



Croatian goalkeeper Stipe Pletikosa grips the ball to deny an Australian attack during their World Cup match in Stuttgart on Thursday.

PHOTO AFP

Spider's place at stake



AFP, Stuttgart

Guus Hiddink is expected to recall goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer for Monday's World Cup last 16 match with Italy after his bold selection gamble with Zeljko Kalac almost ended Australia's dream.

Coach Hiddink made another of his daring selection calls bringing in Kalac for regular goalie Schwarzer for the Socceroos' crucial match with Croatia here Thursday only for Kalac to make a costly fumble and gift the Croatians a 2-1 lead with just over 30 minutes left.

Many of the match Harry Kewell kept Australia in the tournament and saved Kalac's humiliation with

a 79th-minute strike for a 2-2 draw, which was enough to see off Croatia and advance to a knockout match with three-time world champions Italy in Kaiserslautern.

Hiddink admitted soon after the match he was considering recalling Schwarzer.

Asked why 'Spider' Kalac was chosen after Schwarzer had played in the 3-1 win over Japan and the 2-0 loss to Brazil, Hiddink said: "We were not happy with some performances of both goalies and you have to make a decision."

"I think we have learned very fast that goalkeepers have to be very concentrated at the highest level in this World Cup."

"We made little mistakes with big consequences, so that's not the most beautiful part in how we've performed in the last game."

"(Schwarzer) I am considering that in the upcoming hours."

It was a shattering howler by Kalac, the understudy AC Milan goalkeeper, who got his big chance to play ahead of his long-time rival Schwarzer for what up to Thursday was Australia's biggest-ever game.

"It was my fault that the game opened up, we didn't need it to open up, because that was the only way we were going to get punished, but all credit to the boys they just kept going and going," Kalac told reporters after the game.

Asked if it was the most traumatic game he had been involved in, 33-year-old Kalac said: "Let's put it this way after all the sceptics and stuff's that been going on about me, I'm happy that we got away with it. My head's still spinning."

Kalac, one of six Australian players with Croatia at the ground, had a shaky match picking the ball out of his own net after just two minutes off a Darjio Sena free kick, having a

few indecisive moments and then fumbling Niko Kovac's volley to allow the ball to go into the net.

"The big fella doesn't need anyone else to say anything to him, he's very critical of himself," said defender Craig Moore, who converted a 38th-minute penalty to level Srna's brilliant 2nd-minute freekick.

Kalac was relieved that Kewell got him and his never-say-die teammates home in the end.

"The Croatian players were distraught, obviously, but as they say one man's sadness is always another man's happiness and it was our happiness tonight," Kalac said.

"I don't know what Guus is going to do, we've made a few mistakes, but I've made a pretty big one."

"There are a lot of ups and downs in football, it was disappointing because it's such a big stage that it's happened on, but life goes on."

Beckham unfazed

AFP, Stuttgart

England captain David Beckham shrugged off questions about his World Cup form here Friday after coach Sven-Goran Eriksson warned he would be prepared to replace him if necessary.

Beckham, who will win his 93rd cap in Sunday's last 16 clash with Ecuador, has seen his place in England's starting line-up called into question once again after quiet displays during the first round.

But Beckham made it clear he was not going to join the debate about his position at a press conference following training.

"To be honest I'm not sat up here to discuss my own performance," he said. "There's an agenda out there. I've got my agenda, and my agenda is to win the World Cup."

"I'm sat up here as the England captain in a very good situation. We're in the last 16, we're very confident going into the game. I'm not sat up here to discuss my own form, that's for you guys to do."

Eriksson has stressed repeatedly that Beckham's position in the England team is safe but denied suggestions that the Real Madrid star was an 'untouchable'.

Asked if he could ever envisage hauling off Beckham in the way that Portugal coach Luis Felipe Scolari controversially replaced skipper Luis Figo at 2004, Eriksson was adamant he would.

"I'm prepared to do whatever I have to if I see things going wrong," he said. "Whatever."

Eriksson has never substituted Beckham for tactical reasons during a competitive fixture, and only replaced him against Sweden in the 2002 World Cup when he began to tire in his first match back from a long lay-off.

"I have taken off David Beckham before," Eriksson said. "I'm not married to David Beckham, even if you think I am. I'm not even engaged to him."

"He's the captain, but he's engaged in all the same ways."

"At the dinner table, on the bus, on the pitch, training, matches -- exactly the same as all the others."

"He doesn't have any favours just because he's the captain."

While Beckham has had a hand in two of the five goals England have scored in the World Cup so far and remains arguably the world's most accurate striker of a ball at set pieces, the 31-year-old has struggled to offer width.

His lack of pace was highlighted during the 2-0 victory over Trinidad and Tobago last week, when the introduction of Tottenham's flying winger Aaron Lennon midway through the second half made an immediate impact.

There's always a next time



AFP, Tokyo

Heartbroken and sleepless Japanese fans tried to put the World Cup behind them Friday after the Asian champions failed to secure a single victory in Germany.

Diehard supporters who rose before dawn to watch Japan take on Brazil were crushed as the World

Cup title holders thrashed the Samurai Blue 4-1.

"We lost, we lost," cried Kunio Hayashida, 25, holding his head in his hands as he came out of a Tokyo bar.

With a sigh he hoisted himself onto his bicycle and headed for his shift at a ramen noodleshop.

Well, they still did their best and did what they could. I'm going to go work now. It's going to be one long day," he said.

Kenji Shibata, 27, tried to look to the future.

"Next time Japan will do better,

although we always keep saying that," he said. "But for now I'm going to sleep the whole day."

Japanese media were just as heartbroken as the public.

"Complete defeat for Japan," said a Yomiuri Shimbun headline in its evening edition, accompanied by a photo of star midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata sitting alone on the pitch, clenching his teeth to bear the pain of losing.

"Do not cry, Samurai. There will be next time," the Yomiuri said.

A first-half goal by Keiji Tamada raised Japanese hopes of repeating their "miracle" at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics when they unexpectedly defeated Brazil 1-0.

But even with Brazilian legend Zico to guide them, the Samurai Blue watched helplessly as Brazil smashed in four goals.

"When Japan won a goal, I saw a blink of a dream," said Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, the government spokesman.

"But the game was unfortunate. I want the team to work hard again for the next one in four years."

With Japan needing nothing short of a miracle to beat the fancied Brazilians, many fans decided against getting up to watch the game which kicked off at 4:00 am local time.

Only 25 percent of television viewers in Tokyo and Osaka tuned into the game, far fewer than the 50 percent for Japan's other two matches, although they were in better time slots, monitoring group Video Research Ltd. said.

After losing their crucial opener to Australia and drawing with Croatia, Japan needed to pull off an unlikely win against the five-time World Cup champions to advance to the second round.

Knowing full well about the overwhelming odds for Brazil, Japanese supporters were hoping against hopes to see mighty attacks from their samurai.

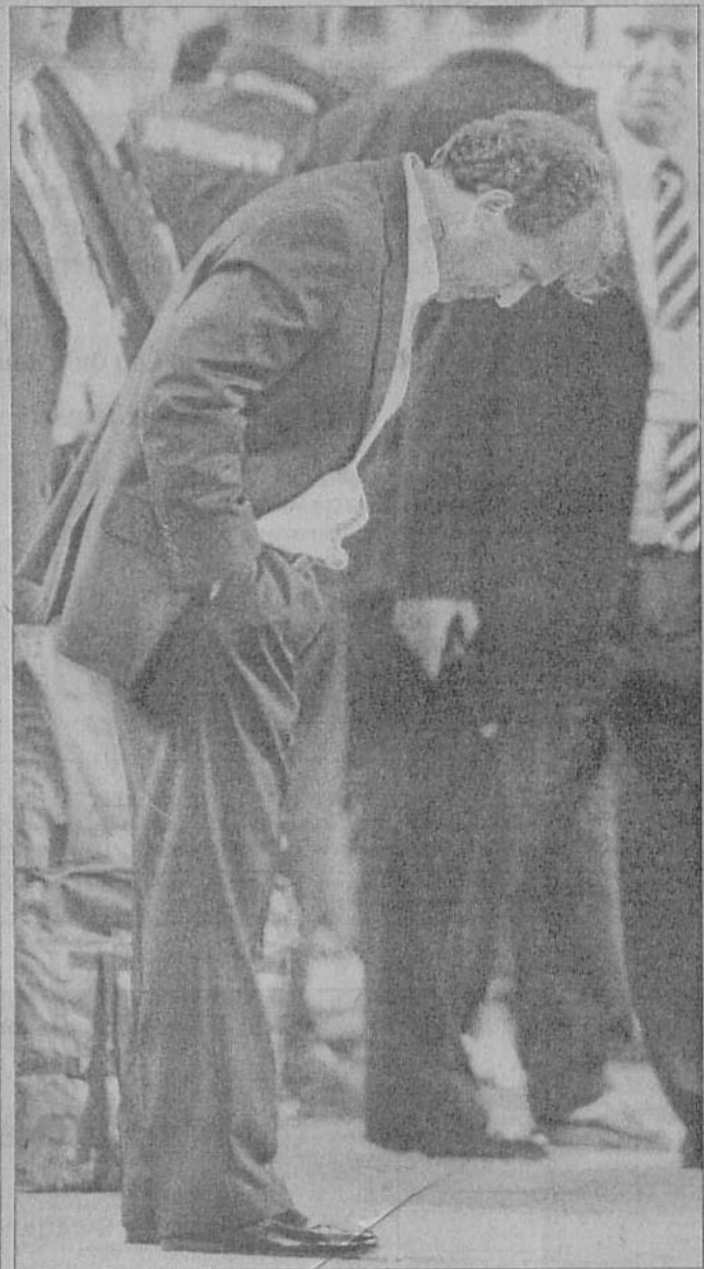
"I'm sad, I'm speechless. I have no words," said 28-year-old Mayumi Sato. "Although I knew Brazil was strong, I believed in Japan. But I'm not ashamed in the end, since they did their best."

Waiver Kazu Yamasaki, 22, said that momentum had been slipping since the opener with Australia, when Japan also squandered an early goal.

"When Japan scored a goal, I had goosebumps and had tears coming out," he said of the Brazil face-off.

But he conceded, "Japan was really weak."

"I'll wait for the next time," he said. "I hope they'll do better."



Japan's Brazilian coach Zico is frustrated after Japan's 4-1 loss to the world champions in Dortmund on Thursday.

PHOTO AFP

Scolari wanted England job!

INTERNET, undated

Luiz Felipe Scolari has revealed that he wanted the England manager's job, but that the Football Association's determination to make the appointment before the World Cup cost him the opportunity of accepting it.

Talking on BBC TV's Match of the Day to compatriot and former Brazil star Leonardo, who is working as a pundit for the BBC during the World Cup, Scolari said: "They [the English Football Association] needed to announce the new England coach in a period that was impossible for me."

"Also I wanted to bring my staff to support me in my job - and this possibility was not very clear."

The Portugal manager had talks with the FA in April about taking over from Sven-Goran Eriksson. But when the talks became public knowledge and the subject of a media feeding frenzy, he ruled himself out of the running.

Scolari said: "Everything was going well but we stopped at a crucial point for both of us."

"They needed to announce the new England coach in a period that was impossible for me. I have a contract until 31 July with Portugal."

"We created a very good relationship but the problem was, the person I am, I couldn't decide to be a coach of another country before a World Cup when I was representing Portugal."

"Imagine if I meet England during the World Cup and I have to say to my players, 'Die for Portugal'. I only can say to my players what I really feel."

"Perhaps in Europe it's normal but I am Brazilian and I didn't feel good in that situation."

However, the good news for England fans - especially those not contemplating four years under Eriksson's protegee Steve McClaren with much relish - is that Scolari would still consider becoming England manager in the future.

"Being coach of England is a dream for every coach in the world and I was very happy when the talks happened," he said.

"I liked the people I met from the FA very much. I hope people understand the situation and one day, why not, I can coach the English team, when I am free."

The shrewd Scolari - who coached his homeland Brazil to the 2002 World Cup - also spoke encouragingly about Brazilian striker Ronaldo.

Before the game against Japan, which Brazil won 4-1 after going a goal down, and in which Ronaldo bagged a brace to become joint top scorer in World Cup history, Scolari told Leonardo and the BBC audience:

"He [Ronaldo] needs time and he will grow up with the team, probably the third or fourth match."

"He is important. He decides matches and if he has two chances, he will score one."

"He's not 100% but even if he is 60%, he makes a difference."

FIFA chief baffled by ref blunder

AFP, Berlin

FIFA President Sepp Blatter said Friday it was incomprehensible that match officials did not intervene when blundering English referee Graham Poll gave Croatia's Josip Simunic three yellow cards.

The performance of the highly rated Poll, who had been tipped to take charge of the World Cup final, in Croatia's 2-2 draw with Australia is under the microscope by FIFA's referees' committee.

It can decide whether he plays any further part in the tournament.

Blatter said that with the four match officials in contact by radio link, one of the assistant referees should have alerted Poll to his mistake.

"An error of this kind should not happen when there are four people in the team," Blatter told a press conference.

"What is incomprehensible is that no-one intervened. I cannot understand it, it is like a blackout."

"One of them should have intervened and run on the field and said 'stop, stop'."

"I place my trust in the referees' committee. I think they have enough tact to deal with this case."

Blatter added that Poll had performed well in previous matches at this tournament.

"We should not forget that Graham Poll in his previous matches achieved fantastic things."

"We cannot excuse it but we should understand it. Referees are human beings and human beings make errors."

Poll also won support from England captain David Beckham, who said Poll deserved to be at the World Cup because he was one of the best referees in the game.

"Graham Poll is a very good referee. Everybody makes mistakes," Beckham said at England's training camp in southern Germany.

"He's a nice person as well, but a very good and top class referee, one of the best in England."

Poll first booked Simunic in the 62nd minute and should have sent him off in the 90th minute, but only eventually dismissed the Croatian in stoppage time.

The point earned by Australia in Stuttgart was enough to earn them qualification for the second round for the first time and sent Croatia home.

Czech dreams peter out



REUTERS, Hamburg

The Czech Republic's early exit from the World Cup has marked the last chance for the team's ageing players to win an international title after years of near misses.

Some of the team's best players, the backbone of a side that has won admirers over recent years for their flowing and technical style, are at the end of their careers and will not play in another World Cup. What has been the best Czech side in a generation, they would be the first to admit that success this year was unlikely because of a squad depleted through injury and suspension. Losses to Ghana and Italy in group games sealed their fate. Their best opportunity for international success was at

Euro 2004, where they reached the semi-finals. For the veterans, that chance will not come again.

Without them, the team will lose much of its quality, but some older players said the new generation could still produce.

"The youngsters showed they know how to play football and they have a great future," said Pavel Nedved, the 33-year-old midfielder whose likely imminent retirement would be the worst loss to the side.

The former European Footballer of the Year, who despite his age was the team's best player and faster than many younger players, had already retired from the national side but came back to help the team qualify for the World Cup.

Although he has said he was undecided about his future, he has hinted his footballing days could be over altogether. Likewise, fellow midfielder Karel Poborsky, 34, who first made his name along with Nedved as part of the team that

reached the Euro 96 final, may soon be thinking about retirement.

But coach Karel Bruckner, instrumental in creating a cohesive team, said not all the 30-somethings were finished yet.

"We still have (Jan) Koller," said Bruckner, referring to the 33-year-old striker who picked up an injury in the first group game that ruled him out of the rest of the tournament and damaged his side's prospects.

"There are other players in their 30s definitely not going to end their career and will, I hope, play well again."

Although players like Nedved and Poborsky will be missed, young players are establishing themselves as worthy successors, including goalkeeper Petr Cech - seen as one of the world's best - and talented midfielder Tomas Rosicky.

Czechs will hope that these players can build on the veterans' legacy and perhaps even win a trophy.



Croatian fans, watching the Croatia-Australia match projected in Zagreb's central Ban Josip Jelacic Square on Thursday, react after their national team's elimination from the World Cup.

PHOTO AFP

Shift in balance



AFP, Baden-Baden

Japan's long reign as Asia's number one team is under threat after they crashed out of the World Cup while rivals Australia made the last 16 for the first time ever.

The two sides were drawn in the same group and the writing was on the wall when Australia beat the triple Asian champions 3-1 in their opening match.

Japan needed to beat Brazil on Thursday and hope Australia lost to Croatia to stand any chance of progressing and they snuffed a major upset by stunning the defending champions to rattle the lead through Keiji Tamada in the 34th minute.

But a Ronaldo header on the stroke of halftime proved demoralising and Japan collapsed in the second half as Brazil romped to a 4-1 victory with another Ronaldo strike and goals from Juninho and Gilberto.

Playing simultaneously in Stuttgart, Australia held Croatia to a 2-2 draw to ensure they finished second to Brazil on an historic night and consigned Japan to the bottom of the group.

It continued the huge success story of Dutch coach Guus Hiddink, who steered South Korea to the semi-finals four years ago and was drafted in by Australia to haul the team out of mediocrity.

Australia twice came from

behind, snatching the draw 10 minutes from time when Liverpool star Harry Kewell pounced inside the box to slot the ball home and set up a clash with Italy next Monday.

Japan coach Zico said losing to Australia in their opening match proved fatal, and admitted they had a long way to go to compete with the top teams.

"Japan have been growing all along and must grow further to become a great team," he said.

"We have to compete with quite physical players at the World Cup and we need the stamina and physical framework matching them."

In contrast, Hiddink was full of praise for his "lionhearted" team and said they will give Italy a run for their money.

"To fully recover in two days to play Italy will be difficult but the team will react," he said. "We won't give up -- that's the slogan of the team and it's a crucial part of how we play."

Australia was only ratified as the Asian Football Confederation's 46th member in September last year, leaving the Oceania Football Confederation in the hope of making it easier to qualify for the World Cup.

At present Oceania winners must face a South American team in a two-leg playoff while Asia has four automatic qualifying berths and a playoff.

Joining the AFC also means they can play in the 2007 Asian Cup, where Japan has previously been dominant.

South Korea also have an excellent chance of progressing, needing to beat Switzerland on Friday to ensure they make the last 16 for the

second consecutive time.

"They are well organised with good players - they will make it difficult for us," said South Korea coach Dick Advocaat. "But we can compete with them and get the win."

Of Asia's other representatives here, Iran are out and in turmoil after the head of Iran's Football Federation was fired over the national team's humiliating exit.

Coach Branko Ivankovic, who had been in charge since 2002, also quit.

A 1-1 draw with Angola on Wednesday left Iran bottom of Group D. They also lost to Portugal and Mexico.

Saudi Arabia meanwhile face their stiffest test so far when they take on Spain on Friday.

Marcos Paqueta's side are propping up Group H after a 2-2 draw with Tunisia was followed by a morale-sapping 4-0 defeat to Ukraine.

To qualify they must beat Spain well because of their goal difference of minus-4 and hope Tunisia draw with Ukraine.

Asian football chiefs are looking to the World Cup for evidence that the game in the vast continent is making strides since Japan and South Korea co-hosted the tournament in 2002.

South Korea shocked everyone then by reaching the semi-finals while Japan made the round of 16.

The Korean performance was the best ever by an Asian team at the World Cup. The previous honour belonged to North Korea, who reached the last eight in 1966.



Brazilian football legend Pele (C) and FIFA president Sepp Blatter watching the Brazil-Japan match in Dortmund on Thursday.

PHOTO AFP