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Baggio proves his worth

EAST RUTHERFORD, New Jersey, July 14: Roberto Baggio has transformed Italy's World Cup in the space of just eight days. his two masterly goals on Wednesday sending them into the final at the end of a bitter-sweet campaign, reports Reuter.

On July 5, Italy were on their way out of the tournament.

They trailed 1-0 to Nigeria with just two minutes remaining in the second round and all the critics agreed that "overrated" was the adjective which best applied to Baggio.

But Baggio slotted home an 89th minute equaliser against the Nigerians and then converted a penalty for the winner.

Then came the quarter-final and again the pony-tailed Baggio popped up with a goal at the vital time — his clinical 88th minute finish earning a 2-1 win for an Italian team which was tiring badly as extra time loomed against Spain.

Baggio struck earlier in the semifinal, two excellent goals within five minutes of the first half earning Italy a 2-1 win over Bulgaria and an epic clash with Brazil in Sunday's final at the Pasadena Rose Bowl.

Asked to define Baggio's performance, Italian coach Arrigo Sacchi said: "I will answer with one word — exceptional."

From "overrated" to "exceptional" — quite a rebirth for the shy Buddhist who has said that "life is an endless cycle for those who believed in reincarnation."

Baggio refuses to forgive those in the Italian press who slammed his supposed weak character as Italy struggled in the opening round matches.

"Some people are very quick to judge those they don't know," he said after Wednesday's win.

"I didn't have many chances to show what I could do in the opening matches. The way my teammates have helped me

was the key," added the reluctant hero, known to the Italians as "the divine ponytail."

Baggio wept at the final whistle and embraced Luigi Riva — the former Italian star who now acts as national team manager.

He was very close to me when things were not going so well. He knows what being at the World Cup is all about," Baggio said of Riva, who played on the 1970 Italian squad which reached the final before losing 4-1 to Brazil.

The lowest point for Baggio came in New Jersey's Giants Stadium during Italy's first round match with Norway on June 23.

Reduced to 10 men in the



Roberto Baggio, the Italian superstar who scored both the goals for his team's 2-1 win over Bulgaria in the semifinal, raises his hands to acknowledge the applause of the ecstatic Italian fans at the Giants Stadium on July 13. — AFP photo

Ref comes under Swede salvo

PASADENA, July 14: Swedish captain Jonas Thern blasted the Colombian referee for sending him off for a harmless tackle, and said the decision could have cost his team the chance of a place in the World Cup final, reports Reuter.

"Who knows what might have happened had we been able to play with 11 men for the whole 90 minutes. Maybe we could have won as well," Thern said after Wednesday's 1-0 semifinal defeat to Brazil.

"We were not so good in the first half, but 10 minutes before I was sent off I felt Brazil were becoming a bit nervous and started to take many more risks than they did in the first half."

Thern was sent off by Colombian referee Jose Torres for a tackle on Dunga in the 63rd minute near the halfway line, forcing Sweden to play a

man short for the second successive game. Brazil scored the winner in the 81st minute.

Coach Tommy Svensson said only that he could not understand the decision, but Thern was bewildered by it.

"When you haven't had a yellow card in the game and you do a tackle with your body and not your studs, it is hard to believe you can be sent off," said Thern, who missed the quarter-final through injury and is now out of the third-place playoff.

"I felt after just five minutes that this referee was not a very good one."

Sweden's goalkeeper Thomas Ravelli also hit out at the referee.

"He did not see what happened, he only saw Dunga fly in the air. It was a mistake to send him off. The referees have been making a lot of mistakes throughout the tournament," he said.

The sending off of (Italian) Gianfranco Zola was also not the right decision, like today," Zola was sent off for a lunging tackle against Nigeria, although television replays showed he made no contact with the opponent.

Dunga claimed he had been tackled after he had played the ball.

"I think it's a scandal that they picked a South American ref," said midfielder Tomas Brolin.

"But they were clearly the better team," he said. "They really deserved the victory. In sports, there's always a loser. I just have to congratulate Brazil."

"It was a stupid mistake by the referee," Brolin said. "I don't think he saw what really happened. He just heard that Dunga, screamed and ejected Jonas. A yellow card would have been enough."

"I think that the (Swedish) Association should have filed a protest," Brolin said. "You bet that Brazil would have filed a protest if Dane Peter Mikkelsen or another European had been picked as ref."

The Swedes, including coach Svensson, said before the game that they hoped that Torres Cadena would be a

Moore joins Saarbrueken

BONN, July 14: German Second Division club Saarbrueken said on Wednesday it had signed US international striker Joe-Max Moore on loan for a year, reports Reuter.

Saarbrueken said it had paid less than 40,000 marks (26,000 dollars) to get Moore on loan until March 31, 1995, but that it also had an option to buy him.

About 200 Brazilian soccer fans celebrated the victory with a samba party at the Sergels Torg plaza in the city centre, after having watched the game on TV at a nearby restaurant.

To be the best

PASADENA, July 14: Romario, scorer of Brazil's late semifinal winner against Sweden, sees Sunday's World Cup final as the perfect stage for a duel between himself and Roberto Baggio to find the game's top striker, reports Reuter.

"We have both shown that we are capable of scoring important goals for our teams," he said on Wednesday after Brazil had beaten Sweden 1-0.

"I'm sure that the team which wins the final will be the one which has the best player in the competition," said Romario.

Both players have scored five goals in the tournament, one behind Bulgarian Hristo Stoichkov and Igor Salenko of Russia who scored five of his goals in one game against Cameroon.

Romario's goal on Wednesday came only after he had missed two clear cut chances in the first half.

"Strikers are there to score goals but they are also there to miss them," he explained.

Swedish tourists join the fiesta

RIO DE JANEIRO, July 14: Swedish tourists forgot their nation's defeat and joined in the fun on Wednesday night as Brazilians celebrated victory in the World Cup semifinals, reports Reuter.

"It is the happiest day of my life," said six-year-old Andre Oliveira, who walked from his hillside Shanty town to Copacabana beach to watch the game on a giant outdoor screen.

On a warm, starry night Rio's beaches became a giant carnival. In front of the city's luxurious beach side apartments and five-star hotels shirtless street sweepers and businessmen in suits and ties crowded together to see the match. Despite the late hour hundreds of people also gathered in Sao Paulo before a giant screen along the city's main avenue.

Expectations were high and fans shouted predictions of 3-0 and 4-0. Tension mounted as Brazil failed time and again to find the Swedish net but in the 80th minute Romario ended the suffering of millions.

It was the first time for 24 years that Brazil reached the final. "I remember 1970 well.

And I believed God will give us the Cup again. I am praying," said reveller Matilda Souza Barreto.

Svensson said what really cost Sweden was the lack of time to prepare for the game after Sunday's gruelling quarter-final against Romania which went to recover from the quarter-final while Brazil had three days. The semifinal was too close to this match and it was no surprise when they scored," he said.

Svensson said what really cost Sweden was the lack of time to prepare for the game after Sunday's gruelling quarter-final against Romania which went to recover from the quarter-final while Brazil had three days. The semifinal was too close to this match and it was no surprise when they scored," he said.

"We could not recover fully as you have to do when you meet Brazil. We had a couple of players who were not 100 per cent today."

Ravelli said the World Cup schedule was too demanding.

"Two days rest was not enough, especially when playing in hot conditions. Before the last game we had a week, but for the semifinal we only have two. This schedule is stupid."

Svensson, who must pick up his players for Saturday's third-place playoff against Bulgaria, said the team should look at what it achieved.

"I am disappointed of course because we lost, but I must recognise that we lost to a better team. But we had a tremendous tournament and when we look back we will be very pleased with what we achieved."

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Zagalo cites another little-remembered quality of that team.

"It had exceptional balance. It was the team that scored

the most goals and allowed the fewest," he said.

"We played a 4-5-1, with only Tostao up front," he went on. "When we lost possession, Pele, Jairzinho, Rivelino, all fell back to help out on defence."

Zagalo feels that was the secret of Brazil's success as much as the geniality of the attackers. He has tried to instill that on the current team.

"It's modern soccer," he said. "Teams that can't play without the ball go nowhere. If you say that's not as pretty as before, well, we have to live in modern world."

Zagalo is reluctant to compare the two teams. Part of it is courtesy to his current squad, which — barring Bebeto and Romario — doesn't have the brilliance of the 1970

squad.

Take it from Romario.

"Ever since I learned how to play soccer, it's been impossible to form a team like the 1970 team," said the striker. himself rated one of the world's top players.

The 1970 team was a collection of superstars. There was Jairzinho, the explosive "hurricane" of the Cup and high-scorer: Gerson, the passing wizard; Rivelino, with his dribbling artistry and "atomic kick," and captain Carlos Alberto, perhaps the top right defender of all time."

And there was Pele.

"The years go by and people

never forget how we played,"

recalled Mario Zagalo, who

coached the 1970 team and

now is assistant coach for the

Cup in Mexico.

The man, who is currently

in England, placed his bet at

odds of 4-7 for Brazil to beat

Sweden in 90 minutes play. He

stands to receive 165,000

pounds (257,000 dollars).

The bet is the biggest single

wager ever struck on a soccer

match, say bookmakers William Hill.

Last week an unfortunate punter risked just over 120,000 pounds (187,000 dollars) on Mexico to beat

Bulgaria, but that sum comprised three separate bets placed at different times and at differing prices.

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Putting Pele and Tostao together was also dumb, critics said. They played the same position on their clubs, so how could they play on the same team?

Somehow, it worked. The team swept unbeaten through the tournament with gala exhibitions. Pele's shot from mid-field that just missed and his back-breaking dribble on the Uruguayan goalkeeper entered the anthology of great soccer moments.

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