Police have deployed 100 anti-gambling squads to curb illegal betting, which has sent many bookies running across the border to Cambodia to handle the wagers.

Despite the crackdown, Thais are expected to bet one billion dollars during the World Cup, according to a leading research center.

The matches, broadcast live in Thailand late at night, have also taken a toll on religious life at some northern temples, according to local newspapers.



Trinidad and Tobago forward Dwight Yorke waves to the fans after their loss against Paraguay in Kaiserslautern on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

Relying on a secret weapon



AFP, Berlin

With England's striking options set to be seriously curtailed by the loss through injury of Michael Owen their last 16 rivals Ecuador sent a potential shock on Sunday.

The South American minnows, having reached the second phase for the first time, say they have a secret weapon in Ulises de la Cruz, their seasoned defender who has made almost 100 appearances for Aston Villa in the English Premiership over the past four seasons.

"We're making Ecuadorian football history and our aim is to stay in this competition for a long time," said Luis Suarez, the squad's Colombian-born coach.

"It will be an advantage that Ulises knows many of the England players. He can give us some information regarding some of their individual qualities and we can make use of that," says Suarez.

Another Ecuador star with Premier experience is Agustin Delgado, though the veteran

striker's two-and-a-half years with Southampton saw him start barely a dozen games owing to a catalogue of injuries.

Nonetheless, "El Tin" scored nine goals in the qualifiers which saw Ecuador come in third behind Brazil and Argentina, both of whom were beaten on the way, while both giants had to make do with single-goal wins on their own home soil.

Although Germany wrapped up Group A with a 3-0 stroll on Tuesday that was against a virtual second-string Ecuador line-up and Suarez says the result should not lull England into a false sense of security.

"I think it will be a tough match in the last 16. We know England. I believe England have one of their best teams for a long time."

"We will have to be more aggressive and keep the ball better. Perhaps for next Sunday's match we can play better. I think we can learn from these mistakes. We made a lot and do not want to repeat them again," Suarez said after the German reverse in Berlin.

"We must remember what we did right in the first two matches," he added in looking back to a 2-0 win over Poland and a 3-0 success

over Costa Rica, games which saw Delgado and Carlos Tenorio twice on target.

Suarez, hoping for great things from midfielder Luis Valencia of Villarreal -- hailed as a future star but loaned out to Huelva in Spain mid-season -- also said he was wise to the fact that England "are strong in the air."

"So we will have to be wary and make sure they don't take an early lead."

Though the South Americans have never played England in a competitive match they did lose a 1970 friendly in Quito 2-0 in the days when England were defending world champions.

Many of the Ecuadorean players hail from the Chota valley, one of Ecuador's poorest regions around 150 kilometres (100 miles) north of Quito and whose residents are predominantly of black African descent, their ancestors brought there as slaves in colonial times to work in sugar plantations.

Delgado himself and De La Cruz both hail from the vicinity and if they can help to see off former champions in England one of the most romantic stories in recent World Cup history would be complete.