

Practising penalties



REUTERS, Herzogenaurach

Argentina ended their practice on Thursday shooting penalties but coach Jose Pekerman said they aim to win their World Cup quarterfinal against hosts Germany without having to go to a shootout.

"We're not thinking of getting to the penalties," Pekerman said when asked if he already had five names in mind if a shootout were necessary to decide Friday's match in Berlin.

Pekerman told a news conference that although Germany have home advantage, both teams go into the game as favourites.

"We are facing a team with a lot of goal power who are quick to go from defence into attack," he said. "And that's how they defend, they retreat very quickly with their midfielders."

"If we dominate up front we may be short of space, if we sit deep we'll be a long way from goal. We have to be intelligent and orderly, that's why it's important to get to the match in the best shape to develop that idea."

"It's true that Germany are very good shooting from middle and long distance and we'll have to prepare for that over and above the game we

want to play," he said.

Asked if the winners of the Berlin match could consider their way was clear to the title, Pekerman said: "Obviously, we're playing a big game between two title favourites and it's a shame that one of them won't go further even after doing good things at the World Cup."

"But we need to be careful because there are other good teams. There's France ... and Portugal-England is another important match, without even mentioning Brazil, who were favourites before the start and continue to be so."

Pekerman was not happy to consider that Argentina had achieved their objective in reaching the last eight.

"I've always said we have to fight to be the champions. I thought that with the junior teams and also as a fan, we mustn't think of anything else," said Pekerman, who won three World Youth Cup titles with Argentina's under-20s.

Pekerman added that the match would be settled by the football displayed by two evenly balanced teams that can both be regarded as favourites.

"We give no importance to the refereeing," Pekerman said when asked what he thought of the appointment of Slovakian match official Lubos Michel.

"I want to emphasise that we are very happy here in Germany, enjoy-

ing the World Cup ... and that puts us in a position of respect (towards our hosts) and this (match) will be resolved on the pitch, playing football," he told a news conference.

"Germany have done very good things in the Klinsmann period, a renewal with many new players, an attacking style that is producing great matches for them."

"This has to be said, and the same for Argentina, who always go out to play. The truth will be revealed on the pitch."

Pekerman, speaking on the 20th anniversary of Argentina's second and last world title in Mexico, said his team would try to honour the memory of the side captained by Diego Maradona.

"More than ever, we will honour that title," Pekerman said. "Because we know just how difficult it is to get to the title."

"We also honour the title of 1978," he added, referring to Argentina's first World Cup victory on home soil.

"And we salute all the good teams Argentina have had, with and without titles."

"This team has signs of those teams," Pekerman said referring to his own players. "They way they play, the positions some of the players occupy."

"They are trying to keep the history going. In each one of these last there is a bit of that history."

Bookmaker's favourites

AFP, London

Argentina, Brazil, England and Italy are the favourites to reach the World Cup semi-finals, according to English bookmakers on Wednesday.

Argentina are rated at 6-4 to beat hosts Germany with Paddy Power, Ladbrokes and William Hill.

Italy are 8-13 on to beat World Cup debutants Ukraine, with Oleg Blokhin's side 9-2 to shock the 1982 winners.

England are marginal favourites at 10-11 on to get revenge on Portugal for their defeat against Luiz Felipe Scolari's side at Euro 2004.

Reigning world champions Brazil are 4-5 on to beat France, who are 7-2 to repeat their 1998 final triumph over the South Americans.

William Hill makes Brazil firm favourites to retain their trophy at 9-4, followed by Argentina (7-2), Germany (9-2) and England (11-2).

Ukraine are 50-1 outsiders, while Portugal are 16-1, France 11-1 and Italy 13-2.

Zagallo seeks revenge

AFP, Bergisch Gladbach

Brazil football legend Mario Zagallo said on Wednesday he hoped that Saturday's World Cup quarterfinal with France would be the final match for Zinedine Zidane, his nemesis from the 1998 final.

The 74-year-old was coach when Zidane's brace of headers inspired the French to a 3-0 defeat of Brazil, frustrating his dreams of emulating Italy's Vittorio Pozzo in winning the title twice as a coach - though Zagallo also won it twice as a player in 1958 and 1962.

"I hope very much it will be Zidane's last match," said Zagallo, who coached the 1970 winning side.

Zagallo, who is the Brazilians' technical co-ordinator at this World Cup, said that the match would be vastly different to the lopsided 1998 final when star striker Ronaldo was taken to hospital on the morning of the match after suffering a mysterious fit.

"In 1998, we had the serious problem with Ronaldo which you all will remember. "But this time it will be a fully fit Ronaldo."

France have beaten Brazil on the last two occasions they have met in a World Cup final, the 1998 final and the 1986 quarterfinal where the French -- in the last hurrah of the magical midfield of Michel Platini, Alain Giresse and Jean Tigana -- took on Zico and Socrates and won an epic match in a penalty shootout.

Sepp slams Sven style

AFP, Berlin

FIFA chief Sepp Blatter has taken a swipe at England coach Sven Goran Eriksson for playing with a sole striker in the 1-0 second round win over Ecuador.

Eriksson sent Wayne Rooney on alone up front against the South Americans in front of a five-man midfield and while he played well, England struggled in what turned out to be a dour affair.

In an interview Thursday with the Tagesspiegel newspaper Blatter said that while he was happy with most of the attacking play so far in the World Cup, he had been disappointed with the England game-plan.

"I am happy that the play is very offensive. The only exception is England who fielded just one striker in their second round match," he said.

"That is not the kind of offensive football you would expect from a title contender."

Eriksson started the World Cup against Paraguay with both Michael Owen and Peter Crouch up front.

But after Owen was ruled out of the tournament with a knee injury the Swede reverted to a fit-again Wayne Rooney playing solo up front.

Eriksson's tactics, however, were given the thumbs up by Franz Beckenbauer, a World Cup winner as a player and coach with Germany.

"In their last match they played with only one striker, Wayne Rooney, and he did a wonderful job," he told a press conference.

"It is the style of Eriksson and it is very successful. They have a chance to beat Portugal, it is a 50-50 game."



Ukraine captain Andriy Shevchenko tries a sidevolley during their training session in Potsdam on Wednesday.

Italian job in reach



AFP, Potsdam

Ukraine coach Oleg Blokhin and star striker Andriy Shevchenko on Wednesday insisted they believed the World Cup debutants could pull off an upset by reaching the semi-finals at Italy's expense.

"Italy will be a tough nut to crack but we are confident we can produce a surprise," said Shevchenko, whose teammates redeemed him after he missed a spotkick in the Ukrainians' shootout win over Switzerland in the last 16.

"The Italians have won the tournament three times and they are a step up on anything we have faced to date, but I'd say we have an even chance."

"That's what we are telling ourselves," the new 30-million-pound (54.5-million-dollar)

Chelsea striker told reporters at the team's training headquarters in Potsdam near Berlin.

The sharp-tongued Blokhin saw his nerves desert him to the extent he had to go and sit in the bowels of the stadium during the Swiss match but he said he had since recovered his poise.

"In my opinion, the pressure is on Italy as they are the favourites. At this stage, each match is a bonus for us," he said.

Blokhin admitted Ukraine "will miss" the physical attacking play of Andriy Voronin, Shevchenko's sidekick who is ruled out with a thigh injury.

"But everyone else is fit," said the former European footballer of the year, who twice played at World Cups for the former Soviet Union.

Blokhin said the war of attrition against the Swiss was the kind of match which had to be played on the road to glory - and said reigning champions Brazil, criticised for not hitting top gear to date,

knew that as well as anyone. "People keep telling me who to play and who not. But the Brazilian coach says it's not so important how we play but that we win."

"He's right." The Ukrainian Football Federation had set aside 4.5 million euros (5.6 million dollars) in bonuses for the squad just for qualifying for the finals, then hiked that to 17 million for reaching the last eight. But a place in the semis will see the cash pile doubled again.

Ukrainian sources added that in the event of the team actually winning the trophy - Blokhin insisted upon qualification that the goal was possible - then the pot of gold will hit 29 million euros.

Blokhin added his voice to the refereeing at this World Cup, saying "there have been lots of incorrect decisions. This is why there have been a record number of red cards at this World Cup."

Frank De Bleeckere of Belgium

will take charge of Friday's game. Local authorities in Potsdam have been delighted that their guests have proved themselves the best Eastern Europe has to offer at this World Cup.

Ukraine are the only team to base themselves in the former East Germany, apart from the German team who are in Berlin, and residents have been closely following the Ukrainians' progress.

To show Potsdam is right behind their bid to reach a semi-final showdown with either hosts Germany or highly fancied Argentina, local officials had sent out a clear message to the squad via the electronic scoreboard at the modest Luftschiffhafen Stadium, where Shevchenko and his teammates have been training.

"Dear Ukrainian friends, we congratulate you will all our heart for your triumph," read the message, in Ukrainian, placed on the scoreboard following the win over the Swiss.

Nesta counter-attacks



REUTERS, Duisburg

Defeating underdogs Australia, especially with a dubious last minute penalty, was never going to make Italy popular but the Azzurri have not taken kindly to criticism of their second round performance.

"Everyone against Italy" was the headline in Wednesday's edition of La Repubblica, which carried a full page review of the international press's criticism of Marcello Lippi's side.

At the last World Cup, Italian media raged about refereeing decisions that went against them but with fortune favouring the Azzurri this time, the Italian media have prickled instead at criticism of their team's tactics.

Italy defender Alessandro Nesta said the negative reaction

revealed fear of his side.

"If everyone is attacking us then it means they are afraid of us," Nesta told reporters on Wednesday.

"We are indifferent to all this stuff, the words fly away with the wind. By now it has become a tradition to attack Italian football and it seems to be in fashion," he added.

Nesta said he believed that, contrary to the critics, Italy have played more attacking football at this World Cup than previous editions.

Teammate Marco Materazzi, who will miss Friday's quarterfinal against Ukraine after being sent off against Australia, said putting on a show however should not be a priority.

"We will leave entertainment to others. You will see it from Italy after July 9," he said, referring to the date of the final.

Nesta displayed a similar attitude when asked about the image the Italian team have presented at the World Cup.

Asked how he felt the team were progressing on the second of those tasks, Nesta said: "We only have one task. If you win then the rest, being popular, will follow."

When an Argentine reporter asked a question about the scandal, Nesta snapped: "Is everything fine in your country? I think everyone needs to look after their own house."

There was outrage in Italian newspapers on Wednesday after German news weekly Der Spiegel published a satirical World Cup-related column on its Web site about the Azzurri entitled "Oiled up and greasy" which referred to Italians as "parasitical forms of life".

The article was later withdrawn and an apology posted on the Web site but that didn't stop the daily La Stampa declaring - "Italian parasites - that is how Der Spiegel prepares for the semi-final".

Asked about the article, Nesta said: "They criticise us for how we are but then they want to dress and eat like us. There is a bit of envy."



ALESSANDRO NESTA

No underdogs



INTERNET, undated

France coach Raymond Domenech is amazed at suggestions that a quarterfinal elimination for Les Bleus at the hands of world champions Brazil would be a dignified exit for his side.

Saturday's clash in Frankfurt will pitch together 1998 world champions France and the current holders from Latin America, and Domenech is baffled by the underdog status his team has been given.

Domenech said: "I am surprised to hear people say that if we lose to Brazil in the quarterfinals France has had a good World Cup."

"I think the opposite -- it would mean that we had lost and that it would be an unsuccessful campaign."

Domenech refused to declare Brazil as favourites for the match which will see the victors progress to a semifinal with England or Portugal.

The coach said: "We are neither outsiders nor favourites -- we just have a game with Brazil at 2100 hours on Saturday."

"We are looking forward with confidence, and everyone is delighted to be in the last eight."

"Brazil have been considered favourites for 40 years - they are used to playing under that sort of pressure. People have been writing us off as underdogs for 90 years."

The coach makes no secret of the fact he will consider nothing less than victory in the World Cup final as a successful outcome to the tournament for Les Bleus -- whose match with Brazil is the first clash between the teams at World Cup level since the 1998 final.

"We are building towards one objective, which is a final on July 9," said Domenech.

"I have no time for personal battles."

Domenech, who like 1998 World Cup-winning coach Aimé Jacquet has had tense relations with the French media and especially L'Equipe, added: "You haven't seen the work (on the training ground) that I have and the preparation

work. "I know what my players are capable of - you don't have the same data base of information as I have."

The coach, whose decision to persist with Patrick Vieira has been vindicated by two consecutive man-of-the-match awards for the midfielder, said: "People criticised us in the warm-up games."

"But football is different to the theatre -- when the audience only sees the performance and not the rehearsals."

"We all have a clear objective of what has to be done, and our mission is to ensure the team has everything it needs -- that no external excuses can be made -- and can build around any problems."

Domenech admits his players were motivated in their last-16 match against Spain by suggestions in their opponents' press that Les Bleus were too old.

He joked: "Do you think the Brazilians (journalists) could do the same thing for us? A player's pride is what drives him. If the Spanish (journalists) made a strategic mistake it's not our problem."

Goal drought at Germany 2006

REUTERS, Berlin

The 2006 World Cup finals could finish with one of the lowest goal ratios on record, according to FIFA statistics.

After 56 of 64 matches have been played, 132 goals have been scored for an average of 2.36 per game. The only other tournament which finished with a lower average was the 1990 finals in Italy where only 2.21 goals per game were recorded.

At the same stage of the tournament four years ago in Japan and South Korea, 147 goals had been scored. In France in 1998, the figure was two higher at 149 and the finals closed with a record 171 goals.

The highest goal average recorded was in 1954 in Switzerland when 140 goals were scored in 26 games, a staggering average by today's standards of 5.38 per game.

Kaiser's bet on fatherland

AFP, Berlin

Two-time World Cup winner Franz Beckenbauer said on Thursday he was confident Germany would be able to beat Argentina in the quarterfinals and said home advantage could be the key.

"This match will be interesting because both teams are at the same level," Beckenbauer, who is the chief organiser for this World Cup, told a press conference here.

"Argentina played excellently in their first three matches and our team was able to improve with each game."

"The match against Sweden was the best performance I have seen under Jurgen Klinsmann."

"Perhaps home advantage will make a difference tomorrow but I am pretty confident that Germany will make it to the semifinals."

Beckenbauer won the World Cup with West Germany on home soil in 1974 and was coach when they lifted the trophy in 1990 in Italy.

"Jurgen Klinsmann is doing a great job. He has changed the team in such a way that it now corresponds to his vision."

"He stepped on a lot of toes but that is only normal when someone new takes over."

"Now he has fulfilled his commitment of reaching the quarterfinals."

This is called obsession



REUTERS, Beijing

A Beijing soccer fan refused to let the small matter of his house burning down disturb his enjoyment of Tuesday's World Cup match between France and Spain.

A fire broke out in a hutong in the centre of the Chinese capital at 3am local time on Wednesday -- kickoff time in Hanover -- and gutted the traditional courtyard dwelling, the Beijing Daily Messenger reported.

"When the neighbours shouted 'fire!', I took my little baby and ran out in my nightclothes," the man's wife told the paper.

"My husband paid no attention to the danger, just grabbed the television and put it under his arm."

"After getting out of the house, he then set about finding an electric socket to plug in and continue watching his game."

The anti-social timing of the matches broadcast from Germany, which is six hours behind China, has forced some Chinese fans to go to great lengths to follow the action.

One man quit his job in Beijing to return to his hometown Chongqing so he could watch the whole tournament uninterrupted.

State news agency Xinhua reported that the 23-year-old's boss at the IT company had offered him a pay rise, but he turned it down flat, saying the World Cup was more important than his job.

The Guangzhou Daily reported that local police were forced to release a thief arrested for stealing a mobile phone when the victim refused to press charges because he did not want to miss the start of a match.

Although there are also many female World Cup fans in China, one man in the southeastern city had to sign a contract with his wife agreeing to do all the housework during the month of the finals so he could watch the matches at night.

Another from Putian, Fujian province, took a less diplomatic approach. Xinhua reported.

When his cheers during the Argentina-Ivory Coast match woke his wife and she switched off the television, he locked her in their bedroom and settled back down to watch the game ignoring her loud protests.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words.

Cryptokuip puzzle grid with a 10x10 grid and a 10x10 grid of numbers.

CRYPTOKUIP XTUUCXW PUCTQWA Z XTDZQ XTMXGPGTGW CF GWV HZKF KCTHA GVZG MW "XUHWFAZ PF GWV DQZXX"? Yesterday's Cryptokuip: IFA CERTAIN AQUATIC MAMMAL IS VERY FULL OF ITSELF, COULD YOU DEEM IT MANATEE VANITY? Today's Cryptokuip Clue: F equals N The Cryptokuip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.