



Italian defender Marco Materazzi is the toast of his teammates after he scored Italy's opening goal against Czech Republic in Hamburg on Thursday.

Overshadowed by the fairer sex

REUTERS, Berlin

Juergen Klinsmann's team have enjoyed their best start to a World Cup in 36 years yet one expert observer fears they are heading out in the quarter-finals -- Germany's women's World Cup-winning striker Conny Pohlers.

"I am sure they can beat the Swedes," the 27-year old said before a news conference to unveil the 2007 women's World Cup's official ball on Thursday.

"But I am not so optimistic about the rest. It won't be easy even though things are going well at the moment. I think they may go out in the quarter-final, especially if they are up against Argentina."

Midfielder Bianca Rech agreed with her team mate Pohlers who missed out on Germany's win at the Women's World Cup in 2003, played in the United States, because of injury.

"They are playing well but my favourites are Argentina," said Rech.

Germany have won all three of their Group A matches against Costa Rica (4-2), Poland (1-0) and Ecuador (3-0) for the first time since the 1970 finals in Mexico where they reached the semi-finals.

They play Group B runners-up Sweden in the second round in Munich on Saturday.

Germany's men have won the World Cup in 1954 in Switzerland, 1974, when they were the hosts like this year, and in 1990 in Italy.

Their female counterparts have won their world title just once although it has only been played four times, and are six-times European champions.

The German women's team defend their world title next year in China.

Sweden seek

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Sweden, with five points from three Group B matches, took second behind England after they played a 2-2 draw on Tuesday. Germany finished top of Group A with nine points and have gained momentum as the tournament goes on.

The Swedish coach said he was not worried about facing a rapidly improving Germany team playing before a home crowd in Munich. He said his players would be able to handle the pressure of playing in front of a partisan crowd of 66,000.

Lagerback expressed some concerns that the home crowd could influence the referee and linesmen.

"Of course it's a little advantage for the German team," he said.

"The most important thing is that we have a referee who can handle the situation with a lot of German people in the stands."

Zlatan making

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Lagerback would not be drawn on whether he would reinstate Ibrahimovic and drop replacement Marcus Allback to the bench. Allback scored against England and set up the winner in the game against Paraguay. "He's playing very well, as he always does," Lagerback said of Allback. "He linked well with the midfield and forwards."

Lagerback also praised Ibrahimovic for "working hard in the matches he played" and creating good scoring chances, especially in their opening goalless draw against Trinidad & Tobago.

When asked how Ibrahimovic might react if he is fit but still left out of the starting team, Lagerback said:

"I would guess like almost every player, I would guess he'd be rather disappointed."

Goal was divine justice: Materazzi



REUTERS, Hamburg

Defender Marco Materazzi described his first ever goal for Italy on Thursday as "divine justice", saying it would answer his critics once and for all.

Materazzi, who had come on as a substitute for the injured Alessandro Nesta in the 17th minute, powered home a header from a corner nine minutes later to put his country on course for a 2-0 win over the Czech Republic and a place in the last 16 of the World Cup.

"Yes, it's the most beautiful day

of career...divine justice," the 32-year-old told reporters.

"I came in for the greatest defender in the world and it's just phenomenal the way things turned out, as I said divine justice," he told reporters.

The Inter Milan defender has become a hate figure in his home country, being publicly labelled an "animal" and a "delinquent" by the Italian press for his tough and physical approach.

Such is Materazzi's reputation among AC Milan fans that the rival club's official television station produced a video clip accompanied by rock music featuring the worst of his challenges on their players.

"I have suffered a lot of injustice on a human level, a lot of unjust

comment, it happens, but today those comments go away," Materazzi said.

Italy's victory saw them progress to the second round of the tournament, finishing top of Group E. The Czechs, ranked number two in the world, are heading home after Ghana beat the United States 2-1 to grab second place.

Materazzi also said his goal should be an inspiration for Daniele De Rossi, who missed the game after being sent off against the United States for elbowing an opponent. His dismissal has also brought criticism from the Italian press.

"Take De Rossi, he made a mistake and I want to devote this goal to him, he's only 22 and everyone makes a mistake," Materazzi said.

Poll loses the plot



INTERNET, undated

England's footballers may not have yet made their mark on this year's World Cup but last night Graham Poll, the country's sole referee in Germany, certainly did with a performance that may go down as one of the most error-strewn in the tournament's history.

Poll, in charge of Australia's wild and chaotic 2-2 draw with Croatia, booked one player three times but forgot to send him off until after showing him a third yellow, blew for full-time just as what would have been Australia's winner was crossing the line, and also missed a blatant Croatian handball in the penalty area.

The official from Tring has long been regarded as one of the Premiership's best referees, but

during last night's game - the most thrilling of the tournament so far - he seemed to lose his bearings in his third World Cup game. Even the kick-off was a portent of things to come as Poll blew his whistle to start the game before calling the bemused players back to take it again.

After that, he seemed to settle down for a while, and he correctly spotted the Croatian defender Stjepan Tomas's blatant handball in the penalty area before half-time, although he wrongly failed to book him.

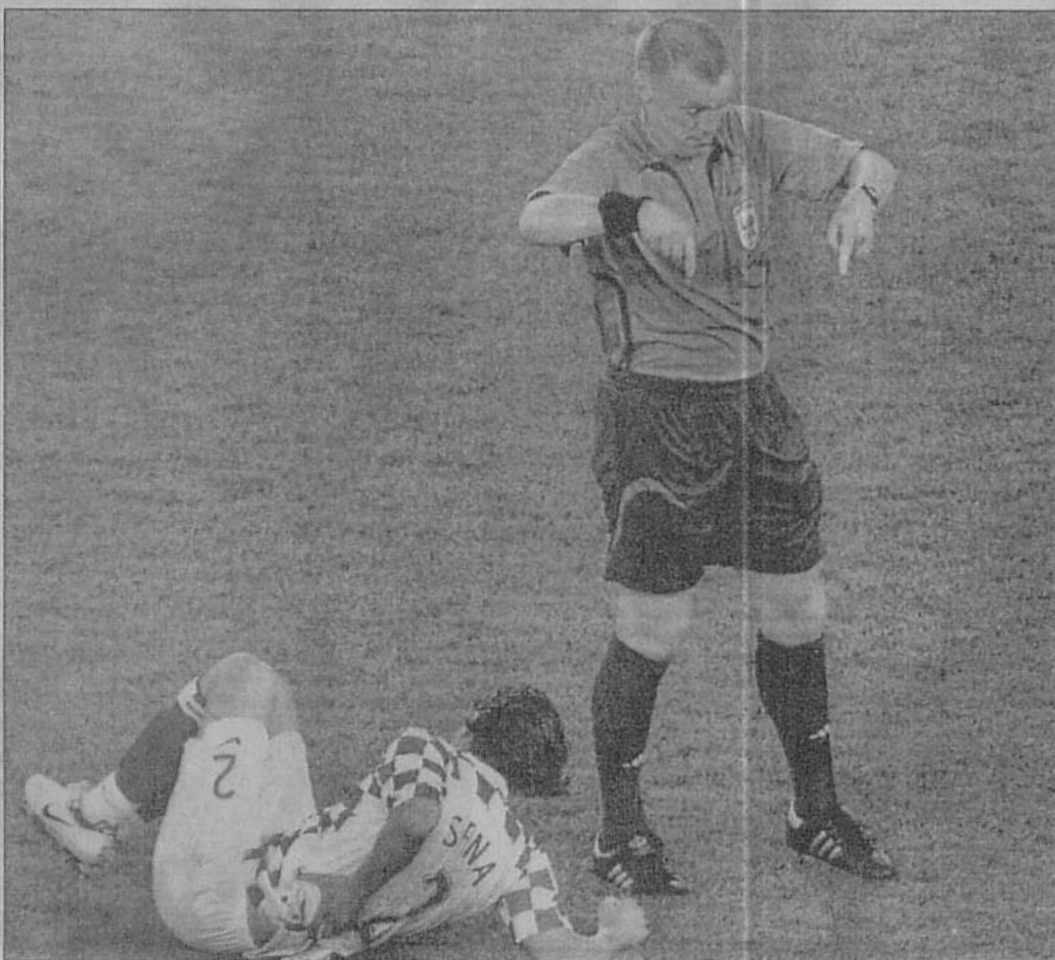
But it was in the second half that his decision-making started to go horribly awry. With Australia 2-1 down and desperately throwing bodies in search of the equaliser they needed to progress to the next round, he missed a second blatant handball in the penalty area from Tomas.

Worse was to follow as Poll then created World Cup history by booking one player, Josip Simunic, three times. The referee gave him his second

yellow card on 90 minutes, but only showed him a red one three minutes after the final whistle after booking him again for dissent.

Moments beforehand, Poll had echoed another British referee in the World Cup by blowing the final whistle just as a goal was going in. Tim Cahill was already running away in celebration when the goal was ruled out. The original, famously, was the Welsh referee Clive Thomas, who in the 1978 game between Brazil and Sweden blew the whistle just as Zico's header flew into the net.

However, amid the turmoil and mistakes, Poll did get some decisions right, notably the sendings off of two other players - Dario Simic of Croatia and Australia's Brett Emerton. But that was about it. Both Fifa and Poll were unavailable for comment after last night's game. But the bookmaker Corals is offering odds of 10-1 against Poll refereeing another match at the World Cup. On last night's evidence that looks distinctly ungenerous.



English referee Graham Poll makes a gesture as Croatia midfielder Dario Srna lies on the pitch during their match against Australia in Stuttgart on Thursday.

Merkel, Blair & Brown not alone

AFP, Paris

Whenever France take to the field, President Jacques Chirac's office lets it be known that he is "in his office watching the game" having made patriotically sure his agenda was clear at that time.

And US president George W. Bush while admitting he knew next to nothing about "soccer" still found time to send his encouragements to the Stars and Stripes team.

More comfortable with the vocabulary inside the baseball diamond, Bush urged his boys to "play hard and keep their heads up."

Bruce Arena's men certainly responded to the first part of his entreaty in their game against Italy with two men sent off in the most punishing match of the World Cup so far.

It does not always go according to plan of course.

Brazil's populist president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Lula for short, poked a light-hearted dig at star striker Ronaldo over his weight problems only to find he had stirred a hornet's nest of sensitivity. A miffed Ronaldo hit back saying that if he was fat then everyone knew that former union leader Lula drank too much.

It all got a trifle nasty and could have done with the silky smooth diplomatic skills of UN chief Kofi Annan to sort things out.

Only he was busy getting behind his home team Ghana who have been carrying the African flag at the World Cup.

"I'm proud of my boys," he said bemoaning that he would have to miss the crunch game against the United States as he would be "trapped in a plane" on the way back to New York.

Ayala critical

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there are times when you don't know what studs to wear," he said.

"I finished the match against Serbia (& Montenegro) with back pains because of the hard pitch. You're playing as if you are on an ice rink."

Borgetti is back

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penalty against Portugal.

Borgetti, who had a nightmare first season with Bolton scoring twice in just 19 appearances for the Premiership outfit, played in all four of their matches at the 2002 edition where they went out to bitter rivals the United States in the second round.

A prospective

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Germany in the final group match. Beating Sweden in that great match was a bit of reconciliation with the rest of the country," Champel added. "The match was pure drama."

Lasse Sandlin, a writer for Sweden's Aftonbladet, said he expects Saturday's match to become another classic struggle.

"They play the same kind of football as we do," he said. "Physical and very fast. It's going to be a very tight game."

Battle of

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really under way but it really hurt to hear our own fans boo us," said Marquez after his side went down to a 2-1 defeat against Portugal in their last Group D game.

Argentina will be favourites to progress to the last eight where either hosts Germany or Sweden will be waiting, but Pekerman, whose team have scored eight times in the tournament, respects the dangers that Mexico can pose.

"I have a very positive image of Mexico," said Pekerman.

"They are high in the FIFA rankings and played well at the Confederations Cup last year."

"It will be a good match. They have many very good players. They will be strong opponents, and it's the World Cup, so every game is difficult."

"Mexico are always able to score goals," he added. "They are technically skilled and highly competitive team. No team can ever believe that Mexico is not a strong rival."

Mexico have twice been quarter-finalists, but on both occasions, in 1970 and 1986, it was on home ground.

Coach Ricardo Lavolpe, a member of Argentina's World Cup-winning squad in 1978, said he was considering making changes for the game as he tries to solve a crisis of confidence amongst his strikers who haven't scored since the first match.

"On Saturday I'm going to have a different team. They're going to be much more at ease and that will help them to score goals," Lavolpe said.

But Lavolpe will be boosted by news that the country's leading all-time scorer Jared Borgetti has been passed fit.

The 32-year-old Bolton Wanderers striker suffered a left calf injury that saw him forced off early in the second-half of the opening 3-1 victory over Iran.

But Guillermo Cantu, responsible for team selection for Mexico, said that he was now fully fit for Saturday's clash after he missed the Angola and Portugal games.

Players on a mission



AFP, Berlin

Stricken England striker Michael Owen has become just the latest footballer to become the focus for his team's mantra of "We are going to win the World Cup for...".

In an increasingly sentimental sport, each time a player goes down and is ruled out of a tournament the team involved feels compelled to turn the tournament into a personal crusade for the player in question.

Unlike less worthy recipients of their teammates' support, the service that the clean-living but desperately unlucky Owen has given England down the years merits such a tribute.

Similarly 1998 champions France showed their solidarity with unfortunate striker Djibril Cisse, as the Liverpool forward broke his leg just prior to the World Cup in a meaningless friendly with China.

All the France players brandished sweatbands with Djibril written on them in their first World Cup match, the 0-0 draw

with Switzerland which highlighted exactly what they were missing -- their leading scorer from the qualifiers.

Now 'Les Bleus' have another martyr to go in and play for when they enter their must-win match against Togo -- icon Zinedine Zidane.

Lose and the great man's last gesture for the team will have been his angry throw of the sweatband into the dugout when he was replaced in the first minute of injury time in the 1-1 draw with South Korea.

It is the South Americans who fly the flag for the more emotional dedications as Ecuadorian striker Ivan Kaviedes demonstrated in the 3-0 win over Costa Rica.

After scoring the third goal he pulled on a Spiderman mask in tribute to former international team-mate Otilino Tenorio, who was killed in a car accident aged 25 in May 2005.

Some dedications push the sense of good taste to the limit.

When Scottish striker Duncan Ferguson -- or 'Drunk and Disorderly' as he was known -- served three months for headbutting another player in an English Premiership match.

Instead of being sacked by his club Everton, he received a wel-

come back seemingly more fit for a returning war hero or political prisoner as the club arranged for a band to pipe him onto the pitch at a reserve team match.

"The people who criticised the club for that didn't know what Duncan meant to the fans," commented Jim King of the Everton Supporters Club.

"He was the right man at the right time for us."

"He roused the passion at Goodison," he added without a trace of irony, though his three previous assault victims would have preferred that he restricted himself to the pitch.

Perhaps the most macabre 'tribute' was paid to Colombian defender Andres Escobar who paid with his life for the simple error of scoring an own goal in the South Americans' costly defeat to host nation the United States in 1994.

Ten days after returning to Colombia, Humberto Munoz -- who was to receive a 43-year prison sentence but was released after serving just 11 -- gained his 10 seconds of fame as he plugged Escobar with 12 bullets. As each bullet hit the defender, Munoz said... "Goal".



Ghana fans go ecstatic on the streets of Accra after their victory over USA in the World Cup on Friday.

Party time in Ghana



REUTERS, Accra

Ghanaians poured on to the streets of the capital Accra on Thursday, jumping on car bonnets, dancing and singing after the African country reached the last 16 of the World Cup with a 2-1 win over United States.

Fellow Africans from Sierra Leone to the Central African Republic joined in to celebrate as Ghana became the first team from their continent to reach the second round.

In Accra's bustling Osu district, the air rang with car horns, whistles and shouts of 'Go Ghana' as fans clapped their

hands, blew whistles and beat metal tins, pots and drums.

"I am very happy. After the first match (a 2-0 defeat by Italy) I was so angry I prayed to God. He answered my prayers and we are rejoicing," said Joseph Chukwu, watching the party from a roadside stall.

"If we pray to God we will beat Brazil 2-0. Today is a very good day for Africa. Africa as a whole is so happy."

Debutants Ghana qualified in second place behind Group E winners Italy and will face Brazil if the champions top their section as expected.

Ghana beat United States thanks to a goal from Haminu Dramani and a penalty by captain Stephen Appiah.

"I am very happy. I am very sure we will beat Brazil 2-0. I am

very, very proud," said Michael Mikoku, draped in Ghana's red, yellow and green national flag.

Cars swerved in procession round the streets of Accra with fans dancing on car roofs and bonnets, while the red, yellow and green national colours could be seen everywhere, carried by people waving from shops and houses.

In Sierra Leone, home to several thousand Ghanaians, citizens cheered the win over U.S.

"Ghana's victory has put Africa on the world map of football," said fan Alie Kamara.

More than 2,000 miles (3,000 km) away in Central African Republic's capital Bangui, bare-chested young men ran on to the streets shouting and beating tam-tams to celebrate.

Reyna calls it a day



REUTERS, Nuremberg

U.S. captain Claudio Reyna has called time on his international career after their World Cup exit on Thursday and could soon be followed by striker Brian McBride and maybe even coach Bruce Arena.

"I'm probably done," Reyna told reporters after his team lost 2-1 to Ghana in their final Group E match. "That's it."

The curtain-call was bitter-sweet for Reyna, 32, who came off just before halftime after straining his left knee ligaments having lost possession in the lead up to Ghana's first goal.

He then had to watch from the bench as the U.S. slipped to defeat after a dubious penalty awarded against them deep into first-half stoppage time by German referee Markus Merk.

"I knew pretty much before (the tournament) that this would be the last World Cup for me," said the midfielder.

Reyna and goalkeeper Kasey Keller became the first Americans to feature in four World Cups when they played at these finals.

"For me, the right time (to retire) is now. The next World Cup is far away. I just wanted to play this as the last World Cup," he added.

Reyna's error gifted Ghana the lead as he received a back pass from Clint Dempsey and collided with Haminu Dramani who took the ball and raced into the U.S. area to slot home.

Forward McBride, bidding to score in three consecutive finals, hinted that he too would retire from the national team and told reporters he would make an announcement soon.

Coach Bruce Arena is in his eighth year in charge of the national team and under contract to the U.S. federation until December. He would not say if he

would be stepping down.

"I have some other opportunities that I need to examine as well," he told reporters. "But that's not important right now."

Arena, the longest serving coach at the finals, plans to address the media on Friday at the U.S. hotel in Hamburg.

Reyna's decision to step down, while not formally announced, comes as no surprise based on his history of injuries.

A veteran of four World Cups, Reyna did not see any action in 1994 but featured prominently in the other three tournaments. In 2002, he helped lead the U.S. to the quarter-finals.

Reyna, who was made national team captain in 1999, has won 112 caps and scored eight goals. He remains one of a handful of Americans players to have thrived in Europe.

In the past 12 years he has played for Bayer Leverkusen, VfL Wolfsburg, Rangers and Sunderland before joining Manchester City in 2003.