



Italian defender Gianluca Zambrotta (R) comes under pressure from Ukrainian midfielder Oleg Gusiev during their quarterfinal clash in Hamburg on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Lifeless game planning leads to a lifeless game



AP, Frankfurt

This was a game that DID deserve to go to penalties. It was awful.

Instead of urging their stars to play positive, attacking soccer, Germany's Juergen Klinsmann and Argentina's Jose Pekerman must have shown them the tape of their 1990 World Cup meeting in Rome -- the worst final ever.

That game was decided by a penalty six minutes from the end. The neutrals in Rome's Olympic Stadium 16 years ago were thankful that Andreas Brehme's successful spot kick for the Germans meant they weren't forced to watch 30 minutes more.

Fast forward to Berlin's Olympic Stadium on Friday and Germany triumphed again, 4-2 in a penalty shootout after a 1-1 tie.

Pity the shootout didn't come at the start of extra time instead of the end.

What had all the makings of a classic between two teams who were talented, confident and in form, turned out to be a big letdown. There were few eye-catching moves and, until the shootout, neither goalkeeper made a memorable save.

The game also had a testy beginning and an ugly finish. Several Argentina players vented the anger of defeat on referee Lubos Michel and, while the Germans celebrated

their place in the semifinal, there were violent scenes on the field as the South American stars were prevented from getting close to the Slovakia official.

That anger should have been turned on themselves.

Having overtaken defending champion Brazil as the title favourite, Argentina was a pale shadow of the side that crushed Serbia-Montenegro 6-0 with a polished display of passing and finishing. Pekerman's team also showed in a 0-0 tie with the Netherlands it had the backup players to put on a show even if they didn't hit the target.

When it came to the biggest game in this tournament so far, a meeting with the host in Berlin, Pekerman's team was dull and lacked imagination. The coach's own performance was disastrous, capped by his resignation just minutes after the game was over.

He was unlucky that he had to replace goalkeeper Roberto Abbondanzieri with 20 minutes to go. After Roberto Ayala's header had given Argentina the lead soon after halftime, the goalkeeper went down trying to reach a cross and injured his chest.

But why did Pekerman also take off playmaker Juan Riquelme within a minute of changing his goalkeeper?

Removing his most creative player damaged his team's chances in two ways: Not only did Pekerman take the heat off the German defense, he also left himself with only one more change.

Soon after Julio Cruz replaced fellow striker Hernan Crespo,

Germany equalized on Miroslav Klose's header.

Pekerman was stuck. He had taken Riquelme off and, having made all three changes, couldn't put on his other prize attacking star, Lionel Messi, who never saw the pitch on Friday.

Two minutes from the end, Maxi Rodriguez was shown a yellow card for diving over Philipp Lahm's challenge inside the penalty area and the game went to extra time and then penalties.

After goalkeeper Jens Lehmann saved twice in the shootout, the Germans celebrated a 10th appearance in the semifinal. In addition to winning the title three times, they have been three-time runners up -- including the 2002 World Cup -- and also reached the semifinal in 1934, '58 and '70.

But even Klinsmann's rejuvenated team didn't provide many thrilling moments in this game.

As they have done so often in the past, the Germans fought back to earn a deserved tie. But twin strikers Klose and Lukas Podolski showed few of the combinations that had earned them seven goals before this game and the strikeforce only began to worry the Argentina defense when winger David Odonkor went on to use his speed down the right.

Their fans and a grateful nation won't mind that they didn't entertain. Usually just advancing to World Cup semifinals is entertainment enough.

Argentina's stars go home feeling aggrieved without reason.

It was the fans who suffered. And the game itself.

## Montero runs to Pessotto

INTERNET, undated

Gianluca Pessotto's plight has moved all his former teammates, as Paolo Montero and Stephen Appiah have flown in to be by his side.

The recently retired full-back, who had been appointed Juventus Team Manager only a month ago, is fighting for his life after falling from a window at the club headquarters in an apparent suicide attempt on Tuesday morning.

Azzurri trio Alessandro Del Piero, Gianluca Zambrotta and assistant manager Ciro Ferrara broke away from their World Cup commitments for a few hours to see their friend and now more colleagues are coming into Turin.

"When we were on the field, Gianluca was the only teammate who could tell me off. Only he had permission to give me a talking to," revealed Paolo Montero (pictured). "Now it's my turn to shake him out of it."

Former Juve hardman Montero flew in directly from Uruguay last night to visit the Molinette hospital, where Pessotto is still kept in an induced coma to help him through the three operations he has sustained since the fall. There are reports he opened his eyes this afternoon after his medication was lowered.

Stephen Appiah has also arrived after Ghana's elimination from the World Cup. "I heard what happened from the journalists after the game. I wanted to come because he is a real friend and we often spoke even after I left Juve."

The Azzurri all dedicated last night's 3-0 quarterfinal victory over the Ukraine to Pessotto and waved a flag with the message: "Forza Pessottino, we're all with you."

Last morning the fans took up that sentiment and chanted Pessotto's name as the players ran out for their training session in Duisburg.

## Drogba's transfer being scrutinised

AFP, Marseille

Didier Drogba's transfer from Marseille to Chelsea is being investigated after the French club had its offices searched on Friday, according to a source close to an inquiry into the Mediterranean club.

Marseille have been under investigation since mid-February when an inquiry by Marseille magistrates was opened to look into the management of the club under former president Christophe Bouchet from 2002-2004.

Drogba's transfer, for a reported 45-50 million dollars, in July 2004 is one of those under suspicion.

Documents and electronic data were seized in the raid, the inquiry source said.

Investigators are looking into image contracts concluded with eight players as well as provision of service contracts signed with players as they left the club.

## Zambrotta feels Azzurri spirit



INTERNET, undated

Gianluca Zambrotta scored a rare goal and set up another for Luca Toni in a wonderful performance against Ukraine.

"It was a great performance from everyone, who put in the effort and kept their cool. Of course, we all dedicate this win to my good friend Gianluca Pessotto, who is in a tough situation and needs our support."

Zambrotta was one of three Azzurri squad members along with Alessandro Del Piero and assistant manager Ciro Ferrara who flew in to Turin this week to visit Pessotto.

The Juventus Team Manager is in hospital fighting for his life after falling from a window at the club headquarters in an apparent suicide attempt. There were moving scenes

at the final whistle when the squad held up a banner that read: "Forza Pessottino, we're all with you."

"The Juventus are all very close to him, as we've been together for a lifetime, and his love gave us particular strength today," explained Zambrotta.

The full-back missed the opening win over Ghana due to an injury, but has been on fine form and was arguably Man of the Match in the 3-0 victory against the Ukraine, although FIFA gave that title to Gennaro Gattuso.

"I was also fortunate with the goal, as the 'keeper could've gotten to it and turned it round the post for a corner, but I put my strength into it and the desire to score."

Zambrotta looks forward to the semifinal with hosts Germany in Dortmund on July 4. "It's going to be particularly tough because Germany are playing at home, but we'll give everything we've got and are a difficult side to beat."

## I turned down Chelsea: Totti

INTERNET, undated

Francesco Totti has revealed he rejected the opportunity to join Chelsea, as he prefers Serie A to the Premiership.

The Roma captain has often stated he would not play for another Italian club, although there had been strong links with Real Madrid. "Chelsea came to me with a lot of money, but I didn't accept it," the Azzurri star was quoted as saying on "The Sun's" website.

"Some representatives made me an offer and they approached Roma. The club said I was not for sale, so there was no decision for me to make."

The 29-year-old plays for his hometown club in the Stadio Olimpico and insists all the gold in the world wouldn't tempt him to give the Premiership a go.

"I have never wanted to play in the Premiership as I'm not a great fan of English football," he said. "I am used to Italian football and it is different to the English style of play. I prefer the Italian way."

The alleged approach came in 2004, when Jose Mourinho took over from Claudio Ranieri at Stamford Bridge.

## ETimor TV station lifts WC threat

AFP, Dili

East Timor's tiny television network Friday lifted its threat to pull World Cup matches from screens on the half-island following a mob attack on its offices.

The quarterfinal of former colonial power Portugal against England in the early hours of Sunday had been at risk after 50 youths charged into the office and threatened staff during a civil crisis rocking the nation for weeks.

Managing director Gill Guterres said the youths were chased off by Portuguese police Wednesday but only a third of the network's 100 staff had reported for work since.

But he said extra security measures meant that the match would now be shown in East Timor, where football is by far the most popular sport.

"Support is divided, but most people support Portugal and Brazil here," he said.

The network paid less than 10,000 dollars for the right to screen the matches in East Timor because of its impoverished status, he added.

East Timor gained independence four years ago following Portuguese colonial rule, Indonesian occupation and then a UN-supervised transition period.

## Milan zoom in on Ze Roberto

INTERNET, undated

Brazilian Ze Roberto has hinted at a free transfer to Milan this summer, where he could be joined by Portugal full-back Miguel.

The Rossoneri are eager to bring in the 32-year-old, who can play in any midfield role, following the departure towards Benfica of Manuel Rui Costa.

"I want to leave Bayern Munich, because after having played for Real Madrid and in the Bundesliga, I want a new experience," revealed the Selecao star. "I don't think I'll have problems in finding another team, but I only want to decide what I'll do after the World Cup."

Ze Roberto will be out of contract this summer and its reported Milan have lined up a three-year deal worth 1.7 million pounds.

The Rossoneri have been active on the transfer market, bringing in Rennes youngster Yohann Gourcuff and Cristian Brocchi back from his loan spell at Fiorentina.

The defence also needs rejuvenating and today the Italian media maintains there is an offer in place for Portuguese right-back Miguel.

The 26-year-old has impressed for the Selection so far in the World Cup and has been compared with current San Siro hero Marcos Cafu.

He started his career in a more advanced role with Benfica, but has been transformed into an effective full-back at Valencia.

It's believed the only stumbling block to this transfer is the 7m-pound price-tag Valencia have slapped on the player, as they paid 5.5m-pound to tempt him away from Benfica last summer.

## Beautiful game fails to win over Americans



REUTERS, New York

If you look west from Germany you will see the United States stifling a yawn at the World Cup.

Despite a doubling of television ratings for the first-round matches this month, before the U.S. squad failed miserably, soccer still ranks below televised poker tournaments in a land where baseball, basketball and American football rule.

ABC-TV's average rating of 2.5 for the first eight matches it aired represents barely 8 million viewers in a nation of just under 300 million. Only 3.9 million Americans watched the 2002 World Cup final, which had an audience of 1.1 billion worldwide.

By comparison, nearly 91 million viewers watched this year's Super Bowl, the glitzy climax to the season for North America's home-grown form of football. Nearly 39 million watched the Academy Awards, Hollywood's big night, in March and 36 million tuned in for May's finale of "American Idol," a television talent show.

World governing body FIFA had hoped to boost interest in the game when it awarded the U.S. hosting rights to the 1994 World Cup.

The event attracted the largest average crowds in World Cup history and spawned Major League Soccer which now has 12 teams but has struggled to find a place in the crowded U.S. sports market.

market research service found that only 11 percent of Americans surveyed were "definitely" interested in the World Cup, compared with 45 percent of respondents world-wide.

"Despite an estimated combined \$420 million invested in official partnerships by U.S.-based corporations to gain worldwide visibility, the facts don't lie: the U.S. lags significantly behind other countries when it comes to being passionate about 'the beautiful game' of soccer," GMI said.

The poll revealed that 56 percent of Americans did not even know that the 2006 World Cup was taking place in Germany.

Soccer just is not part of the culture in a country that often prides itself on sporting isolationism.

Millions of children play the game in the U.S. but whereas spontaneous soccer breaks out on Rio and Cape Town beaches, or in the alleys of Berlin and Bologna, you will not see youngsters kicking around a ball on the streets of Philadelphia or Memphis.

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American opinion is still shaped by a handful of sports commentators who can barely hide their hostility to soccer.

Yet, while the U.S. team were competing in their fifth consecutive finals, two long-time opponents of soccer appeared to soften.

First, it was Frank Deford, a Sports Illustrated columnist, who delights in provoking soccer fans with outrageous jibes.

In a National Public Radio commentary, he actually praised the passion of the world's fans, and called soccer players "rock stars of sweat".

The transformation was fleeting, however, as Deford still thinks soccer is not for Americans.

"America is one of the few countries that escaped being infected by the soccer pandemic," Deford went on. There was more interest last month in the professional basketball and hockey playoffs in America, "the only country where soccer is not important," he said.

Another apparent convert was Jack Kemp, the former National Football League (NFL) quarterback and Republican presidential candidate, who once called soccer "socialistic and collectivistic" during a speech in Congress.

Yet he acknowledged in a posting on his Web site this week that seven or eight of his 16 grandchildren play soccer.

"Watching our USA soccer team tie the Italian team last week and on Sunday watching the athleticism of the Brazilian team, I'm hereby publicly acknowledging that soccer can be interesting to watch," said Kemp.

## 'Ukraine's future is bright'



AFP, Hamburg

Oleg Blokhin said Ukraine were leaving their first World Cup with their heads held high after Friday's 3-0 quarterfinal loss to Italy.

Ukraine belied their underdog status to reach the last eight, but were handed an Italian masterclass by Marcelo Lippi's squad in Hamburg.

Blokhin, a former USSR international and European Footballer of the Year, said: "I have to admit we were missing some of Italy's well known stars, perhaps they could have loaned as a couple -- we could have done with a Ukrainian Totti or Toni!"

But he was proud of his men led by new Chelsea signing Andriy Shevchenko who after a muted first half put Italy under serious pressure after the break but were unable to

find a response to goals from Gianluca Zambrotta and Luca Toni.

"I'm disappointed at losing but completely satisfied with our performance considering it was our first World Cup.

"We were among the best teams, we made it to the last eight, as a coach I have to be very happy with that. The sides which have made it to this stage are worthy of being world champions, and we almost made it.

"The Italian team are one of the best and doesn't forgive childish mistakes and we made a few.

"We missed a chance to score but Italy were in a different class to us."

Blokhin reckons Ukraine's showing in Germany where in their first round group stage they fell 4-0 to Spain before bouncing back to beat Saudi Arabia by the same margin and Tunisia 1-0 will have boosted his country's chances of co-hosting the 2012 European Championships.

"I do think we have a good chance of staging it with Poland, I

would like it to be so, obviously to be chosen as the host country is a very prestigious reward."

He said he was heading home to Kiev to try and build on the experience of competing on the World Cup stage for the first time.

"I've learned a lot from the coaching aspect, this has been a completely different experience to say the Champions League or the domestic championship.

"I dreamt of my family last night and will return to them to have a break and reflect and analyse and plan where to go from here.

"We have a bright future ahead of us as we've constructed a good young team. Some players are ending their careers, others are coming into the team."

As a final parting shot to the assembled media he said: "I'd just like to thank everyone for what they've written about our team while in Germany, both the science fiction and the truth!"



Ukraine coach Oleg Blokhin contemplates his next step during the match against Italy in Hamburg on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP