

Royal divisions

INTERNET, undated

Like most other Argentines Princess Maxima was eager to catch her national team's game at the World Cup on Wednesday. Unlike her countrymen, however, the royal faced divided loyalties as the Latin American dream team battled it out against the Netherlands, the land she adopted on her marriage to Crown Prince Willem-Alexander in 2002.

At the stadium in the German city of Frankfurt Maxima was excused from sporting Dutch colours and tactfully refrained from turning out with any hint of Argentine blue in her outfit. Willem-Alexander had no such qualms, wearing a tie in the traditional orange hue of the Netherlands, and a football scarf over his suit.

In the princess' native country football is regarded as more important than life itself, so competitive passions between the normally loved-up duo may have been running a little high.

At half-time she introduced her husband to someone who knows a thing or two about the beautiful game - footballing legend Maradona. The player of Argentina's glory years grasped Willem-Alexander's hand in a warm salute, before engaging him in a spirited discussion about the likely outcome of the match.

Luckily for the sake of peace in the marital home the 90-minute thriller ended in a 0-0 draw. Argentina go through comfortably to the knockout stages of the tournament, where they meet Mexico, while the Netherlands are due to come up against Portugal.



ROYAL FANS: Dutch Crown Prince Willem Alexander and his wife Argentine-born Princess Maxima wave as they attended the match between the Netherlands and Argentina in Frankfurt on Wednesday.

The fastest football fan on the planet

AFP, Indianapolis

On the eve of the US athletics championships, sprint star Justin Gatlin was sporting an orange replica jersey of the Netherlands' football team.

"I'm supporting World Cup," Gatlin, co-holder of the 100m world record, said Wednesday. "Without World Cup, a lot of people look past soccer - like they do track and field until the Olympics come around."

Gatlin is carefully following this year's matches and said defending champion Brazil is his favourite team.

So why is he sporting Dutch forward Ruud van Nistelrooy's No. 9? "It's a Nike shirt," replied Gatlin with a sheepish grin. Like the Netherlands football team, Gatlin has a contract with the American shoe company.

Unlike Brazilian footballers Ronaldo and Cafu, Gatlin has no plans to switch to just one name. "Not yet," he said. "There are too many Justins out there."

Gatlin's time of 9.77sec, for the 100m last month tied the world mark by Jamaica's Asafa Powell, and the American responded glibly to questions about his chief rival.

"What do I think of Asafa?" joked Gatlin. "I think I get asked that question too much."

WC pitches 'disappointing'

AFP, Berlin

The World Cup organisers admitted on Thursday that they were disappointed by worn-looking pitches, but blamed unseasonably cold weather in Germany in May for the problems.

All of the playing surfaces at the 12 World Cup stadiums were replaced at the end of the German league season in mid-May, but low temperatures at that time prevented the grass from growing properly.

"We didn't achieve the optimum objective we set, we have to concede that," the vice-president of the organising committee, Wolfgang Niersbach, admitted.

"This winter there was unusually cold weather in Germany," Niersbach told the daily media briefing.

"In Hamburg, Cologne and Gelsenkirchen the visual appearance is not as good as expected."

Patches may be replaced on the Gelsenkirchen pitch, he added.

Both Hamburg and Gelsenkirchen will host a quarterfinal match, although not matches in the last 16.

The design of the two stadiums in question has also not aided the growth of the grass, Niersbach said. The bowl design of the Hamburg stadium, for example, did not let as much light in as the other grounds.

"We are a bit upset, we thought we were so cautious and could offer optimum conditions and we have ended up with a weak spot we were not expecting," Niersbach said.

FIFA President Sepp Blatter said this week that matches at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa could take place on synthetic pitches.

"In the future, it will be necessary to have pitches that can resist all weather conditions," he explained.

Mind over matter



AFP, Berlin

Sports psychology has come a long way from the advice once offered by a coach when told his struggling star striker had been knocked unconscious and had forgotten his name.

"Tell him he's Pele," said the coach. "And get him back on the pitch."

Some World Cup hopefuls are a little more sophisticated. Spain, who have impressed many with their early form which has yielded two wins in two games, have turned to one of America's top sports psychologists to transform them from underachievers to world beaters.

"They haven't got beyond the last eight since 1954."

"We're trying not to dwell on history," said Boston University

professor Leonard Zaichkowsky who has worked with Olympic athletes as well as the Boston Celtics basketball team and the Calgary Flames hockey squad.

"We're trying to emphasize that this is a different team, with a different coach, a different everything. We want to get them thinking along the lines of great performances," said Zaichkowsky.

"They may have things that are bothering them in their own life that are affecting their play on the field. Psychology has a positive dimension, helping normal people achieve their highest potential."

Zaichkowsky said he has told Luis Aragones's team that they need to feel united in their approach.

"You guys are all playing at a high level, and we want to take you to a championship level... we'll be working on genuinely caring about each other. That's the only way they're going to win a world championship."

Like Aragones, Jurgen Klinsmann's Germany team is

professor Leonard Zaichkowsky who has worked with Olympic athletes as well as the Boston Celtics basketball team and the Calgary Flames hockey squad.

Germany, too, are using a sports psychologist for the first time.

After a disastrous Euro 2004 campaign, when Germany failed to win a match under Rudi Voller, Klinsmann recruited Dr. Hans-Dieter Hermann who has also worked with the German ski team.

"We are delighted that he is there for the mental side of things," explained Klinsmann.

"He has a lot of experience having worked with top sportsmen. He can help them deal with stress and maximise their performance."

World Cup debutants Angola called in Laurindo Vieira.

"The psychologist talks to them about brains and nerves and he tries to make them more confident in themselves and in the team," said a team spokesman.

"I'm not really sure what they do in these lectures but the players come out laughing about who is using the right side of their brain

and who is not."

Golf has been the trailblazer when it comes to mind games.

Belgian sports psychologist Jos Vantsiphout once took the direct approach to former world number one Ernie Els.

"I told him I thought he was the biggest under-achiever I'd ever met," said Vantsiphout.

Els's problem was Tiger Woods who pushed him into second place in three Majors in 2000 after the South African had won the US Open in 1994 and 1997.

But with the help of Vantsiphout, who told him to focus on the course and not the American, Els overcame his fear of Woods to land the 2002 British Open.

"I think the big boss up there, maybe he gave me more talent," said Vantsiphout on his influence, which has also worked wonders with Els's compatriot Retief Goosen.

"Maybe he sent me to get some competition for Tiger."

A tale of two Owens



AFP, Baden-Baden

Michael Owen's injury might be a devastating blow to England, but it could be a blessing in disguise for Owen Hargreaves.

Until now, the Bayern Munich midfielder has always been on the sidelines - in the England squad but never quite nailing down a place in the starting 11.

Supporters have given the versatile 25-year-old a rough ride

since he made his debut against Holland in 2001 because he has never played in the Premier League.

But his electrifying performance in a rare start against Sweden, and the positive response from the fans who booed him when he came on as a substitute against Paraguay, suggests he is now ready to step up to the mark.

With Michael Owen's knee ligament injury forcing him out of the tournament, coach Sven-Goran Eriksson may have to revert to a 4-5-1 formation with Steven Gerrard playing as a second

striker behind Wayne Rooney.

This would allow the Swede to keep Hargreaves in the holding midfield role he performed so well on Tuesday in the 2-2 draw and give people like Frank Lampard and Joe Cole licence to push forward against Ecuador in the knockout round on Sunday.

Hargreaves, who last started for England over two years ago, ironically also against Sweden, insists he is now ready to command a regular place in the side.

"I have been playing regularly for Bayern Munich, but people

don't really watch the Bundesliga," he said.

"So I think it was a great opportunity especially in the World Cup to play and I'm very happy I got the chance."

"It's my position -- playing in the holding role -- getting stuck in, winning tackles and laying it off. I feel very confident in that role."

"For Bayern Munich, I've proved on the pitch exactly what kind of player I am."

He also proved against Sweden that he could gel with Lampard. His holding role allowed the flow of England's first half, before the team collectively lost the plot in the second period.

Born in Canada to British parents, Hargreaves first caught the attention of England's management when playing for Bayern in their Champions League-winning season in 2001.

Aged just 20, he won rave reviews and sparked a race to secure his international services between England and Germany, for whom he qualified through residency.

He looked to be establishing himself in the side when selected against Sweden and Argentina in the last World Cup finals in Japan but an injury sidelined him.

Since then he has struggled to have more than a bit-part role with Gerrard and Lampard becoming England's first choice central midfield partnership.

Buoyed by his game against Sweden and with the prospect of another start in store against Ecuador, Hargreaves' confidence is soaring.

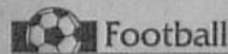
But he is realistic enough to know that England's hit and miss form means overcoming the South American side will not be easy.

"It's difficult to say how easy or difficult it will be against Ecuador," he said. "I think every team that's made it this far can win it."

"But if we play like we did in the first half (against Sweden), we can beat anyone."

PREMIERSHIP

Chelsea start defence against City



REUTERS, London

Chelsea kick off the defence of their Premier League title at home to Manchester City on Aug. 19 before facing their first major test against Liverpool in mid-September.

Runners-up Manchester United host Fulham at Old Trafford while FA Cup winners Liverpool travel to promoted Sheffield United in the opening fixtures for the new season announced on Thursday.

Aston Villa will be the first league visitors to Arsenal's new Emirates Stadium on the opening day after the London club's move from Highbury.

United have the most rigorous start of the top four. They face Tottenham Hotspur, fifth last season behind Arsenal, at home on Sept. 9 before playing host to Arsenal a week later, the same day that Liverpool travel to Chelsea.

United play Liverpool at home on Oct. 21.

Newly promoted Watford and Reading will play away to Everton and at home to Middlesbrough respectively.

Newcastle United, resigned to starting the season without their injured England striker Michael Owen, start the season at home to Wigan and play Manchester United away on Sept. 30.

Iain Dowie's first fixture as Charlton Athletic manager takes

him back to EA Cup runners-up West Ham, the club he played for as a striker.

The fixtures announced on Thursday are provisional and the games could take place any day over the specified weekend, depending on television schedules.

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE FIXTURES FOR AUGUST

Aug 19: Sheffield United v Liverpool West Ham United v Charlton Athletic Arsenal v Aston Villa Bolton Wanderers v Tottenham Hotspur Chelsea v Manchester City Everton v Watford Manchester United v Fulham Newcastle United v Wigan Athletic Portsmouth v Blackburn Rovers Reading v Middlesbrough

Aug 22: Watford v West Ham United Wigan Athletic v Arsenal Charlton Athletic v Manchester United Middlesbrough v Chelsea Tottenham Hotspur v Sheffield United

Aug 23: Fulham v Bolton Wanderers Liverpool v Newcastle United Manchester City v Portsmouth Aston Villa v Reading Blackburn Rovers v Everton

Aug 26: Tottenham Hotspur v Everton Watford v Manchester United Wigan Athletic v Reading Aston Villa v Newcastle United Blackburn Rovers v Chelsea Charlton Athletic v Bolton Wanderers Fulham v Sheffield United Liverpool v West Ham United Manchester City v Arsenal Middlesbrough v Portsmouth

Ronaldinho willing to sacrifice party tricks



AFP, Dortmund

Ronaldinho on Thursday said that he might appear to have less of a central role for Brazil than for Barcelona while stressing that the team's overall shape and form was paramount.

"It's clear in my mind that I have a different function (with Brazil) which is to get the team into a rhythm and for that I have to renounce my own style of play so that the group as a whole is strong and wins," said the world footballer of the year.

Ronaldinho has, like teammate Ronaldo - in the latter's case to a greater extent - not quite found his form but whereas he is more the individual with Barca, playing further forward, "my Brazil role is a bit different from Barcelona as I operate more in the midfield."

With Barca he can float more freely as the club can share out creative responsibilities between him, Portuguese international Deco and Argentine starlet Lionel Messi, as well as Frenchman Ludovic Giuly - with Ronaldinho often getting further into the attack to help Samuel Eto'o.

With Brazil, he has to do more of the legwork to act as a provider for Ronaldo and Adriano.

"We all want to help each other out in the (Brazil) squad and so we shun trying to stand out more than the others to aid the solidity of the team," Ronaldinho explained.

"In the midfield I am playing more for the team than for me."

With qualification for the last 16 assured ahead of Thursday's match with Japan, coached by former Brazil star Zico, Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira is tempted to rest some key squad members.

But the likes of Ronaldinho, Roberto Carlos and Emerson are not sold on that idea.

"Frankly, I'm okay with that

but I want to play and I hope to play," Roberto Carlos said.

"Anyway, we'll see what the coach decides."

Parreira says he will only pin up the team sheet "in the dressing room."

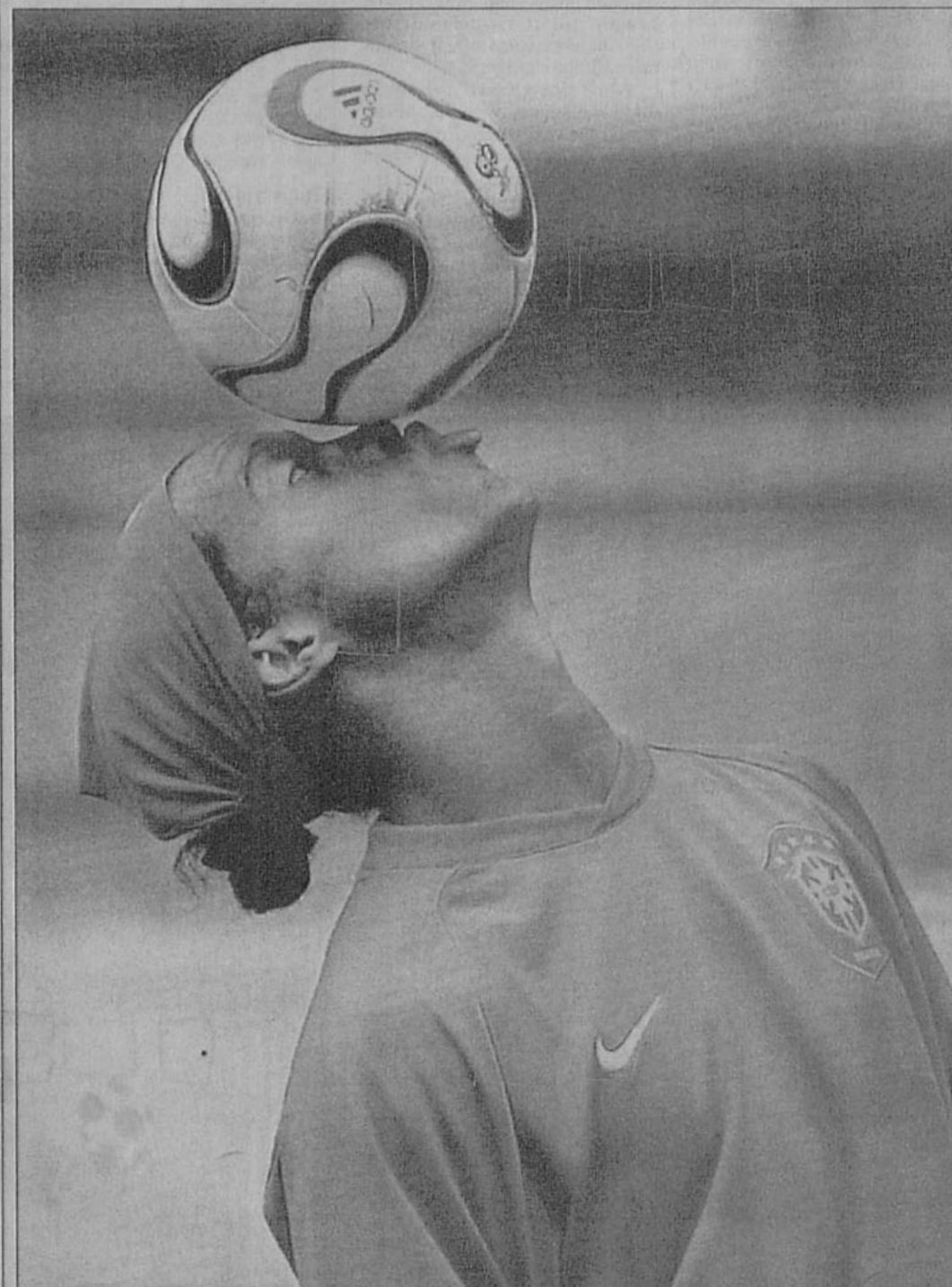
"If Parreira wants to give an opportunity to another player then that's fine," said Roberto Carlos, while adding that he was ready to play.

For Ronaldinho, "some players may prefer to take the chance of a rest - but I feel very good. If it's down to me I prefer to play," said the 2002 world champion.

"Brazil's goal is simply always to improve and grow," he added.

Juninho, who is hoping for a chance in midfield, said Brazil would use the match against Japan to improve on their rather sluggish albeit winning form to date.

"Japan almost knocked us out of the Confederations Cup last year so I'd say Brazil have a dangerous match coming up," he warned.



THE SEAL: Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho juggles the ball during a training session in Dortmund on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP