

German honour for Blatter

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has awarded the country's Grand Cross of the Order Merit to FIFA president Sepp Blatter for his role in the football World Cup.

Blatter said he was "moved" by the award, which he said he was receiving on behalf of all members of the football's world governing body.

"But the honour really belongs to Germany," he added.

Merkel used the opportunity to wish Italy and France luck ahead of the final in Berlin on Sunday and to congratulate the German team for reaching the semi-finals.

"The whole country is behind this team," she said.

The chancellor thanked German coach Juergen Klinsmann for doing a "fantastic job".

There have been calls for Klinsmann to be awarded the Grand Cross for leading a youthful German side into the last four of the championship.

French fans arrested

AFP, Paris

French authorities have been cracking down on World Cup related violence, Friday, dishing out prison sentences to young hooligans.

A French football fan received a four-month prison sentence for throwing a bottle at a police officer after his country reached the World Cup final.

The 19-year-old man launched the missile at a police chief in Cavailon following France's 1-0 World Cup semi-final victory against Portugal.

He denied the incident and claimed to have been a victim of police violence, but was found guilty by a court in Avignon.

Meanwhile, three youngsters from Marseille were also handed prison sentences after a night of violence in the port town following France's semi-final win.

Gangs threw missiles at CRS officers and 15 youths were arrested, with two repeat offenders receiving three months in prison, while a Marseille court gave an adult a 15-day sentence.

France plays Italy in the World Cup final in Berlin, Germany on Sunday.

Captain courageous



INTERNET, undated

Azzurri captain Fabio Cannavaro knows all about World Cup disappointment. In fact, he got an early taste even before he was part of the Italian squad at both the 1998 and 2002 World Cup Finals.

There flows through the streets of the peninsula that summer after a reverse which many Italian players from that era, and fans alike, have still not come to terms with. Yet the nation has a chance to rejoice at the weekend with arguably the most popular Nazionale since that Italia '90 version and Cannavaro is going to have a key role to play.

There can be no denying that Cannavaro has probably not only been Italy's best player at the tournament, he's arguably been the competition's best player. The foreign media have been raving about him with envy for the last three weeks, while the Italian Press are simply underlining what many of us in the peninsula have already known for years.

He's also done it with a smile on his face. After Barzagli stepped on to the pitch against Australia following the wrongful dismissal of Materazzi, Cannavaro looked at his younger colleague, smirked and said: "Andrea, let's have some fun now." The Palermo central defender, one of the least experienced in the squad, did Fabio

month after touching down in Germany under a cloud of controversy. Despite his undoubted class underlined with his performances at Juventus over the last two campaigns and being Italy's most capped player in the squad, there were calls for him to be stripped of the captaincy. His crime? To not join the media campaign in condemning Luciano Moggi, the man responsible for his move from Inter to Turin, after the Calciopoli revelations hit the news stands.

But there was no way that Cannavaro, who has also subsequently had to deal with the Gianluca Pessotto shock, was going to have the armband removed. With the determination and coolness with which he defends on the pitch, the former Parma stopper refused to step down and focused on proving that if Italy were to lift the trophy in Germany, then he deserved to be the first Italian to do so since 1982.

The 32-year-old has been a constant source of assurance throughout the tournament, despite being partnered in defence by a multitude of stoppers in the form of Alessandro Nesta, Marco Materazzi and Andrea Barzagli. While some partnerships may have suffered from a possible lack of understanding, Cannavaro's just got on with it in his own commanding way.

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proud with an accomplished display in high pressure circumstances.

There was even a broad grin at the start of the extra time period against Germany when Michael Ballack and himself tossed the coin ahead of the restart. While the Chelsea man's face personified the magnitude of what was at stake, Cannavaro's cheeky grin seemed to say it all. Italy would end the night victorious. As a result, Cannavaro will lead his side out in Berlin where he will become only the third Italian to win 100 caps after Dino Zoff who celebrated his century in the 1982 Finals and Paolo Maldini.

And he certainly has a score to settle with France after two defeats which have left their mark on the pint-sized stopper. He was in Cesare Maldini's side who were knocked out of France '98 on penalties to Les Bleus, while their Alpine cousins destroyed Azzurri dreams at Euro 2000 when they equalised at the death before snatching a Golden Goal through David Trezeguet.

Given his age, Sunday will almost definitely be his last chance at World Cup glory. But win or lose, Cannavaro has already joined the long list of great Italian defenders from Franco Baresi to Gaetano Scirea, Claudio Gentile to Beppe Bergomi to write their names in football legend. Cannavaro is simply living proof that when it comes to defending, Italians do it better.

Eiffel Tower ready

AFP, Paris

A World Cup victory for France against Italy on Sunday will be celebrated by a spectacular all-night light show at the Eiffel Tower.

The world's most-visited monument with six million visitors each year was draped with thousands of light bulbs to celebrate the millennium six years ago.

Currently these flash on and off for 10 minutes each hour during the night.

But should Zinedine Zidane and his men triumph in Berlin the huge iron structure will flash its recognition without pause throughout the night until dawn.



Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon (R) presents Fabio Capello as the new manager of the club at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday.

Capello after Juve boys

AFP, Madrid

Former Juventus coach Fabio Capello is set to try to sign three players from the ailing Italian giants for his new club Real Madrid, it was reported on Saturday.

Capello, who quit earlier this week to take the helm at Real Madrid for a second time, wants to lure Italian captain Fabio Cannavaro, fellow defender Gianluca Zambrotta and Brazilian defensive midfielder Emerson according to the sports dailies As and Marca.

According to the papers negotiations between the two clubs began on Friday over the trio - Cannavaro and Zambrotta are still in Germany preparing for Sunday's World Cup final - who will in Marca's opinion apparently cost 15million euros.

However, As disagrees and according to its contacts it will be a loan deal with the players returning to the 'Old Lady' should they be promoted to Serie A at the end of next season - the club also would prefer that none of the players go to rival clubs, with Zambrotta already interesting AC Milan.

Juventus look set to be demoted from Serie A after their lawyers said earlier this week that they were prepared to accept their punishment over the match-fixing scandal.

Juve rattled league rivals Lazio, AC Milan and Fiorentina by announcing on Wednesday they would accept relegation to the second division and a points deduction for their role in the alleged scam.

"The acceptable sanction, let's say forced but acceptable, is that proposed for the other teams ... that's to say, the second division with penalty points," Juventus lawyer Cesare Zaccone told the sports tribunal.

The prosecutor in the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) hearing has demanded Juve be dropped to the third division with the loss of six points and stripped of its last two league titles.

He has proposed that the other three be relegated to the second division next season, with AC Milan losing three points, and Lazio and Fiorentina 15 points each - 13 of the World Cup finalists squad play for the clubs involved, though none has been implicated.

They are expected to learn their fates on Monday or Tuesday next week.

Ronaldinho clothes for charity

AFP, Lisbon

An autographed green T-shirt and matching shorts worn by Brazilian forward Ronaldinho during the taping of a television chewing gum advert has fetched 477.50 euros (608.5 US dollars) in an online charity auction in Portugal.

Bidding for each of the two items, which went under the hammer separately on June 26 on Portuguese online auction site www.miau.pt, closed on Thursday.

The shorts donated by the Barcelona forward received a top bid of 157.50 euros while the T-shirt captured 320 euros. Both winning bids were made by the same online moniker.

The money raised by the auction will benefit an anti-poverty campaign run by Oikos, a Portuguese non-profit group that helps the poor, hungry and homeless.

Jury considers Serie A verdict

Football

AFP, Rome

A sports tribunal probing allegations of match fixing in Italy's top football league ended on Friday with the jury retiring to consider their verdict over the weekend.

The panel of five retired judges is expected to hand down their judgement by Monday or Tuesday after a week-long sports fraud trial implicating Serie A clubs Juventus, Lazio, AC Milan and Fiorentina.

Jury president Cesare Rupert, 81, took a swipe at criticism the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) tribunal was a kangaroo court aimed at reaching a snap decision to clarify clubs' league status before the new season.

"Someone has murmured that the sentence has been written already. If that is the case, I'd like you to give it to me because that would save us time," he said.

Juventus, the club in the eye of the storm over allegations referees were picked to favour certain teams in key matches in the 2004/05 season, have said they will accept relegation to second division in a bid to turn the page on one of Italian football's sorriest chapters.

But the three other clubs and the 25 senior Italian Football Federation (FIGC) and club officials, referees and linesmen, who face lengthy bans from sports involvement, continued to protest their innocence.

The prosecutor has demanded Juve be dropped to the third division with the loss of six points and stripped of its last two league titles.

The other three face relegation to the second division, with AC Milan losing three points, and Lazio and Fiorentina 15 points each.

As Italy goes up against France in the World Cup final on Sunday, the country's politicians are split over whether four of its top clubs, which have furnished more than half the national squad, should be hung out to dry.

Justice Minister Clemente Mastella said he could understand requests for an amnesty but Rome's socialist mayor Walter Veltroni said the sport had to be cleaned up.

And the players were not given to leniency either. "I don't know if I'm going to stay with Juventus," said Azzurri goalie Gianluigi Buffon.

"Giving an amnesty to the guilty parties in this scandal if Italy wins the World Cup would be unfair and disappointing to millions of fans awaiting these sentences," news agency ANSA quoted AC Milan midfielder Rino Gattuso saying.

Faced with the damning evidence of hours of criminal investigators' wiretaps implicating key figures, the clubs' lawyers argued that the transcripts were misinterpreted or taken out of context.

Former Italian football federation official Paolo Bergamo, who had responsibility for referee selection, for instance, is overheard telling a match official: "Try to be on the right wave length."

Absent, however, from the tribunal in Rome's Stadio Olimpico was Juve's former general manager

Luciano Moggi, who was overheard telling Pierluigi Pairetto, the head of the Italian referees' association, which match officials he wanted assigned to certain league and European games.

Moggi's lawyer Paolo Trofino on Friday reiterated demands that he could not be tried as he had resigned from the club.

He said the transcripts were worthless in light of the massive number of phone calls - 420 to 430 per day - made by "the man with a thousand contacts" among journalists, officials and politicians.

"In total, one could estimate at 100,000 the telephone calls made by my client during that season. And you know how many conversations the police have used to come to their conclusions? They have used 40," he said.

"His innocence is contained in the other 99,960 phone calls that have not been put forward."

Not everyone is convinced the clubs are guilty, though.

"There is no doubt about the unhealthy links that existed between club bosses and federation officials," an observer told AFP. "But if you consider the facts it will perhaps be difficult to prove that the course of matches was changed because everything rests on conversations that are often ambiguous."

Gattuso fancies tired Zidane



AFP, Duisburg

Italy's tigerish midfielder Gennaro Gattuso said on Friday he hopes Zinedine Zidane has used up all his energy in helping France reach the World Cup final.

Gattuso has been given the task of keeping the skilful playmaker quiet in Sunday's show-

piece in Berlin in what will be the 34-year-old Frenchman's swansong.

Zidane is giving up the game altogether after Sunday's match and Gattuso is praying the Real Madrid midfield maestro has nothing left to give in his farewell match against the Italians.

"Zidane's 34 and he's played every match at a high level. I hope he has little energy left in his body for the final," the 28-year-old AC Milan midfielder said.

Nicknamed 'The Growler' for his aggressive style, Gattuso

insists he won't be marking Zidane man-for-man, but will be out to make his life difficult.

"If Zidane comes into my path of course I'll try and stop him, that's normal, but I certainly won't be following him everywhere on the pitch," Gattuso said.

"I've never man-marked anybody. The only time I have done it was when I stayed on (Juan Carlos) Valeron in a Champions League quarter-final against Deportivo La Coruna for 20 minutes."

Finalists unable to train on pitch

REUTERS, Berlin

World Cup finalists France and Italy cannot train at the Olympiastadion before Sunday's final because of the condition of the pitch, FIFA said on Friday.

FIFA spokesman Andreas Herren confirmed that FIFA had taken the decision "because of the state of the pitch and because of the heavy rainfall in Berlin over the last couple of days."

Although the pitch appears to have stood up well to staging five World Cup games in the past month, FIFA are keen to ensure it is in the best possible condition for Sunday's showpiece.

Neither France nor Italy have played in the stadium during their runs to the final and both teams will continue to train at their base camps, with France at Hamelin and Italy in Duisburg.

'Coach handed us the keys'

REUTERS, Hamelin

France coach Raymond Domenech told his players to find the solution to their problems and the result is a place in the World Cup final, defender Willy Sagnol said on Friday.

"Pretty much so," Sagnol told reporters when asked whether self-management was what had inspired the 1998 champions' amazing resurgence in the tournament.

"We were lucky enough to have a coach who placed us in front of our responsibilities and gave us the keys," the reliable right back added.

The discussions, Sagnol said, took place following dismal draws against Switzerland and South Korea in their first two games and the prospect of another early exit after they were eliminated in 2002 without a win or a goal in the group stage.

"Together with the coach, we

talked and we found the right formula, the solution to our problems", the Bayern Munich player said.

A 2-0 win over Togo followed, sending France through to the knockout stage.

"That was important because the ghosts of 2002 were laid to rest," said Sagnol.

After that win everything clicked and Domenech's team recaptured the form that once made them the ultimate winning machine as they brushed aside Spain, Brazil and Portugal on their way to Sunday's final against Italy.

"The solution was that all the players had to give it their very best in the team's interest," added Sagnol, who is perfectly aware that internal squabbling and oversized egos had marred France's runs at previous tournaments.

"There was a good atmosphere in

the team from the start here and we were eventually able to translate that on to the pitch. Solidarity and mutual respect are values you must not forget when it comes to football," he said.

The French players and coach needed also to agree on a tactical system and they went for the defensive approach that has been their trademark in the last few outings.

"We all agreed that we needed to be competitive defensively and everybody has accepted that," said Sagnol.

"It is remarkable to see players like Thierry Henry and Zinedine Zidane participate in the defensive duties the way they do."

"Tit (Henry) could not do that all the time because it demands a lot of effort but he's doing it beautifully here. I hope he gets the reward he deserves."

Final under tight security

AFP, Paris

Thousands of riot police will be on duty in Paris for Sunday's World Cup final to prevent a repeat of the chaotic scenes that left five people dead during this week's celebrations, officials said.

Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy told reporters Friday that a "very significant" security contingent would be deployed, with an additional 4,000 riot police and gendarmes deployed across Paris and its suburbs.

Five people died in accidents across the country after France knocked Portugal out of the competition on Wednesday, while several people were injured in assaults and dozens of cars set alight by vandals.

Sarkozy denounced the "extremely violent behaviour" and "scenes of unacceptable violence" that marred Wednesday's festivities, leaving 45 police officers injured and leading to 350 arrests, 190 of them in Paris.

"We are doing all we can to ensure the party goes as well as possible," he said, adding, "We need to separate the people who are celebrating from those who come just to smash things up."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words. Includes a solution time of 21 mins.

Cryptokuip puzzle grid with numbers 1-50 and letters D, L, T, L, H, T, U, X, H, W, D, U, P.

CRYPTOQUIP D L T L H T U X H W D U P Y Z W V D V U X A Z W O P Z L Y Z J V A Z P Z R V R C C Z V X D U J Z R O A W T Q X D U V X O L A X O U T Q Z Z ? Yesterday's Cryptokuip: WHEN A PERSON'S HAT IS WITHIN EASY REACH, I SUPPOSE YOU COULD CALL THAT A HANDY CAP. Today's Cryptokuip Clue: L equals F