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'Reputations count for nothing'

SAN JOSE, June 24: Brazil said on Thursday the shock demise of Colombia at the World Cup had served as a warning that reputations count for nothing in soccer, reports Reuter.

"What happened to Colombia is without doubt a lesson for us," said Brazilian striker Romario the day after Colombia, one of the pre-tournament favourites, lost 2-1 to the United States, leaving team dependent on a mathematical miracle to reach the second round.

"When you get on to the pitch, everyone is equal. There aren't any stupid teams any more," said Romario, adding, "Colombia was a tremendous disappointment."

Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira was also wary of his team being widely tipped to win the competition.

"We have been favourites for the last five competitions and look where that has got us," he said. Brazil last won the World Cup in 1970s. "We have to forget about this business of being favourites."

Brazil, who beat Russia 2-0 in their opening World Cup match on Monday, face Cameroon on Friday in a Group B game.

On Thursday, around 3,000 drum-beating, flag-waving fans packed a stand at Santa Clara University simply to watch their idols practice free kicks in a routine training session.

Colombia in state of mourning

BOGOTA, June 24: Deserted streets and disconsolate headlines mourned Colombia's World Cup disaster on Thursday while police stood guard outside players' homes after the team received death threats, reports Reuter.

Millions of fans had looked forward to a night of celebrations to erase the team's nightmare 3-1 defeat by Romania in their opening match but the United States shattered the hopes with a surprise 2-1 win on Wednesday.

City streets throughout the country were deserted after the game and in Bogota only a handful of fans drove around honking their car horns in disappointment.

Newspapers expressed the nation's sense of shock at the defeat with angst-laden headlines.

"Colombia, what pain, what grief," read one.

"Colombia's dream died in the United States," declared another as sports commentators slammed the team, saying there was nothing to justify the poor showing.

"The World Cup — a total failure for Colombia," said Hernan Palaez of the Caracol Radio network from Pasadena, California, where the game was played.

The defeat effectively dumped Colombia, one of the pre-tournament favourites, out of the competition.

Bogota police said they were taking no chances over the death threats which forced midfielder Gabriel Gomez out of the team before Wednesday's match even though they could not say whether they were a hoax or not.

Team coach Francisco Maturana and Gomez were both threatened by an unidentified group in Medellin who said they would bomb family homes if Gomez played.

Gomez did not play and was replaced by Herman Gaviria, who plays for Atletico Nacional in Medellin.

ROK, Asia's role model?

HANOI, June 24: South Korea's progress in the World Cup has won ecstatic praise in Vietnam, where Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet described the team as "the pride of Asian football," reports Reuter.

"We Vietnamese should try to imitate them," he was quoted by the Lao Dong newspaper received Friday.

South Korea has so far drawn 2-2 with highly-fancied Spain and 0-0 with Bolivia.



Italy's Daniele Massaro is stymied by Norwegian Erik Mykland during a Group E encounter at New Jersey's Giants Stadium on June 23. Italy won 1-0 to earn a new lease of life in the 15th World Cup. — AFP photo

Bitter rivals battle anew

ORLANDO, June 24: Belgium and the Netherlands, given a fright by less-fancied opposition in their opening Group F matches, battle for early assurance of a second round World Cup place on Saturday, reports Reuter.

Belgium scraped through 1-0 against Morocco in Orlando in their first game and the Dutch came from behind to grab a late 2-1 win over Saudi Arabia in Washington.

It was a chastening experience for both, particularly the Dutch who were caught cold by a 19th minute Saudi strike before Wie Jonk hauled them back with a goal after the interval and substitute Gaston Taument headed the winner three minutes from the end.

"I feel we should thank them for what they did," Dutch striker Dennis Bergkamp said. "They woke up up. We were asleep in that game until the second half and I think it has done us some good."

Taument may well get his chance on the right wing in the starting line-up against Belgium in preference to Marc Overmars, the player he replaced in the second half last Monday.

Belgium team chief Paul Van Himst envisages a change in his formation to meet the threat he knows he can expect

the Dutch to pose down the wings and to shore up deficiencies exposed by the lively Moroccan in midfield.

Central defender Philippe Albert, who missed the Morocco match because of suspension, looks sure to return and — for this clash at least — the attack will almost certainly be reduced from three strikers to two.

Luc Nilis is likely to stand down, leaving Sunday's goalscorer Marc Degryse and Croatian-born Josp Weber, five-goal hero on his Belgian debut against Zambia earlier this month, up front.

Apart from a goalless draw in a 1987 friendly, Belgium and the Netherlands have not met since two World Cup qualifiers in late 1985.

Each won one but the Belgians went through to the 1986 final tournament in Mexico where they reached the semifinals before falling to eventual champions Argentina.

Dutch coach Dick Advocaat played down the rivalry between the two teams.

"It is not extra motivation to us that it is Belgium and that it is so long since we played them," he said. "You don't need any motivation when you are playing in the World Cup."

"They have a different style from us. They play on the counter-attack but we always play full-out attack."

Belgium will hope Weber can exploit any holes in the Dutch defence with his sharp predatory instinct.

Manager Van Himst — a fine international marksman in his day — said after the Saudi match that Dutch veteran Ronald Koeman was a very good player but had been a little slow getting back.

Belgium are the seeded team in the group but Van Himst mischievously told Dutch journalists his side would be the underdogs on Saturday.

"Holland are going to play Brazil in the final, as you've all been saying. Of course we're the underdogs," he joked at the team base in Daytona Beach on Thursday.

Argentine fullback Oscar Ruggeri recalled playing in his team's shocking 1-0 opening loss in the 1990 World Cup against Nigeria's southern neighbor. He urged his teammates to be cautious.

"That day we came into the field full of confidence, and look at what happened," Ruggeri said. "And don't forget Nigeria plays in a similar style as Cameroon."

Argentina coach Alfio Basile was trying to keep his players focused.

"We've just won a battle, not the war," he said of the game against the weak Greeks.

Argentina wary of Nigeria

WELLESLEY, Mass., June 24: Who's afraid of Diego Maradona?

Not Nigeria's "Super Eagles," who met two-time world champion Argentina on Saturday coming off a triumphant 3-0 World Cup debut against Bulgaria, reports AP.

"Maradona is a respected player," said Nigeria's Dutch coach Clemens Westerhof. "We respect him, but we are not afraid of him after the last match. We respect Argentina, but we are not afraid."

Both teams won their opening games and know they have relatively weak opponents in their last games, so the Group D match could turn into a goal-chasing clash of two powerful forward lines.

Maradona, the Argentina team captain back from drug addiction and other controversies, opened his fourth World Cup with a brilliant goal that added to three by Gabriel Batistuta in a 4-0 romp over Greece Tuesday.

But Maradona counselled caution against Nigeria.

"We have to be very careful. The Nigerians are extremely fast, and we can't give them a millimetre of advantage on the field."

Nigerian star Rashidi Yekini, who scored a goal against Bulgaria, will challenge Maradona for the limelight.

"All our players are in high spirits and raring to go," Nigerian team spokesman Austin Mgbolu said.

With two games played in four-team Group D, Argentina leads Nigeria on goal difference. Both have three points.

But even with a plus experience and a resounding start, there's a watchword for Argentina, the 1978 and 1986 champions and 1990 runner-up: Remember Cameroon.

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Milla the candid old pro

SAN FRANCISCO, California, June 24: Cameroon's most famous player, Roger Milla, said on Thursday that money was never a reason to boycott matches during a World Cup campaign, reports AP.

Cameroon's captain, Stephen Tataw, had earlier called off any possibility of a strike, a day after goalkeeper Joseph-Antoine had raised such fears.

Milla, eager to become the oldest player to play in a World Cup, was delighted with his multi-coloured jerseys. He has designed 50 different styles for the youth market in Mexico City and they are his trademark.

If he succeeds with Mexico in Friday's Group E clash with Ireland and achieves his eventual dream of a move to a big European club, it would be a wrench to leave his large family — which includes three brothers and four sisters — and his home at Plan De Los Amantes near Acapulco.

Many of the 800 residents of this coastal village are reportedly related to Campos by blood or by marriage and his family owns a small ranch. His father runs a construction materials trucking company and paid for his son to attend a private catholic school in Acapulco.

"For now, I am concentrating on this tournament and on our game against Ireland," he said in time-honoured soccer-speak.

With Campos, however, there is always the smile and the unarguable fact that this is no ordinary player and certainly not one who honours conventions on or off the pitch.

Milla, who in Italy four years ago, became the oldest player to score at a World Cup finals, has had financial problems with the Cameroon Federation. He was once appointed executive manager of the national team. More than a year later, he was still waiting for his first pay slip and had to use his own money to buy equipment and cover travelling expenses for his players.

Foxboro awaits fireworks

FOXBORO, Massachusetts, June 24: Argentina's reborn World Cup side look well enough equipped to overcome the Cameroon syndrome when they meet Nigeria in a Group D match on Saturday — a clash between the champions of South America and Africa, reports Reuter.

But they will need to show the same craft and guile as they did in the 4-0 rout of Greece on Tuesday to counter the rapid thrusts of Nigeria's pacy attack spearheaded by the tall Rashidi Yekini.

Their strikers Gabriel Batistuta, hat-trick scorer against Greece, and Claudio Caniggia — playing with a painful, bruised toe — can match, if not better Yekini and fellow striker Finidi George for speed and finishing.

Nigeria's Dutch coach Clemens Westerhof said Yekini, who scored in the Africans' 3-0 victory over Bulgaria in Dallas on Tuesday, should have had three.

"You have not seen the real Super Eagles yet," he said.

The key for Argentina lies in midfield where Basile will be looking for rising stars Fernando Redondo and Diego Simeone to found a solid base and dictate the pace.

Redondo, who will be playing his club football for Real Madrid next season, said: "Argentina have more options in attack."

Nigeria snatched the initiative from Bulgaria after the Europeans had failed to capitalise on a dominant start.

Westerhof did not feel the need to man-mark Bulgaria's Barcelona star Hristo Stoichkov, who he did not consider so much of a danger on the ball. But he will not give Argentina's captain Diego Maradona, at 33, still unmatched as a ball player, the same room.

Hinting that attacking midfielder Augustine Okocha of Eintracht Frankfurt might be given the man-to-man task, Westerhof said: "You don't put a woodpecker on Maradona, you put a star on a star."

Basile said: "We won't put a man on Yekini. I'm not going

to change. Every time people mention the match against Colombia I tell them that I would play them the same way again."

But Argentina have made a significant improvement since the debacle in Buenos Aires and also shrugged off the unpopular defensive shackles of the 1990 World Cup.

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Okocha, who is nursing a minor knee injury, said he was not sure whether he would play, but that if he did "Maradona will also have to mark me. I'll play when I have the ball."

The Nigerians, in their first finals believe they can win the group, to stay in the Boston area and play their second round match at the Foxboro Stadium, venue of Saturday's match.

PROBABLE TEAMS

ARGENTINA: 12-Lusi Islas, 4-Roberto Sensi, 13-

AUGUSTINE OKOCHA

Fernando Caceres, 6-Oscar Ruggeri, 3-Jose Chamot, 14-Diego Simeone, 5-Fernando Redondo, 10-Diego Maradona, 19-Abel Balbo, 7-Claudio Caniggia, 9-Gabriel Batistuta.

NIGERIA: 1-Peter Rufai, 2-Augustine Eguavoen, 3-Ben Iroha, 5-Okechukwu Uche, 6-Chidi Nwanu, 10-Augustine Okocha, 14-Daniel Amokachi, 15-Sunday Olieh, 11-Emmanuel Amunike, 7-Findi George, 9-Rashidi Yekini.

Referee: Bo Karlson (Sweden)

Kick-off: 2000 GMT.

Story of Yekini's success

BOSTON, Massachusetts, June 24: This has been a year of unending success for Rashidi Yekini.

Africa's top striker who now rates among the most dangerous in European club football, reports AP.

His 21 goals made the Nigerian leading scorer in Portugal, he hit eight of his country's 17 goals in the World Cup qualifiers and also top scored as Nigeria won the African Nations Cup.

To cap it all, he signed for Greek club Olympiakos before the finals with a 100,000 dollars a month salary.

Then, and Yekini hopes it will be his final word, he scored Nigeria's opener and made another in a 3-0 upset of Bulgaria when they took their World Cup bow this week in Dallas.

Now the 29-year-old striker faces probably the sternest test of his career against Argentina here on Saturday.

Team-mates nickname Yekini the "Hulk" for his bulldozing style or the "Kaduna Bull", after his town of origin in northern Nigeria. He certainly cut an imposing figure at 6ft 11.83m and just over 13 stone (185lb, 84kg).

"Of course I was happy to score against Bulgaria but the main thing was to get off to a

winning start. Anyway my performances depend greatly on support from my team-mates," he said.

Yekini learnt his football as a child by slipping away from

for a lot of hard work throughout my career."

His career really took off in 1990, when he signed for Portuguese club Vitoria Setubal from the Ivory Coast side Africa Sport, of Abidjan.

His 89 league goals in three and a half seasons in Portugal inevitably led to interest from other European clubs and he was linked with French sides Lens and Monaco before opting for a two-year deal with Olympiakos.

"Some people were surprised by my choice but the offer of 100,000 dollars a month from the Greeks was an offer I just could not refuse," he said.

But he will never forget his roots. "Nothing gives me more pleasure than scoring for Nigeria. I have had tiffs with Setubal because of my desire to play for my country," said Yekini, a strict Muslim.

Nigeria's coach, the Dutchman Clemens Westerhof, said: "Players like Yekini do not grow on trees. He's one of a kind, has amazing goal instincts and is a big man in every way."

Eusebio is the only African-born player to finish as top scorer at a World Cup, scoring nine at the 1966 finals. Yekini will never be in the same class as the Portuguese forward but the Golden Boot Award might not be beyond him.

Americans discover soccer

DANA POINT, Calif., June 24: After 78 years of obscurity, soccer in the United States was hot Thursday, reports AP.

All day long, the telephones kept ringing at the Dana Point Resort. Television stations wanted Tony and Tab, Alexi and Cobi.

Wednesday night's 2-1 upset of Colombia put US soccer player's names in the news, and possibly ensured the World Cup will be a success.

"Maybe 10 years from now they're going to talk about whether the US is going to win the World Cup," goalkeeper Tony Meola said.

It might have been the most

important win in the history of US soccer. The United States won a World Cup game for the first time since 1950 and is almost certain to advance past the opening round for the first time since 1930. About 2.7 million homes were tuned in to the ESPN cable channel that carried the game with English language commentary, and there may be a record US television audience for soccer when the Americans play Romania on Sunday in their final first-round game.

"We've seen people on the freeways with their windows painted USA 2, Colombia 1," things were never seen before," defender Paul Caligiuri said.

For so many years, they'd

been regarded as those guys playing that foreign sport. As recently as May 7, a game against Estonia at Cal State-Fullerton drew just 2,158.

But now, it's sort of like the Olympic ice hockey team in 1980. US sports fans who knew almost nothing about soccer are starting to rally around the flag. It may not be as overwhelming as it was for hockey, but it's starting to happen.

"That was inspiring, what they did. The Mike Eruzione, the Jim Craig, athletes who normally don't get attention," Caligiuri said, recalling two stars of the 1980 Olympic ice hockey team. "I think that's happening for ourselves, too."

THE FRENCH HAVE PROBLEMS OF A DIFFERENT KIND IN THEIR NEXT MATCH. KUWAI'S PRINCE FAHD MANAGES TO PERSUADE THE REFEREE TO DISALLOW A GOAL AGAINST HIS SIDE.



THE SPANISH FANS ARE ENJOYING THE FOOTBALL FIESTA BUT ARE DISAPPOINTED IN THE FORM OF THEIR OWN TEAM. IN A MEMORABLE MATCH, UNFANCIED NORTHERN IRELAND BEAT THEM 1-0.



AS THE FIRST ROUND ENDS, DEFINITE FAVOURITES HAVE EMERGED. BRAZIL, EXHIBITING THEIR SAMBA SOCCER OF OLD, PROVE MUCH TOO GOOD FOR THE SOVIET UNION AND GALLANT SCOTLAND.



IN THE THREE-TEAM SECOND ROUND GROUP, BRAZIL FINALLY KNOCK OFF ARGENTINA'S TOPPLING CROWN. JUNIOR ACCLAIMS HIS CLASSIC GOAL WITH A DANCE OF DELIGHT.



ARGENTINIAN STARLET MARADONA VENTS HIS FRUSTRATION WITH A SPITFUL FOUL AND DEPARTS THE TOURNAMENT IN DISGRACE. HIS DAY WILL COME.



BRAZIL NOW NEED ONLY A DRAW TO REACH THE RE-INTRODUCED SEMI-FINALS. BLOCKING THEIR WAY - THE ITALIANS WHOSE IRON-MAN DEFENDER GENTILE HAS JUST GIVEN MARADONA A HAIRY INTRODUCTION TO WORLD CUP FOOTBALL.



DISPLAYING A REFRESHINGLY ATTACK-MINDED ATTITUDE, ITALY FIND THEMSELVES 2-1 AHEAD AT HALF-TIME. PAOLO ROSSI TWICE MAKES CAPITAL OUT OF BRAZIL'S DEFENSIVE INDISCRETIONS.



BUT IN 68 MINUTES, FALCAO CRACKS HOME A ROCKET TO TIE THE EPIC GAME AT 2-2. BRAZILIAN DRUMS - AND HEARTS - BEAT AGAIN. CAN THEIR TEAM NOW HOLD OUT FOR THE PRIZE THEY NEED?

