

AUSTRALIA V CROATIA An ancestral showdown

AFP, Stuttgart

Skipper Mark Viduka had an abiding suspicion that Australia's improbable qualification for the last sixteen at the World Cup would come down to the final group match with Croatia here on Thursday.

The Australians, who have been a revelation in Germany under the inspired coaching of Guus Hiddink, have beaten Asian champions Japan and put up a strong showing against world champions Brazil. But for them to reach the knockout rounds they must get past Croatia, the 1998 World Cup semi-finalists.

The mathematics are simple: a draw should be enough to join Brazil in the second round, but this is an emotionally-churning time for many in the Australian camp as they prepare to finish off their outstanding work and take their place in the next phase.

Six of the Australian squad trace their roots back to Croatia and there are three players in Croatia's squad who were raised in Australia and groomed their football at the taxpayer-funded national sports institute.

It is a particularly poignant match for Viduka, who in the early 1990s as a 17-year-old had the walls of his bedroom at the Australian Institute of Sport decorated with posters of the greats of Croatian football. His bedsheets bore the emblem of his favourite club, Hajduk Split.

At 19 he was spirited away from Australia by the then president of Croatia Franjo Tudjman to play for Dinamo Zagreb, where he played four seasons before moving on to

Scotland and England.

Now at 30 Viduka, the Middlesbrough striker, is to lead Australia against Croatia for what would be a high-water mark in Australian football, a place in the last 16 of the World Cup.

His father was born in Croatia, Viduka played for Croatia Zagreb, his wife Ivana is Croatian and he answers questions in Croatian at press conferences for Croatian reporters.

But there is no doubt where Viduka's allegiance lies on Thursday in Stuttgart.

"I am Aussie through and through, mate," Viduka 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."

With Croatia's experienced defender Robert Kovac, suspended for the crunch game, Viduka will likely be marked by Josip Simunic, who was a team-mate of his at the Croatia-backed Melbourne Knights before he opted to represent his parents' place of birth.

TEAMS

Croatia (3-4-1-2)

1-Stipe Pletkosa, 13-Stjepan Tomas, 7-Dario Simec, 3-Josip Simunic, 2-Darjko Srna, 5-Igor Tudor, 10-Niko Kovac, 8-Marko Babic, 19-Niko Kranjcar, 17-Ivan Klasnic, 9-Dado Prso.

Australia (4-5-1)

1-Mark Schwarzer, 7-Brett Emerton, 2-Lucas Neil, 3-Craig Moore, 14-Scott Chipperfield, 13-Vince Grella, 5-Jason Culina, 4-Tim Cahill, 23-Marco Bresciano, 21-Mile Sterjovski, 9-Mark Viduka.

"It was always going to be the case with Croatia," Viduka said. "We hoped against Brazil we might have got a result and it wouldn't have happened that much but it was always going to be the case that the last game was going to be very important for us."

"I think when you go out to look for a draw usually you lose, in my experience anyway, but our team doesn't know how to play for the draw, we just go for it."

"We're confident that we can go into the Croatia game and make a good result for us to go forward."

Croatia, following their goalless draw with Japan last Sunday, are two points behind Australia so they must win to leapfrog them into the knockout round.

Australian followers were apprehensive about their chances after Croatia's impressive opening 0-1 loss to Brazil, but Croatia's media lamented that their national team looked tired in the Nuremberg heat against Japan where Darijo Srna missed a 21st-minute penalty.

Croatia's coach Zlatko Kranjcar says his team will be "more effective against Australia."

"We have the strength, knowledge and morale for these three points," he said Monday.

Australian assistant coach Graham Arnold believes Croatia is a mirror image of the Australian team.

"I think you can't get two teams with any closer playing styles at this World Cup," he said.

"We both have big physical strong players, we both have technically good players, huge work-rates, so we're very similar and it will be a very difficult game."

Simunic has no regrets

AFP, Bad Breckenau

Mark Viduka and Harry Kewell represent half of the Australian team at the World Cup such is their huge influence, Croatia's Australian-born defender Josip Simunic said here Tuesday.

Kewell was cleared by a FIFA disciplinary committee Tuesday to play in Thursday's crucial World Cup group match with Croatia in Stuttgart.

A FIFA inquiry into Kewell's on-field berating of German referee Markus Merk straight after Australia had lost 2-0 to champions Brazil last Sunday found that there was an "inconsistent report from the referee" in relation to the incident.

Australia need only to draw with Croatia to reach the last 16 provided Japan does not produce a big win over group leaders Brazil in Thursday's other game.

Simunic is one of three Australian born-and-raised players who chose to play for Croatia rather than Australia in their formative footballing years.

"Mark Viduka is a great player and a great person," Simunic said of his former Melbourne Knights club-mate.

"Harry Kewell, there's not too much to say. He's shown he's a great player."

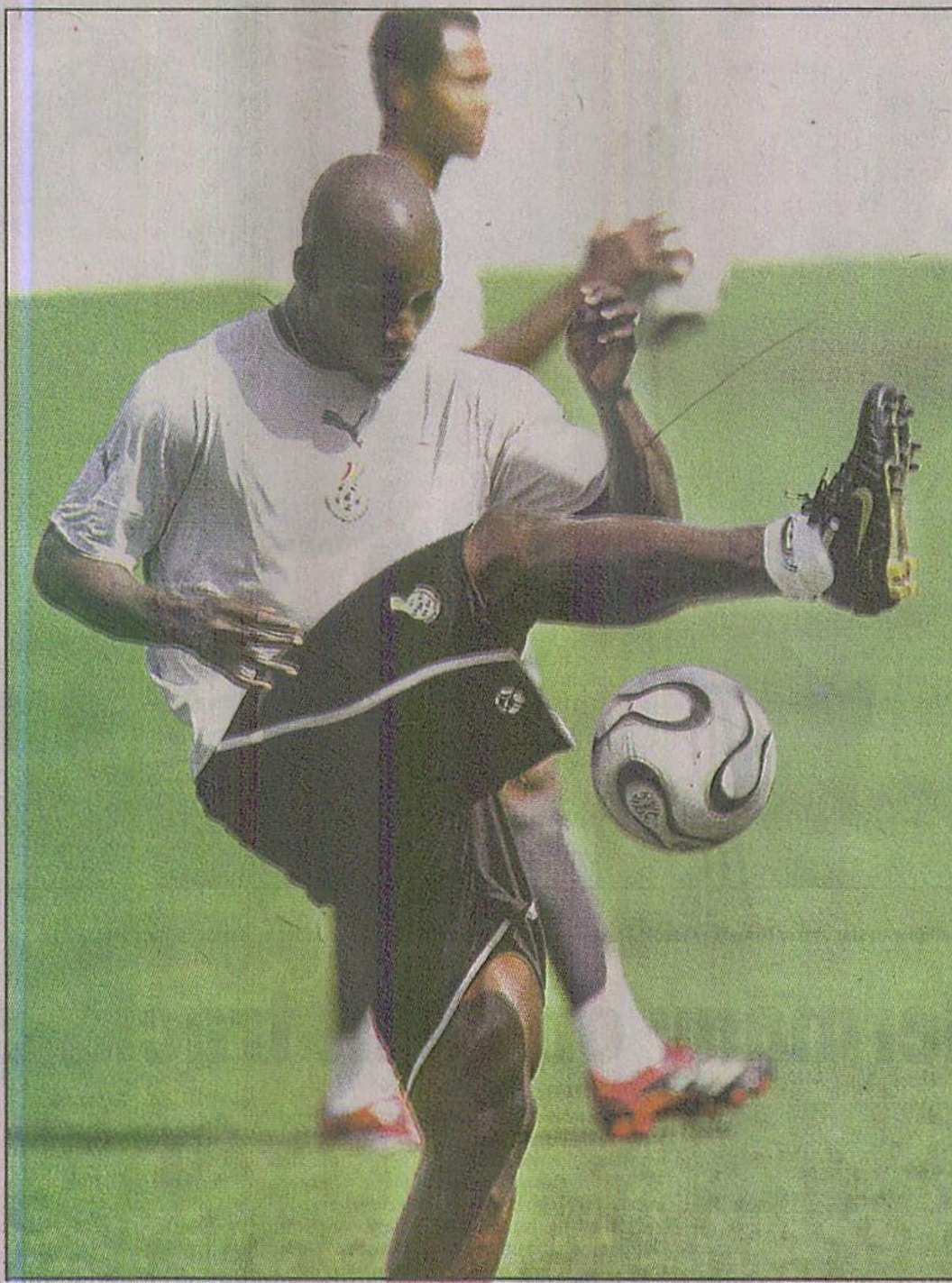
"Both these players are half the side."

Simunic, who telephoned Australian team technical director Ron Smith offering congratulations after Australia qualified for the World Cup by eliminating Uruguay last November, said he was unhappy Kewell had been cleared to play against Croatia.

"I'm unhappy that he's playing," Simunic said. "If he had done something wrong, he would have got a fine or something. He didn't get a fine so it couldn't have been that bad. Rules are rules. FIFA didn't ban him."

"I would rather he didn't play

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ALIVE AND KICKING: Ghana captain Stephen Appiah kicks the ball during the team's training session at The Kickers Stadium in Wurzburg on Tuesday ahead of their crunch World Cup Group E match against the United States today.

Referee with common sense!

AFP, Ohringen

Captain Mark Viduka has appealed for common sense refereeing from Englishman Graham Poll in Australia's potentially stormy World Cup clash with Croatia which will decide a place in the second round.

The Aussies were incensed by the officiating of German Markus Merk in their 2-0 loss to Brazil last weekend, culminating in Harry Kewell being cleared by a FIFA disciplinary committee Tuesday after angrily confronting the referee at full-time.

With progress to the knockout phase of the tournament at stake, Viduka believes the Stuttgart game on Thursday with the Croats could be highly emotive.

Poll has a reputation of communicating with the players during his games, but Viduka urged him to referee with intelligence.

"I hope it won't be a rough game, it don't think it will be, but there is a lot of stake for us on Thursday night and for them," Viduka said Tuesday.

"Sometimes these games can get fiery, everybody wants to win, we both want to win and a little bit of common sense is needed."

Referring to last Sunday's Munich match where Merk pulled the Aussies up for 25 fouls against only nine for Brazil, Viduka said: "Sometimes fouls are given for silly little tackles."

Viduka, who is one of six players in the Australian squad with Croatian family heritage, said Thursday's match would be very special.

"It's a very special game because first of all we can go further in the World Cup, secondly, obviously because of my heritage, but for me the most important thing is (the team) going forward to the next round," he said.

Croatian coach Zlatko Kranjcar has signalled that he will use Stepan Tomas to mark Viduka with first-choice Robert Kovac suspended.

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GHANA V USA Africans dream big

AFP, Nuremberg

Ghana's shock World Cup upset of the Czech Republic has put a bit of a fright into the US team. That's music to the ears of the Africans' 60-year-old coach, who wants the Americans to suffer Thursday.

Ghana, which stunned the second-ranked Czech Republic 2-0 after losing to Italy, will reach the group of 16 with a victory here in a Group E match. The US team comes off a 1-1 draw with Italy and must win for any hope to advance.

"Ghana was miraculous in the way they turned their game around. That in itself is frightening," US coach Bruce Arena said. "They have momentum and confidence."

Something else the Black Stars boast is quickness. Sparked by dynamic Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien and captain Stephen Appiah, World Cup debutante Ghana could send the 2002 quarter-finalist squad flying home.

"Hopefully we can deal with their team speed. That's my biggest concern," Arena said. "One thing we don't want to do is have a foot race with Ghana for 90 minutes. If we do, we're going to lose a lot of

those races."

Ghana coach Ratomir Djukovic, a Serbian who calls this the most important match of his life, said Arena is right to be concerned.

"They have to worry. The USA will suffer because we are strong and we are not afraid of anyone," Djukovic said. "Ghana is young and tough. We won't play for a draw. We always play offensive football and we play to win."

That's especially true when

inspired to win for all of Africa over a US team that, for all its land's riches and advantages, faces a tough task to defeat a much poorer nation.

"It would be fantastic for us," Ghana's Derek Boateng said. "We're looking forward to that because it's very important for us and the whole country, the whole of Africa."

Should upstart Ghana finish second in Group E, reigning champion Brazil is the likely foe in the round of 16.

"We are ready to play anyone. We're not afraid to meet the Brazilians," said Essien. "First we have to deal with the USA. They play good football and they will be tough."

"Every one of our players would give their lives for a win over Brazil," Djukovic said. "We're certainly not going out there to play in a half-hearted way."

The Americans, who have managed only a single shot on goal in two matches, will rely on teamwork to contain Essien, a masterful defence organizer who can quickly spark a scoring threat with a long ball.

"Probably the only thing that is going to neutralize him is us keep-

ing the ball. He's equally good offensively and defensively." US forward Brian McBride said.

"No matter how good a player Essien is, if we put one person on him at a time it's going to affect him. We need to work on him as a team, put a lot of guys on him and work together."

Due to yellow card suspensions, Ghana will be without their scorers from the Czech match, Sulley Muntari and striker Asamoah Gyan, whose second booking of the Cup came for taking a penalty without referee consent.

"I'm sorry to miss the game," Gyan said. "It's a historic moment for Ghana."

US defender Eddie Pope and midfielder Pablo Mastroeni also will miss the match because of card suspensions.

"The cards are excessive," Arena said. "It's just too much. They have taken some good players out of some games."

The US team advances if it beats Ghana and Italy wins, the simplest scenario and one that has US star Landon Donovan cheering on a

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WHAT MORE UP HIS SLEEVES? Australia's Dutch coach Guus Hiddink (C) instructs something to his charges during the Socceroos' training session in Ohringen on Monday.

Aim for the goalpost!

AFP, Hamburg

Anyone can find the goals on either end of a World Cup pitch. They have white posts and a net on the top, sides and back. Players often crowd around the front. Teams poke a football inside to score.

Well, most teams do.

The United States have managed only one shot on goal in two matches, a 3-0 loss to the second-ranked Czech Republic and a foul-filled 1-1 draw with mighty Italy where an own goal allowed the Americans to sustain hopes of advancing.

"We're not shooting a lot of balls on the goal," US coach Bruce Arena said. "Other teams have taken advantage of these chances better than we have."

The US squad must defeat Ghana on Thursday in Nuremberg to have any chance of reaching the round of 16, but the Americans have been unable to threaten opposing netminders through two games much less nudge home a goal on their own.

"We would always like to score more goals and we're going to need them for the Ghana game," US

forward Brian McBride said. "We need to be smart, pick our chances to go forward. When the opportunity comes we have to go for it."

"It takes the opportunity, the right mindset, sometimes a bit of luck and how you strike the ball."

The Americans have also fallen behind in both matches, ensuring a tougher test for their attack.

"When a team gets an early goal it sits back," McBride said. "When the ball gets in the box we need to loosen them up a little bit. That's one of the things we need to do."

The US squad has faced two of the world's toughest teams in the only group with no team either assured of advancing or elimination. Two ejections against Italy kept a nine-man US team on the defensive most of the second half.

Having faced Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech of the Czech Republic and Italian netminder Gianluigi Buffon of Juventus was another key factor in US players sending shots high and wide.

"We're facing some pretty good goalies," Arena said. "When you look at these goalies cut down the angles, you tend to be more precise with your shots... We've just been wide."

"What we need to do in game three is just get some shots on goal and test the keeper."

Arena also emphasized the importance of crossing passes in the US attack to counter the quickness of Ghana and set up scoring opportunities.

"That's important. We need to do a better job of that," he said.

US players have landed three shots in each match atop the goal. Going over the crossbar is great in American football but worthless at the World Cup.

"Our players are in a mode to create chances. I don't think we have a psychological block to looking at the goal," Arena said. "I think we will show up and make our opportunities Thursday."

Ghana advances with a victory and even a draw would eliminate the Americans, who must win and have Italy win to ensure a spot in the round of 16. The US team will lose most goal-difference scenarios without a big scoring day.

"Our focus has to be on winning the game," Arena said. "We can't manufacture three, four or five goals. The starting point for us is to get three points."

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Abedi Pele proud of Ghana

REUTERS, Wurzburg

Abedi Pele, one of Africa's finest footballers and the inspiration behind Ghana's team for more than a decade, said he was proud to see the Black Stars finally competing at the World Cup.

Attending a training session with Ghana on Monday, the three-times African Footballer of the Year said he had waited a long time to see his country perform at the finals.

"We were waiting to see Ghana," the 43-year-old told reporters.

"We've seen Cameroon and others like Tunisia and Morocco and we were waiting for Ghana. Now Ghana have not disappointed anybody."

The West African nation qualified for their first World Cup after 11 previous attempts.

Drawn in Group E, they were beaten 2-0 in their opening game by Italy despite dominating for long periods and then stunned the highly-rated Czech Republic 2-0 on Saturday.

"We have a very wonderful team," he said. "We have a team which is very young and very determined to go far in the World Cup but at the same time I want us to be

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Croatia firing blanks: Kalac

AFP, Ohringen

Croatia's failure to score so far at the World Cup is unsettling them and given Australia a mental edge in their World Cup decider, Aussie goalkeeper Zeljko Kalac said Tuesday.

The Croats lost 1-0 to Brazil in their Group F opener and midfielder Darijo Srna missed a penalty in last Sunday's 0-0 draw with Japan.

Guus Hiddink's Aussies are two points ahead of Croatia and a draw in Thursday's match in Stuttgart should be enough to get them into the last sixteen.

Kalac, who is one of six Australian squad members with Croatian backgrounds, said he hoped the 1998 World Cup semi-finalists' scoring blanks will last just one more match.

"Probably they have a little bit in their heads why the ball won't go in for them and how are they going to get over the top of these Australians who run and work all day," said the AC Milan shot-stopper.

"Yeah, a mental edge is always good to have."

"They are a very good side and it's normal that they are going to create a lot of chances but let's

hope they don't create much and don't score."

Kalac along with midfielder Josip Skoko, another Aussie with Croatian heritage, are hoping they can make their first playing appearance at the World Cup after being ignored by Hiddink.

"I'm still hopeful, there's still one more match in the group stage and you never know what can happen in football," said Kalac, the understudy to Mark Schwarzer.

"I've trained hard to keep myself fit and ready and anything can happen with this guy (Hiddink), he might think certain players can make a difference and throw them in."

"I was very confident that I would play against Brazil, but I took another upper-cut on the chin, it's part of my life, you always go into the team talk and say 'come on, come on, say my name' and it doesn't happen and you take the knock-out and you pick yourself up and dust yourself off and get out there and train like I've been training."

It's a similar story with the experienced Skoko, who scored a cracking winning goal against Greece in a leadup match in Melbourne last month.

"I am very disappointed like

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EMERGENCY EXIT: America defender Jimmy Conrad comes out of a window after he found the front door locked to attend his team's final training session at HSV Norderstedt on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP