



Share The Passion



Will it be history repeated?

NEW YORK, July 12: It could be a repeat of that classic World Cup final of 1970. Brazil and Italy, both three-time winners of the World Cup, have every chance of producing a rematch of that final in Mexico City 24 years ago when a Pele-led Brazilian team trounced the Italians 4-1 with some of the most breathtaking soccer ever played, reports AP.

To reach this year's final on Sunday, Brazil must get Past Sweden and Italy have to down Bulgaria in Wednesday's semifinals. Odds makers have them favoured to do so, though FIFA banished Italy's Mauro Tassotti from the Cup Monday for an elbow in the quarterfinal win over Spain.

If Brazil and Italy survive, it will set up a Romario vs Roberto Baggio final with several other intriguing rivalries, much like that 1970 contest.

In Aztec Stadium, Pele, Jairzinho, Gerson and Carlos Alberto fired the goals that crushed Italy and had the world admiring the Brazilian flair.

Rather like at these finals, the Italians went into the game with a traditionally miserly defence and fast counter-

tacking style that made good use of strikers Luigi Riva and Roberto Boninsegna, backed by creative midfielders Gianni Rivera and Sandro Mazzola.

Man for man, Italy probably had a stronger team than they do now. Then again, so did Brazil.

Pele headed the Brazilians ahead in the 18th minute only for Boninsegna to level on a breakaway eight minutes before halftime.

After the break, the Brazilians simply tore the Italians apart, Gerson firing home from the edge of the box, Jairzinho making it 3-1 five minutes later and Carlos Alberto scoring a memorable fourth.

The final goal is one of the greatest of all-time in soccer, involving 12 passes from the edge of Brazil's penalty area and a stunning finish from the fullback.

With players of the ability of Marcio Santos, Mazinho, Rai, Dunga, Zinho, Bebeto and Romario, Brazil could go close to emulating that level of skill.

But their defence will have a fired-up Roberto Baggio to deal with.

Unable to score in Italy's first three games, the Juventus superstar knocked in Italy's late equalizer against Nigeria just when his team looked set to go out. He then hit the win-

ner from the penalty spot.

In the 2-1 quarterfinal victory over Spain he struck again with the winner two minutes from the end.

In the semifinals, Bulgaria also will be wary of Baggio while the Italians must handle another in-form striker, Hristo Stoichkov.

With good support from Emil Kostadinov and Yordan Letchkov, Stoichkov was a handful for Argentina and defending titlist Germany, the two 1990 finalists, and Bulgaria beat both on the way to the semifinal.

"Offence is Bulgaria's strength and we will have to watch out for Stoichkov and Kostadinov, who are among the world's best forwards and can lead devastating counterattacks," said Italian coach Arrigo Sacchi.

"It's going to be another battle. The best way for stopping them would be a pistol."

Brazil had problems dealing with Sweden in the first round, Romario scoring the equalizer in a 1-1 tie.

The Swedes have top-quality attackers in Martin Dahlin, Tomas Brodin and Kennet Andersson but will miss influential midfielder Stefan Schvarz, who will miss the game through suspension.



Swedish forward Tomas Brodin (C) answers reporters' questions at the team's base in Marina del Rey, Los Angeles on July 11. — AFP photo

Bald beaters from Balkans

EAST RUTHERFORD, New Jersey, July 12: The 1994 World Cup was supposed to be a showcase for Colombia's shock-haired Carlos Valderrama or, until he walked out, the Dutch deadlocks of Ruud Gullit, reports Reuter.

Instead, all eyes are now fixed on a bald midfielder and a goalkeeper with a hair transplant who will be challenging the owner of soccer's most famous ponytail for a place in the World Cup final.

While Italy and Roberto Baggio trained behind closed doors on Monday morning, Bulgaria's unlikely collection of world-beaters were slumbering behind closed curtains.

They went partying in Manhattan on Sunday night after pulling off the biggest quarterfinal upset in recent World Cup history, leaving everyone else wondering how they had failed to spot the fabulous Balkan boys earlier.

The refreshing story of how an unheralded East European team, who scraped into the finals and flew in under a cloud of financial disputes, managed to knock out Argentina, Mexico and Germany in the space of 11 days has its roots all over Europe.

The rest of the world already knew of Hristo Stoichkov, the Barcelona striker responsible for Bulgaria's equaliser on Sunday, but ignored the fact that many of his teammates had also been snapped up by leading foreign clubs.

As the Germans discovered to their cost, the phenomenon has benefited both parties, Stoichkov and Emil Kostadinov

may be more familiar names but Yordan Letchkov and Borislav Mihailov have been a revelation from Sofia to Sao Paul and beyond.

Letchkov, the prematurely bald Hamburg midfielder who celebrated his 27th birthday last Saturday, had won a mere 14 caps before the tournament, scoring just one goal.

His perfect diving header which won the match on Sunday took his finals tally to two, in comparison to Stoichkov's five, yet his contribution in and around both penalty areas has drawn comparisons with Frank Rijkaard or Lothar Matthaus.

Letchkov's only misjudgment, apart from conceding what he felt was a debatable penalty after a challenge on Juergen Klinsmann, was placing himself in the hands of a shaky tournament translator.

Asked if he now felt like a superstar, his supposed reply emerged as: "I have known for several years I am a star."

The words did not fit a quietly-spoken man, whose move to Hamburg was hastened by 17 goals in 29 games which helped CSKA Sofia win the Bulgarian title in 1992.

Before the match he modestly thanked a small group of reporters for noticing his contribution in earlier matches. Now, after four successive wins, he and his teammates are suddenly aware they have a great chance to etch their names in history.

"I always believed we could win against Germany and I said so after the Mexico match," said Letchkov. "We have very good individual players and now we have nothing to lose."

Mihailov, the goalkeeper and laid-back captain who rates Italy as an inferior side to the Germans, is eager to attract a big club following the end of his contract with French Second Division side Mulhouse.

Confessing he had not recommended his hairdresser a Romanian by the name of Stephaneqth a salon in Colmar, to Letchkov — it is a personal thing — the 31-year-old has enjoyed a succession of finest hours at just the right time.

His previous World Cup experience in 1986 was not an auspicious one, coming only a year after he was banned for life by the Bulgarian Federation for his part in a now infamous Cup final brawl.

Yet eight years on the memory of Bulgaria's 17-match World Cup finals run without a win has receded quicker than either his or Letchkov's hairlines.

It may just be coincidence that Sunday's other match-winning hero, Sweden's Thomas Ravelli, is also thinning on top.

Or that with the exception of the shaven-headed Roger Milla of Cameroon, the last balding men to make an impact in the final stages of a World Cup finals were probably England's Bobby Charlton in 1970 and Poland's Grzegorz Lato 20 years ago.

At this World Cup the exotic styles of Valderrama and Gullit, not to mention the goatee beard of Alexi Lalas, have failed to last the course.

"The divine ponytail," as Baggio is known in Italy, could be next in line for the chop.

From mediocrity to stardom

PRINCETON, N.J., July 12: They can't work horses and will leave as thoroughbreds.

In the World Cup's 64-year-old history, North Korea, Algeria, Cameroon, and the United States have recorded some of the tournament's biggest surprises, reports AP.

Now it's time to add another nation to the elite list of World Cup giant-killers — Bulgaria.

In a match that sent shock waves through the international soccer community, Bulgaria struck for two late goals in a three-minute span Sunday to stun defending champions Germany, 2-1.

So Bulgaria, who came into the tournament without having won a World Cup game, meet Italy in a semifinal match Wednesday at Giants Stadium.

Sunday's shocker is comparable with North Korea's 1-0 victory over Italy in 1966; Algeria's 2-1 defeat of West Germany in 1982; Cameroon's 1-0 stunner against defending champion Argentina in 1990; and the United States' 1-0 upset of England in 1950.

But here is where any com-

parison stops. None of those teams made it to the semifinals and unlike them, Bulgaria shine both collectively as a finely tuned mechanism and individually, through superbly gifted athletes in all the playing compartments.

"I think the world will realise that we have some very classy soccer players in Bulgaria," said striker Hristo Stoichkov, who scored the equalizer in the Germany game.

"Our victory coincides with the birthday of my daughter Mihaela, who turned six today," he said, adding that he thought of her when he kicked the ball over the German wall into the corner of the net.

The Bulgarians look like a happy family.

The nine-year-old grandson of the team's security chief takes part in the players' practices — and Stoichkov is his tutor. And coach Dimitar Penev is more like a careful father, joking with his pupils, rather than the stern professor.

The Bulgarians, who were criticized by FIFA officials for their lack of exposure to the soccer-hungry media, have changed their attitude and mood after their most recent successes.

"I think that as we are going to the semifinal the world will have to look at our team in a different way," Penev said.

Playing better and achieving more than they had originally hoped, the Bulgarians said they discarded the psychological burden that affected their play in their opener's 3-0 loss to Nigeria.

"We realized we have nothing to lose, we're playing relaxed and will have the same success (in the game with Italy) as we had today," the Barcelona striker Stoichkov said in a post-game interview Sunday.

The Bulgarians relaxed Monday at their hotel near Princeton University, where they usually go for practice.

Twelve members of the Bulgarian roster play professionally for clubs in the German Bundesliga, and others play for top clubs in Spain, Portugal and England.

Playing in the West after the collapse of communism in 1989 means a lot of money for the cash-starved Bulgarians or Romanians, who have to struggle domestically with high prices, inflation and unemployment.

Accolaide for Romanians

BUCHAREST, July 12: Romania may be out of the World Cup, but the country is set to give the team a hero's welcome, reports AP.

Soccer players are to be given the title "Citizen of Honour" of the capital, an award reserved for outstanding performance, says Bucharest Mayor Crin Halaicu.

The team, which lost to Sweden in a sudden-death penalty shootout in the quarterfinals on Sunday, was awarded the special honour at a city council meeting Monday.

Latest WC odds

LONDON, July 12: Latest World Cup betting guide ahead of the semifinals on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

10-11 Brazil.

13-8 Italy.

8-1 Bulgaria and Sweden.

Match betting for semifinals

4-5 Italy, 4-1 Bulgaria, 7-4 the draw.

4-7 Brazil, 5-1 Sweden, 21-20 the draw both on 90 minutes play.

Two to contest the final

8-13 Brazil v Italy, 100-30 Brazil v Bulgaria, 4-1 Italy v Sweden, 12-1 Bulgaria v Sweden.

WORLD CUP NOTEBOOK

UNDATED (AP): Brazil heading for a semifinal game against Sweden, are now an odds-on 5-6 favourites to win the World Cup, according to Ladbrokes.

The London bookmakers rate Italy 2-1 second favourites with Sweden and Bulgaria both at 7-1.

The Brazilians, who beat the Swedes in the 1958 final, are rated 4-7 to down them again in the semifinal at Pasadena while Sweden are 11-2 shot to win the game.

Italy are 10-11 to beat Bulgaria, who are rated at 100-30 to reach the final.

What's the score?

German defender Martin Wagner was knocked out briefly after a head collision with Bulgaria's Nasko Sirakov in the 54th minute of the World Cup quarterfinal Sunday and was taken out on a stretcher.

At the time Germany were leading 1-0.

Wagner regained consciousness and was being treated by medics when someone from the German team's staff told him the score was 2-1.

"Who scored our second goal?" a still groggy Wagner asked, and was shaken, again when he heard that in fact the Bulgarians were ending Germany's reign as World Cup champions.

Wagner, 26, suffered a bruise but no concussion.

Most Italians believe their coach has kept up a long-running lucky streak in reaching the World Cup semifinals.

An opinion poll by Italy's RAI state television found 73 per cent of those questioned believe that Arrigo Sacchi is a lucky coach while 27 per cent credit his ability.

In the second round, Roberto Baggio equalised against Nigeria with one minute left and scored the 2-1 winner in overtime. In the round of eight, Baggio's 88th-minute tally knocked out Spain 2-1.

Baggio dismissed the matter, saying "we were not overly lucky in the World Cup so far."

But Sacchi has long had a reputation of being a lucky coach. Even Italian soccer federation president Antonio Matarrese cited it as "a point of merit" when he hired Sacchi for the national team job in 1991.

One lucky break came as Sacchi coached powerhouse club AC Milan to the 1989 European Champions Cup title. In the second round, Milan were down 0-1 against Red Star at Belgrade and facing elimination with a few minutes left. Suddenly, fog rolled in to force postponement of the game. Milan played to a 1-1 draw the next day, advanced on a penalty shootout and went on to capture the trophy.

With Sacchi at the helm in the qualifying campaign for this World Cup, Italy were down 0-2 at home against Switzerland on Oct 14, 1992. But the Italians came back and Stefano Eranio equalized in the 90th minute. The point captured at the last minute helped Italy reach the finals in the United States.

The heat in Germany could be worse than heat in Florida. German Coach Berti Vogts, under fire back home after Germany's ouster by Bulgaria in the World Cup quarterfinals, has extended his stay in the United States.

Vogts will not be on the plane taking most of the team back home Monday from New York. Instead, he is taking a vacation in Florida.

There must be a more popular way to save money.

By losing the quarterfinal to Bulgaria, Germany's soccer federation saved nearly 2 million marks (dfls 1.27 million) in bonus money it would have had to pay its players.

The Germans were promised 125,000 marks (dfls 80,000) apiece for defending the World Cup title.

By reaching only the quarterfinals, they got 35,000 marks (dfls 22,000) each.

However, the German Soccer Federation would have also received about 1.8 million marks (dfls 1.15 million) from FIFA for reaching the last four.

Exposure abroad is the key

NEW YORK, July 12: In World Cup terms, Sweden and Bulgaria aren't exactly Hall of Famers.

The Swedes made it to the final in 1958 when they hosted the contest but were outplayed 5-2 by the emerging Brazilians.

Bulgaria have never before made it past the quarters.

Yet the first World Cup final to be staged in the United States could well be between Sweden and Bulgaria in Pasadena, Calif., on Sunday, reports AP.

First, the Swedes must beat favoured Brazil in one semifinal Wednesday and Bulgaria must eliminate another three-time titlist Italy in the other.

But Sweden and Bulgaria in the semifinal instead of Germany, Argentina, the Netherlands, Spain or Colombia?

Hard to imagine.

Surely the hot, sticky American weather can't have been in their favour. Neither team has avoided suspensions and injuries. So there must be some other reasons why they have reached the last four.

Their success could well be a by-product of a trend in exporting their star players.

They play in far-tougher leagues abroad and have picked up good methods and qualities that now they are passing on to the national team.

Bulgarian striker Hristo Stoichkov is a standout player for Barcelona, who just won the Spanish title for the fourth time in a row.

Midfielder Emil Kostadinov plays in the high-quality Portuguese league for former Champions Cup winners FC Porto along with Krasimir Balakov and Yvaylo Yordanov

(both Sporting Lisbon).

Yordan Letchkov, whose diving header in the quarterfinal knocked out defending titlist Germany, ironically plays in Germany for Hamburg.

Borislav Mihailov, one of the standout goalkeepers in the tournament, plays for Mulhouse in the French league. Trifon Ivanov lines up for Real Betis in Spain and Zlatko Kankov plays for another Spanish club, Valladolid.

The Swedish World Cup players are from equally far afield.

Striker Martin Dahlin, who has scored four goals in the tournament, is on the Borussia Muenchengladbach team in Germany along with defender Patrik Andersson, Klas Inge-son plays in the Netherlands for PSV Eindhoven and Henrik Larsson is with another Dutch team, Feyenoord.

Letchkov the soothsayer

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J., July 12: A few months ago, Yordan Letchkov told a German soccer magazine that Bulgaria could reach the World Cup semifinals, reports AP.

"If we are smart, we could go far, we are no worse than other nations," he wrote in a column for Kicker. "We can get into the semifinals, if we don't run into Germany before."

Letchkov has proved himself wrong, in one aspect. Bulgaria did meet Germany and also reached the semifinal.

And Letchkov is the main reason it did. He scored the winning goal, blasting home a header in the 79th minute.

He could have ended up being the goat, having caused the penalty from which Germany took the lead. But his teammate Hristo Stoichkov equalised in the 76th and Letchkov clinched the winner.

Stoichkov has five goals in the tournament, but Letchkov's scoring has also been vital: He slotted the decisive penalty in the shootout against Mexico in the Round of 16 and the winner against Germany in the quarters.

So, is he now a superstar? "I've known that all the time, now you guys (in the media) know it too," he replied with a devilish smile.

It is ironic that Letchkov's goal should beat Germany, the country where he earns his living by playing for Hamburger SV in the Bundesliga.

"I gave the coach (Dimitar Penev) some tips and I think they helped," said Letchkov who has been in Hamburg for two seasons.

Penev said he and Letchkov had talked at length about Germany's strengths and weaknesses.

"Beating Germany really

stimulated me," said Letchkov. That could be bad news for Italy, Bulgaria's semifinal opponent Wednesday at Giants Stadium.

"Germany and Italy are world-class teams, but so are we now," Letchkov said as he relaxed around the hotel pool Monday.

It is unusual that he scores with a header, having not scored with his head for more than a year.

Although a midfielder, he is no stranger to scoring. He had 17 goals in 29 games for CSKA

career in Sliven, before moving to CSKA Sofia, the central army club coached by Penev where he met most of his present teammates, including Stoichkov and Kostadinov.

A good dribbler with pace and vision, Letchkov turned 27 on Saturday, but looks older because of his balding head.

Letchkov thinks his loss of hair is linked to the nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, Ukraine, in April 1986.

"Sliven is only 300 kilometers (180 miles) from Chernobyl and two-three months after the accident many young men in Sliven lost their hair," he said.

The son of a truck driver, Letchkov often skipped school to engage in his favourite occupation — playing soccer. The flair learned at the time still show in his game.

Letchkov learned early that talent alone will not get him far.

"He is a true professional," said Hamburg coach Benno Moehlmann.

In a team notorious for its easy-going attitude and slack discipline, Letchkov is a hard worker.

He attributes Bulgaria's success to experience gained by 13 of its players who play abroad.

"We've always had good players but now we have the necessary experience. We also go back a long time and we've played together for many years."

Letchkov lives in Hamburg with his wife Svetlana, his childhood sweetheart from Sliven who cooks his favourite bean soup.

Above the matrimonial bed hangs a photograph of Madonna.

"I am a fan of her music. She is a full-blooded singer and I am a full-blooded soccer player."



LETCHKOV
Sofia in 1992 before he moved to Hamburg, where he is a steady if not prolific scorer.

Conquerors of obscurity

LOS ANGELES, July 12: Brazil's Branco and Sweden's Kennet Andersson are two unlikely national heroes who have been thrust into the limelight in this World Cup, reports AP.

Branco, at left back, will probably see a lot of 6ft 4in striker Andersson in Wednesday's semi-final between the two sides at the Los Angeles Rose Bowl.

Veteran Branco, in this

making his 77th appearance for Brazil, said he had scored with God's help.

His performance also silenced critics who said he was too old, hence too slow to keep playing at top international level.

Before Leonardo's dismissal, Branco had to be content with cheering on the sidelines. "I'm still part of the squad, and I'm giving the players my full support," he had said.

But Branco suddenly came from reserve team obscurity to become the toast of Brazil in a nation where football is almost on a par with religion.

Then, following his dramatic goal, said: "After 40 days, I had not played, but now I have regained the confidence of my teammates."

Andersson also grabbed his chance when it came to him.

He was a second-choice striker before the finals but would not have made the 22 in Sweden's squad before mid-February.

Four goals, including one against Brazil, and the last-ditch equaliser against Romania have, like for Branco, propelled him into the spotlight in his native country.

Coach Tommy Svensson explained his sudden meteoric rise. Svensson decided to pick Andersson for their tour of the USA in February.

"It was a risk but one worth taking," he said.

And the risk paid dividends. "Kennet used to be a bit lazy but I told him he needed to work harder and if he did I had total confidence in him," Svensson said.

And cool Andersson has remained relaxed while coping with the intense pressure of the toughest competition in the world.

"I find it very easy to relax and concentrate on the game.

don't think I'm playing better it's just that I've been given a long run to establish myself."

And on the match against Brazil, Andersson said Sweden could take heart they had already scored against them in the 1-1 draw of their Group B match in Detroit on June 28.

Andersson further picked out Aldar as "a big jumper" who could cause him problems.

Rightback Roland Nilsson commented on Andersson: "He's not just a big lad, he's been scoring goals."



KENNET ANDERSSON
third tournament, was first kept out of the side by lumbago, then an inspired Leonardo.



BRANCO
said the 1.93m, 91kg striker, who follows coach Pierre Mankowski to French side Caen next season after leaving First Division neighbours Lille.