

DADDY, WILL YOU STAR THE NEXT GAME AGAINST FRANCE? Brazilian midfielder Juninho Pernambucano takes a break from training to spend time with his daughters Maria Clara (L) and Giovana at the Belkaw Arena in Bergisch Gladbach on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Henry hits back

AFP, London

France striker Thierry Henry insisted on Wednesday that he did not cheat to help clinch his country's World Cup win over Spain.

The Spanish captain Carlos Puyol claimed Henry had led to win the free-kick that led to France's decisive second goal in Les Bleus' 3-1 triumph in Hanover on Tuesday night.

Puyol was furious as Patrick Vieira headed France into the lead from Zinedine Zidane's resulting set-piece, but Arsenal star Henry maintained he was fouled by the Barcelona defender.

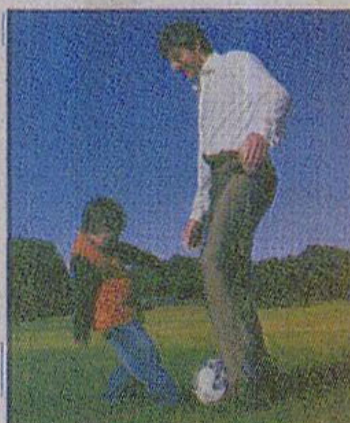
He told BBC's Match of the Day: "Spain's left-back Mariano Perina was going to win the ball so I don't know why Puyol cut across me, but he did. I don't cheat."

Henry believes Raymond Domenech's side could repeat their 1998 World Cup victory thanks to their indomitable team spirit.

Despite widespread rumours of unrest in the French camp before the tournament and suggestions the senior players were unhappy with Domenech, Henry is adamant his team-mates are united in their desire to win the World Cup again.

He added: "I think we have got a lot of stick, but we have shown that we are a team."

"Now, no matter what happens, and you never know what can happen later on during the competition, we showed to our fans and to our people back in France that we are a team."



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Friendship can wait

AFP, Berlin

There's friendship and there's football - and, at least at the World Cup, never the twain shall meet until the final whistle has sounded.

Zinedine Zidane played five years at Real Madrid alongside Raul and Iker Casillas, but there was no room for sentiment as the French veteran dumped his former colleagues out of the competition with his solo goal which plunged the dagger into Spanish hearts on Tuesday.

From friend to foe - the recurring theme of the World Cup.

Having broken Spanish hearts Zidane, knowing that each succeeding game can be his last as he will retire the moment Les Bleus depart the competition, will Saturday bid to end the dreams of

three more ex-club mates, fellow Real 'galactico' Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos, as well as youngster Robinho.

The inter-galactic interecine World Cup 'wars' between current, retiring and one-time Real Madrid stars don't end there, however.

England skipper David Beckham will face off against Luis Figo as England seek to down Portugal in their quarter-final and there will be no holds barred between the men who were team-mates at the Bernabeu for two seasons before Figo jumped ship to Inter Milan.

The 33-year-old Figo, playing in his final international event, will be fortunate to make the date after picking up a booking - only two of his teammates didn't - in the ugly win over Holland.

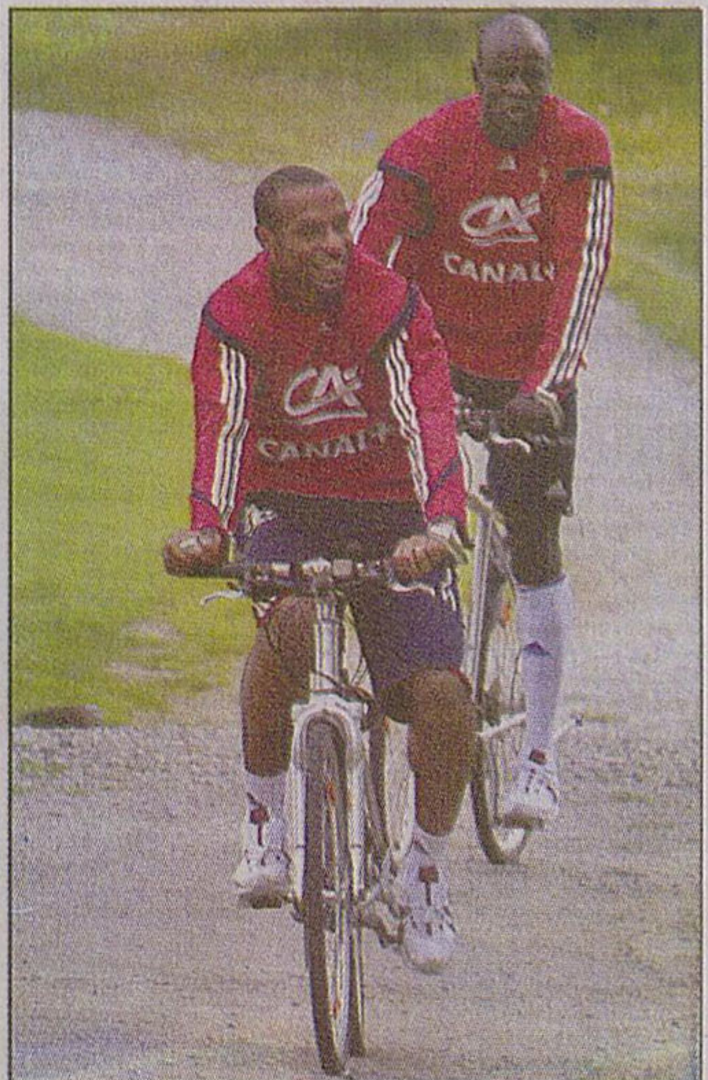


PHOTO: AFP

DRESS REHEARSAL FOR A TOUGH RIDE: Thierry Henry (L) and Lilian Thuram of France enjoy a ride on bicycle at the Schlosshotel golf garden in Arzen on Thursday. France will take on defending champions Brazil in a World Cup quarterfinal at Frankfurt on Saturday.

FIFA's disciplinary committee has elected not to take any further action against him for headbutting Dutch player Mark van Bommel, the player he also shoved to get his yellow card.

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari defended his skipper by remarking that while Jesus Christ would have turned the other cheek, "Figo is not Jesus Christ. I thought he was much more correct than the Dutch player."

The Real Madrid friends' reunited tour will not stop with Brazil playing France or England playing Portugal.

If Brazil win and send Zidane into retirement, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and Robinho will get to greet once more either Beckham or Figo, and if the French should prevail then it will fall to Beckham - or Figo - to try to bring the curtain down on his career.

The old pals act doesn't end there.

Whichever of Zidane, Figo, Beckham, Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos make it to the final on July 9 they will potentially shake hands with Figo's current Inter Milan clubmate Esteban Cambiasso, hell bent on making the trophy match with Argentina and yet another who used to wear the white of Real.

Portuguese fear for English set pieces

REUTERS, Marienfeld

Portugal will clamp down on England to avoid giving away free-kicks and corners, defender Nuno Valente said on Wednesday.

"It will be a dangerous game," he said of Saturday's World Cup quarterfinal in Gelsenkirchen.

"Their strengths are in crossing, free-kicks and corners. We have to try to prevent these from happening. We must pay attention to this," he told a news conference.

Portugal are preparing to face an England side who have been criticised for their bland performances, but Valente said that was no reason for Luiz Felipe Scolari's men to relax.

"Their football is not always beautiful but it is effective," he said.

"We will approach this game as we have done all the others... but we will have to be cautious against England because they are a very dangerous team with a lot of experience. We always have to be attentive."

Brazil below par: Silva

AFP, Bergisch Gladbach

Defender Gilberto Silva has joined the chorus of those who say that Brazil are under-performing at the World Cup.

The reigning champions have won all four games they have played and scored 10 goals for just one against, but even coach Carlos Alberto Parreira has been critical of their form to date.

Gilberto Silva said he agreed and that further progress had to be made if the South Americans were to win a record sixth crown in Berlin on July 9.

"I really believe that we are not playing to the best of our ability right now," the Arsenal player told the FIFA World Cup website.

"We can play much, much better than this and we will need to if we want to go to the final."

Gilberto Silva started in Brazil's final group game against Japan and came on at half time as a replacement for Emerson in the last 16 round game against Ghana.

Turning to Brazil's quarterfinal clash with France in Frankfurt on Saturday, he said that the big danger-man would be his Gunners teammate Thierry Henry.

"France are a spectacular team full of great players and we will have to be at our best to get a result against them," he said.

"Thierry is a special player and a handful for even the best of defenders, but I think if we continue to play well and improve we can beat France and move one step closer to our goal."

C'Ron back in training

AFP, Marienfeld

Portugal winger Cristiano Ronaldo resumed training here Wednesday after picking up a thigh injury in the second round win over the Netherlands on the weekend.

Ronaldo caught a boot from Dutch defender Khalid Boulahrouz early in the ill-tempered 1-0 win on Sunday - which saw four send-offs and 16 yellow cards - and was replaced after 34 minutes.

At the Portuguese training camp here on Wednesday, the Manchester United player went through a rigorous stretching regime with the team physio, apart from the rest of the players.

Teammate Pauleta earlier said that he was confident coach Luis Felipe Scolari would have a full squad to pick from come Saturday's quarterfinal against England, although playmaker Deco and influential holding anchorman Costinha are out after being sent off in the win over the Netherlands.

"We're all going to be fit for Saturday. We've had six days to rest and prepare for the match," insisted Pauleta.

England profile helps Portugal

INTERNET, undated

Portugal's all-time record goal scorer Pauleta believes English footballs high profile could work against them in their World Cup quarterfinal.

Pauleta insists there are no secrets in the England side.

He said: "In a way it is easier to play against England than other teams."

"We see English players playing more often on television. We play against them more often. We have more information about their players."

The theory may explain Luis Felipe Scolari's coaching success

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France-Brazil brings back old memories

REUTERS, Hamelin

From damage inflicted by a 17-year-old named Pele to a masterful performance by Zinedine Zidane on the greatest night of their lives, France fans have vivid memories of World Cup clashes with Brazil.

"When you're a football player, your first dream is to play in the World Cup and the next one is to meet Brazil there," said France midfielder Patrick Vieira, summing up the excitement in the build-up to Saturday's quarterfinal against the holders in Frankfurt.

A 5-2 semifinal defeat in 1958 against arguably the best side in the history of the game, a quarter-final thriller won on penalties in 1986 and, of course, a magical 3-0 final triumph in 1998 have all left indelible impressions on the French.

The story starts in 1958 at Stockholm's Rasunda stadium, where a France side inspired by midfield maestro Raymond Kopa

and striker Just Fontaine challenged an awe-inspiring bunch of Brazilian artists for a place in the final. France's chances suffered a blow when defender and captain Robert Jonquet suffered a fractured leg in the 26th minute. No substitutions were allowed in competitive matches in those days and France, trailing 1-0, had to carry on with 10 men.

Pele put France to the sword with a hat-trick. The young prodigy, at the start of an illustrious career, had fine company that day in Garrincha, Didi and Vava, to name just a few.

The two sides met again at the Jalisco stadium in Guadalajara, in the quarter-finals of the 1966 finals in Mexico.

France boasted their magic midfield triangle of Michel Platini, Alain Giresse and Jean Tigana, while Brazil had Socrates, Alemao and Careca.

In a pulsating contest, a Platini

goal shortly before halftime cancelled out an early Careca strike. It came down to a penalty shootout in which Socrates and Platini missed before Luis Fernandez sent France into the last four.

Few gave France a chance when Brazil again stood in their path in 1998, this time in the final at the Stade de France.

Zidane, who was brilliant throughout a surprisingly one-sided contest, headed home twice from corners. France then had Marcel Desailly sent off on 68 minutes but remained in control, Emmanuel Petit sealing their only World Cup triumph with a late goal.

"It was madness," said Vieira, who came on as a late substitute that night. "I will always remember the hundred thousands of people on the Champs-Elysees, an entire country celebrating."

"Meeting them again is a fantastic challenge."

Rooney ready to rough it

AFP, Baden-Baden

Wayne Rooney has declared himself ready for anything Portugal's tough-tackling defence throw at him as he prepares to spearhead England's World Cup quarterfinal challenge on Saturday.

Rooney has been a marked man since returning from injury to boost England's flagging campaign, and revealed that he has already been targeted in the three matches he has played in the tournament.

But the 20-year-old Manchester United star is unfazed by the possibility of a kicking from the Portuguese in Saturday's quarter-final, the team responsible for sending him limping out of Euro 2004 with a foot injury.

And the volatile striker has vowed not to let his temperament get the better of him if the tackles start flying.

"In the games I've had so far I have had kicks but you've just got to get on with that," Rooney said.

"I'm sure it will happen again on Saturday. You've just to stay cool and get on with it."

Having completed a full 90 minutes in the 1-0 second round victory over Ecuador, Rooney feels he is edging closer to the sort of form that saw him light up the European Championships two years ago.

"I think there's still more to come from me in this tournament," he said. "I think with every training session I'm getting better, and fitter. So hopefully I can get better in the games too."

England were leading 1-0 in their Euro 2004 quarterfinal against Portugal when Rooney departed with a broken metatarsal, a game-turning injury in a match eventually lost on penalties.

Rooney watched England's shootout defeat in his hotel room, but despite the bitter disappointment of that night in Lisbon, the talismanic forward will not be looking to settle a score on Saturday.

"You've got to try and forget it really and look forward," Rooney said. "I certainly won't be going into the game thinking about revenge -- but it would be nice to beat them. As long as we keep winning I'm not too bothered."

And after nearly seeing his World Cup dream shattered by another metatarsal injury against Chelsea on April 29, Rooney is just relieved to be playing in the greatest footballing show on earth.

Speaking for the first time about the injury that gripped an entire nation until he was given the all clear to resume playing, Rooney said he knew immediately that something was seriously wrong.

"As soon as I did it I knew I'd done something bad and that I'd be out for a while," Rooney said. "Once I got the news that I'd broken my foot I was gutted. I didn't think about the World Cup at that time I did. I was playing for Manchester United and we'd just lost the league. That was as disapp

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RISE HIGHER: England striker Wayne Rooney (C) is locked in an aerial tussle with defender Gary Neville (L) during a training session at Mittelbergstadion in Buhlertal yesterday. England face off with Portugal in the World Cup quarterfinals on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP