

Baggio, a host in himself

FOXBORO, Massachusetts. July 10: Roberto Baggio, a consummate finisher, makes the most of the small morsels provided by a workmanlike Italy team that reached the World Cup semifinals on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Often fading out of the picture for long spells in the game, the Juventus striker sprung to life in the dying minutes of Italy's quarter-final against Spain to drive home the winner in a 2-1 victory.

Had Julio Salinas scored with a clear chance at the other end five minutes earlier, the Spanish might well have been going on to New York instead of Italy.

Goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca, back from a two-match suspension, saved Salinas's shot with his left boot. It was one of several crucial saves he made in the second half.

"Football is full of such episodes," Baggio said. "I've been working hard to show my worth."

Baggio struggled in the first round to make his mark on a tournament he was expected to take by storm.

He finally broke through with a last-gasp equaliser against Nigeria in the second round, then scored the winner from a penalty in extra time.

Spanish coach Javier Clemente, asked to explain why Baggio fades in and out of matches, said: "He was very well marked by (Rafael) Alkorta. Playing in his advanced position it's difficult to be dynamic and participate continuously."

"Both Baggios are great players, that's not news," Clemente added.

Dino Baggio, namesake and teammate but no relative of Roberto, scored Italy's opening goal in the 26th minute. The pair have netted five of Italy's six goals in the tournament.

Roberto Baggio in the last two games took Italy to the semifinals. Those are the facts," said former Italy striker Giorgio Chinaglia. "Like today, he didn't play too well in the second half, touched one ball. It was very important."

Such goals could now be called "Zona Baggio" in Italy after his World Cup exploits.

Since the 1930s, goals in the dying minutes of a match have in Italy been known as "Zona Cesarini" after Argentine-born Juventus winger Renato Cesarini, who made a habit of making last-gasp strikes.

"If Baggio continues like this it will pass from 'Zona Cesarini' to 'Zona Baggio,'" coach Arrigo Sacchi said.

Media hails Sacchi

ROME, July 10: Success on the soccer field has transformed Italy's national team from struggling starts to miracle workers, reports AP.

Sports pages and commentators Sunday gushed forth with their most lofty adjectives to describe Italy's 2-1 victory over Spain that advanced the team to the semifinals of the World Cup.

"Italy's Destiny," the Newspaper La Repubblica wrote. It suggested that only a twist of bad luck could keep Italy from winning the World Cup.

Il Messaggero proclaimed: "Italy: Two Baggios of the Sun," in reference to goals by Roberto and Dino Baggio in the win over Spain.

"Italy was in the Baggio zone," wrote Il Tempo.

Roberto Baggio — who was derided by the Italian press for lackluster play early in the tournament — was elevated again to star status. Baggio, who is not related to Dino, also scored a late goal in regular time against Nigeria last week to put the game into extra time. Italy won 2-1 on Baggio's penalty kick.

After the win over Spain, some fans marched in celebration carrying cardboard cut-outs of Baggio used in gas station advertisements. Other fans splashed in fountains on a muggy evening.

Game stories on TV and the press even topped coverage of the Group of Seven summit in Naples. But US President Clinton couldn't resist getting into the spirit, joking that Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl make a 1 billion lire (dhs 600,000) bet on which team will go farther in the World Cup.

Italy will play the winner of the Germany-Bulgaria match on Wednesday.

The once-ridiculed coach Arrigo Sacchi also is now basking in the team's glory. Newspapers ran photos of him flashing a huge grin. Before, the editors favored photos reflecting gloom and apprehension.

"Bravo, Sacchi, bravo," yelled the announcer on state-run TV as the team rejoiced after beating Spain.



Roberto Baggio dodges past Spanish goalkeeper Andoni Zubizarreta to seal the fate of the quarter-final encounter at the Foxboro Stadium on July 9. Baggio's goal gave Italy a 2-1 win and a ticket to the semifinal. — AFP photo

Pagliuca's new lease of life

FOXBORO, Mass. July 10: A nightmare is over for Gianluca Pagliuca, reports AP.

Forced to sit out two World Cup games after an expulsion for deliberate hand-ball, the Italian goalkeeper was terrified he might be held responsible for the team's elimination.

But his saves made sure they weren't.

Pagliuca's outstanding performance in Italy's 2-1 quarter-final victory against Spain propelled the Azzurri into the World Cup semifinals and healed his bruised morale.

"I'm so happy for the contribution given to the team. I badly needed a good performance in this game," the 27-year-old Sampdoria player said after Italy's second thrilling win in a row.

"You can't imagine my suffering in the last two weeks, following my ejection. And the uncertainties about my comeback, taking the place of a friend who did well in my absence."

Red carded after 21 minutes of Italy's preliminary round game against Norway, Pagliuca missed qualifying games against Mexico and Nigeria in which substitute goalie Luca Marchegiani of Lazio performed well.

Pagliuca handled the ball outside the penalty to stop a Norwegian breakthrough, was ejected and received an automatic two-game suspension.

Italy struggled to a 1-0 victory playing one man down.

"I did it to stop the team conceding a goal which could have meant elimination," Pagliuca said. "But staying out for two games, at a crucial time of the competition, was a hard blow for my morale."



GIANLUCA PAGLIUCA

Sacchi decided to take Pagliuca back on the starting lineup on the eve of the game against Spain. He repaid the coach's confidence with decisive saves.

In the 84th minute he made a brilliant save. Spanish forward Julio Salinas rushed unmarked into the Italian area and Pagliuca stopped his goal-bound flick with the tip of his boot.

"When Salinas approaching the net, all alone, I thought that our World Cup trip had come to an end," Pagliuca said.

"Instead I managed to stop him and, shortly after, Baggio sealed victory."

"I was not surprised at Roberto's goal. He never surprises me when he makes good things, he surprises me when he does not," said Pagliuca, whose soccer career was put at risk last year by a serious highway accident.

"Pagliuca was very good, he's the No. 1 goalie of the team and I thought he deserved his place back, although Luca (Marchegiani) was equally good in the previous games," Sacchi said after the victory at Foxboro stadium.

About Marchegiani's substitution, Pagliuca said "If I were Luca I could have been upset by Sacchi's decision. The coach made a very difficult choice."

"I always felt the No. 1 in the team. I think I deserved to play today," said Pagliuca, who faced some criticism for the goal allowed in Italy's 0-1 upset against Ireland in the World Cup opener.

Pagliuca was now looking forward to the semifinal match at Giants Stadium Wednesday, against the winner of Sunday's quarterfinal between defending champion Germany and Bulgaria.

"I hope it's Bulgaria, but realistically it should be Germany," said Pagliuca.

Asked to whom he wanted to dedicate Saturday's victory, Pagliuca said, without hesitation: "To myself, I deserved it."

CUP HIGHLIGHTS

UNDATED [AP]. Saturday's results — Italy 2, Spain 1, Brazil 3, the Netherlands 2.

Stars of the Day — Roberto Baggio, Italy, scored in the 88th minute, lifting his team into the semifinals with a 2-1 victory over Spain. It was Baggio's second straight goal in the dying minutes of a game.

Brazilian defender Branco, a replacement for the suspended Leonardo, scored on a 25-metre free-kick in the 81st minute for a 3-2 victory over the Netherlands.

Quotes of the Day — "I was not surprised at Roberto's goal. He never surprises me when he makes good things, he surprises me when he does not." — Italian goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca on Baggio's winning goal against Spain.

"It's terrible. I think the linesman is absolutely blind; he was three yards offside. It's a terrible way to get a second goal. It is something we will never get over. It's one of the saddest things in my career." — Rob Witschge of the Dutch team, which argued vehemently that Romario was offside on his goal in Brazil's 2-1 victory.

Moving On — Brazil and Italy, both three-time winners of the World Cup, moved into the semifinals.

Moving Out — Spain and the Netherlands headed home after close losses in which they played well.

History — The last time Brazil advanced to the final four was in 1978; when it finished third, beating Italy for that spot. Brazil won the tournament in 1958, 1962 and 1970.

Fatigue worries Sacchi

MARTINSVILLE, July 10: Italy's real foe in the World Cup semifinals will be fatigue, coach Arrigo Sacchi said Sunday, reports AP.

Italian players are tired out after overtime play against Nigeria, two 40-against-1 games and Saturday's tough quarterfinal match against Spain played in high heat and humidity.

Sacchi said it got so bad that Roberto Baggio lacked the energy to celebrate his 88th-minute goal that clinched the 2-1 win over the Spaniards.

"Roberto was so exhausted that he could not even raise his arms in triumph," he said.

Sacchi said he was more worried by the deteriorating physical condition of his players than by the next opponent of the "Azzurri" (Blues) at Giants Stadium on Wednesday.

"We have spent more energy than other teams following our misfortunes in the previous games. I hope we can recover physical and psychological strengths in three days," he said.

Neapolitans toast victory

NAPLES, Italy, July 10: As Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi rushed off from a news conference at the economic summit, an aide whispered in his ear the real news of the day: Dino Baggio had scored, reports AP.

The first day of the summit in the hushed, gilded rooms of the Palazzo Reale was ending. But Naples and the rest of this soccer-obsessed country were in the grip of World Cup fever.

Everywhere Neapolitans huddled around flickering television sets placed inside and outside coffee bars. Several hundred Italian reporters, technicians and government officials crowded around a television, in a press tent in a palace courtyard — even during Berlusconi's press conference. They roared at each near-goal.

Soldiers patrolling cordoned-off streets around the palace shook their first in triumph when people from windows shouted after Roberto Baggio (Dino's unrelated teammate) scored Italy's second goal. The few official cars allowed honked their horns.

Interest rates, the dollar, economic aid — it all became irrelevant when the Italian team took the field in Foxboro, Mass., against Spain to stay alive in the tournament. Italy's 2-1 victory put them in the semifinals.

After the game, Neapolitans poured into the streets in

swirls of motor bikes and cars, waving flags and triumphant fists. But not in their usual places. Streets leading into the central squares are cordoned off for Group of Seven security. Police there turned back youths on motor bikes. A few fans stood around sheepishly.



SILVIO BERLUSCONI

unsure whether to celebrate.

"We couldn't party like we wanted to," said unemployed Vincenzo Murolo, 26, who stood on a corner of Via Toledo and spoke over the deafening roar of whistles, air horns, car horns and motors.

Soccer here inspires a devoted following bordering on the religious. When Roman Catholic Church figures suggested moving the traditional game day from Sunday to

Saturday, league officials scoffed. The Italian league is the world's best, and richest.

"Soccer is in our blood, not like in America," said Gennaro Paduano, 50, a hospital worker. "When we saw the second goal, we all had a heart attack."

Berlusconi is perhaps Italy's No. 1 fan. He owns AC Milan, last season's European champions and the country's most successful team. Seven of its players man the national squad. When Berlusconi, a millionaire businessman, entered politics five months ago, he resigned all corporate titles except one: president of AC Milan.

He named his new political party "Forza Italia" (Let's Go, Italy) after a soccer cheer. In Rome, a celebrating resident hung a Forza Italia banner from her clothesline after the game.

After patiently answering reporters' questions for 45 minutes in the Rococo Court Theater of the palace, Berlusconi went off for a quick meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin with the hope of rushing back to the Hotel Vesuvio to catch the second half of the game.

At a separate news conference, French President Francois Mitterrand tried to hurry reporters so he could see part of the match before the summit dinner. When journalists persisted in asking questions, he finally said to one woman, "You are no sportswoman."

Family with Hagi all the way

CONSTANTA, Romania, July 10: In a worker district on the outskirts of this Black Sea port, the family and trainer of Romania's most famous soccer son are savouring his success, reports AP.

Six members of the close-knit Macedonian family of Gheorghe Hagi returned to Constanta after three weeks in the United States to watch Romania's most important match to date at home with family and friends.

"I wanted to be at home to watch the match because it was too much for my heart," said Hagi's mother, 64-year-old Chirita Hagi. She has been on medication since a heart attack nine years ago.

Family members and friends gathered Saturday afternoon to drink coffee in the courtyard of their five-roomed house shaded by vines. The mood was optimistic.

"Hagi is at the peak of his career," said Josef Bukoese, a 58-year-old ethnic Hungarian talent scout. "He is the creator on the field but he also finishes."

Nineteen years ago Bukoese — a right-winger for Romania in the 1960s — discovered Hagi one morning in a school yard.

"It was clear he was very talented," he recalled, sipping coffee.

Bukoese took Hagi under his wing until 1981 when the young soccer star joined the national youth division in the capital Bucharest.

Now Hagi, earning dhs 900,000 a year at Brescia, Italy, has all the trappings of success.

It wasn't always like this. 29 years ago Hagi was born in the village of Sacele, 50 kilometers (30 miles) north of Constanta. He was the third child of a couple of peasants.

In the village peasants grew corn and sunflowers and raised sheep and goats. Soccer was seen as something strange.

They moved to Constanta when Hagi was 7.

Hagi's mother remembers her son always asking money for tennis shoes and soccer balls. "We didn't really have that much money, but you can't refuse your own child," said the tiny dark-eyed woman whom Hagi closely resembles.

Hagi's 61-year-old father, Iancu Hagi, who works in the construction industry for a monthly wage of 140,000 lei (dhs 83) said: "The family, like any family, is delighted at the success of their talented son."

Not only the family or the city of 250,000 people, but all of Romania are pinning their hopes on this 1.73-metre (5-foot 8-inch) midfielder.

"Before we could only dream of hope," said his father. "Now we can feel it."

Kick-ins come back next yr

DALLAS, July 10: Three European leagues will experiment with kick-ins instead of throw-ins next season, FIFA general secretary Sepp Blatter said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Blatter said the Belgian and Hungarian Second Divisions and an English semi-professional league would test the kick-ins and said he expected the change to be written into the laws of the game within two years.

"I am sure that in two years the kick-in will replace the throw-in in the laws of the game and then we will have an even faster game than we have now," Blatter said in an interview with Australia's SBS TV network.

The kick-in, used in soccer in the 1860s and 1870s, was replaced by the throw-in in 1882.

Blatter said the kick-in would also add to the skill element. "There will be more technique than we have now, because by kicking the ball in it is easier to control it."

FIFA tested the kick-in during last year's World Youth Cup in Australia.

Blatter also said that sudden-death goals would be introduced at the next World Cup finals with the first team scoring in extra time taking victory.

Bruguera's third Swiss Open

GSTAAD, Switzerland, July 10: French Open champion Sergi Bruguera clinched a hat-trick of Swiss Open titles here on Sunday as he beat comeback man Guy Forget, reports AFP.

The Spaniard dispatched wild-card entry Forget after losing the first set 6-3.

The Frenchman's resistance continued during the second, which he lost 7-5, but then, short of match fitness, he caved in as Bruguera comfortably wrapped up the clay-court encounter 6-2, 6-1.

Forget admitted: "I played well for the first two sets but I started to run out of steam."

Forget, however, had every reason to be pleased. A winner at Beckenham, he also reached the Wimbledon fourth round after a disastrous 1993 which saw him spend more time on the surgeon's table than on the tennis court.

A knee operation saw the top-10 player fall to 11300th in the world but his run of successes will now take him well inside the 200 mark — although continuing concerns over his knee mean he will miss France's Davis Cup clash with Sweden at Cannes next weekend.

Spain back to square one

FOXBORO, Mass. July 10: They came with so much hope. They leave with the same disappointment.

Spain, considered a European power and with what many believe is one of the top domestic leagues in the world, fly home from their ninth trip to the World Cup still trying to figure out why they can't win the big one.

They won the European championships in 1964. They only once have advanced past the World Cup quarterfinals, and that was 44 years ago.

Unlike other teams, Spain can't use the standard excuses. Nigeria can blame inexperience, Colombia can point to overconfidence.

Even Italian coach Arrigo Sacchi talked of his team's "buona fortuna" (good fortune) and admitted that the Spaniards deserved better.

Spain allowed two goals in five minutes to fall to a 2-2 draw with South Korea, but came back in the next game to draw with defending champions, Germany 1-1.

They dominated Switzerland in the second round, earning them a reputation for having one of the best defences and midfield systems in the tournament.

The Spaniards scored 10 goals, allowing only six. In the quarterfinals, Spain were given an opportunity to upset one of their fiercest rivals. One that was struggling. So what happened?

"We came to win the World Cup, although we knew that would be difficult with teams like Germany, Brazil and Italy," said Jose Luis Caminero. "But we finally went down against Italy, a three-time world champions and I think the team and its supporters can be

proud of what we've done."

The second remark betrays the first and essentially reveals one of Spain's great failings as a soccer nation: its underlying sense of inferiority.

Nobody honestly expected Spain to win the World Cup. And so not even the players were too surprised to get knocked out. That would never be the case in Brazil, Germany or Italy.



JAVIER CLEMENTE

Coach Javier Clemente disclosed another reason recently when defending his choice to use much criticised striker Julio Salinas: he had no one else.

In Saturday's game against Italy, Salinas came on to join defender Luis Enrique Martinez to make up Spain's firing line and it just was not enough to win in the top echelon of soccer.

Salinas missed a prime opportunity to give Spain the lead with six minutes remaining. Instead, three minutes later, Roberto Baggio added another chapter to Italy's storied soccer history. It also put another black mark in Spain's.

"The experience of Italy showed today," midfielder Jose, Mario Bakero said. "We

just weren't able to finish off our attacks. I'm not angry that we lost, because I thought we played well."

But Bakero should have been angry and Spain should have finished off their attacks.

Clemente has argued that Spain in their awe of foreign strikers has failed to cultivate solid forwards of their own. The country's top clubs, such as Barcelona with Romario and Hristo Stoichkov, Real Madrid with Chilean Ivan Zamorano, and First-Division title challenger Deportivo with Bebeto have relied for too long on foreigners to get what counts — goals.

It was a Romario that Spain were sorely missing Saturday. And if the national side doesn't find one, they will continue on reaching World Cup quarterfinals, doing well... and then getting knocked out.

Spaniards' spirit still high

MADRID, July 10: Spain's soccer fans put a brave face on their country's elimination from the World Cup at the hands of Italy, reports Reuters.

"Spain dies with grandeur," said the daily El Pais, "they fell honourably," said the sports daily as.

Others were more dramatic. "God is an Italian," was the headline of El Periodico.

Julio Salinas, who blew a clear chance of a goal just seven minutes from the end of Saturday's match, said it was a game he would never forget.

"I'm sorry, above all for the team, for the coach and for the whole of Spain," he said.

The Basque forward added: "That goal would have got us to the semifinals because the Italians were dead, too tired to move."



Brazilian defender Mazinho and Dutch midfielder Rob Witschge are engaged in an aerial tussle during their World Cup quarter-final match at the Cotton Bowl Stadium on July 9. Brazil won 3-2 and advance to the last four. — AFP photo