

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

first half when goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca was sent off, coach Sacchi decided to haul off Baggio to send on reserve goalkeeper Luca Marchegiani.

Now Sacchi is hoping he does not have to do without Baggio in Sunday's final in Los Angeles. Baggio strained a thigh muscle on Wednesday and was substituted 20 minutes from time.

"I felt a sharp pain. We won't know how serious it is until the morning but of course I hope to play in the final."

Baggio also broke a tooth in a clash during the match but was able to laugh that off.

"It's unfortunate because we Italians like our pasta a little," he said.



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

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 Selenko 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 forget 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.

Record bet

LONDON, July 14: A Hong Kong restaurant owner has gambled a record 115,000 pounds (180,000 dollars) on Brazil in Wednesday's World Cup semifinals, reports Reuter.

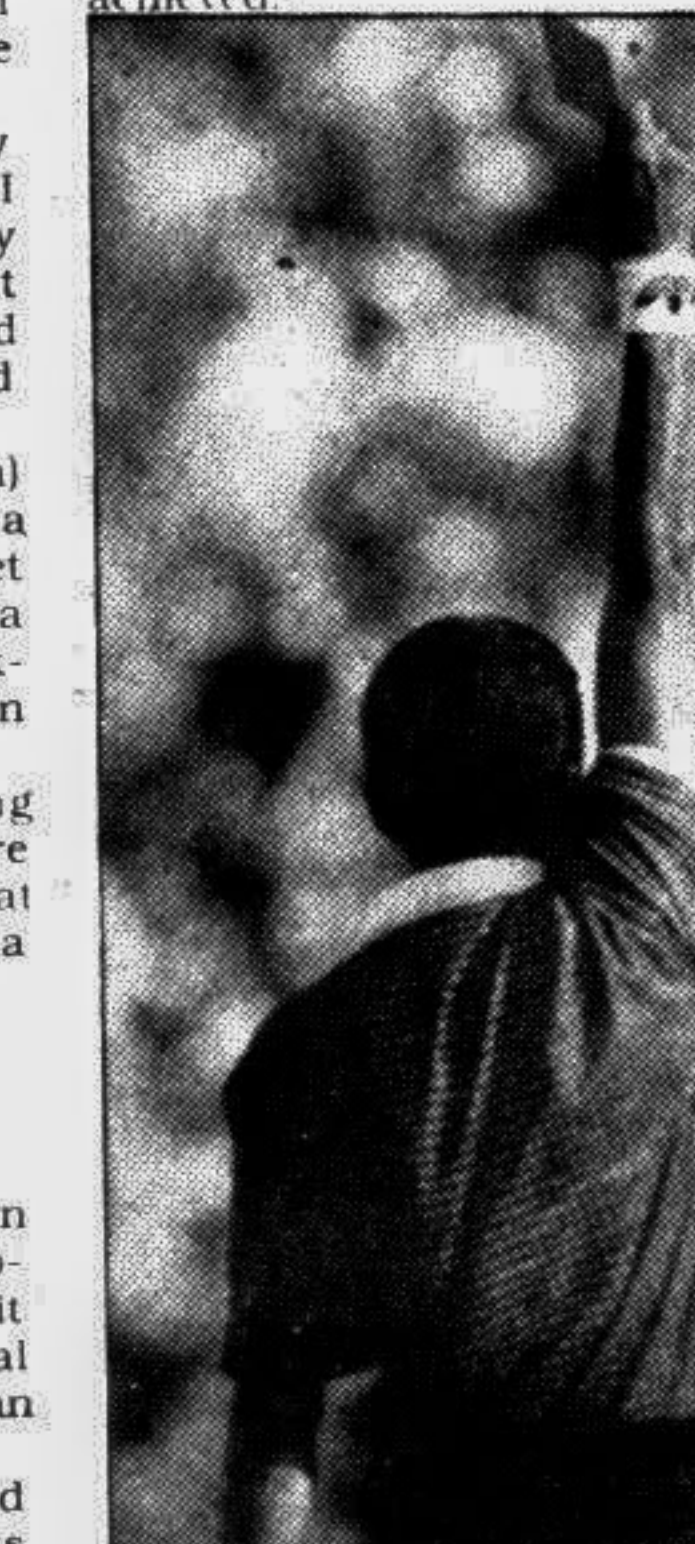
The man, who is currently in England, placed his bet at odds of 4-7 for Brazil to beat Sweden in 90 minutes play. He stands to receive 165,000 pounds (257,000 dollars).

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.

William Hill's spokesman Graham Sharpe said: "This World Cup has already smashed all previous football betting records. Now it's set to become the world's biggest betting event of all time with a total turnover of 60 million pounds (93.6 million dollars) by the time the final ball is kicked."

"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."



Swedish captain Jonas Thern (C) watches in despair as the Colombian referee Jose Torres shows him a red card for a foul on his counterpart Dunga during the Brazil-Sweden semifinal at the Rose Bowl on July 13. — AFP photo



Italy's World Cup squad pose for photographers before the semifinal match against Bulgaria at the Giants Stadium in New York on July 13. Italy won 2-1. — AFP photo

Changing faces of sorcerers



PASADENA, Calif., July 14: They have no equal. In soccer, the standard of excellence is Brazil's 1970 World Cup championship team, reports AP.

So the question was asked a lot this week, as heavily favoured Brazil worked their way to a possible fourth World Cup title: How does today's team measure up to the 1970 squad?

It's unfair. No team has ever equalled the artistry and magic of Pele, Jairzinho, Gerson, Tostao and Rivelino. Few have even come close.

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 national team.

But not many recall that opinion was anything but unanimous when the team left for the Cup in Mexico. "They said I was stupid and crazy," Zagalo said. "I put Rivelino, midfielder, on the left wing. They said it would never work, that I was trying to turn the clock back to 1958."

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.

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 genius 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

team. But it's also because soccer itself has changed.

The tempo of the game then was slower. Players had time to work the ball around without an immediate challenge. Today, speed and teamwork are more important.

"They were entirely different epochs," Zagalo said. "Soccer then was more combative. Today it's faster, more combative, with less room."

How does Romario compare with Pele, he was asked.

"It's hard to make comparisons," he began cautiously. "They both are great scorers. Romario has a great importance for this team, and he shows that every game."

He shrugged.

"Pele was the athlete of the century," he said.

GOAL SCORERS

UNDATED (Reuter): Following are the World Cup '94 goal scorers after Wednesday's semifinal matches:

6 goals — Oleg Salenko (Russia), Hristo Stoichkov (Bulgaria).

5 goals — Juergen Klinsmann (Germany), Roberto Baggio (Italy), Romario (Brazil), 4 goals — Martin Dahlin (Sweden), Gabriel Batistuta (Argentina), Florin Raducioiu (Romania), Kennet Andersson (Sweden).

3 goals — Bebeto (Brazil), Gheorghe Hagi (Romania), Jose Camarero (Spain), Dennis Bergkamp (Netherlands).

2 goals — Tomas Brolin (Sweden), Juan Golkoetxea (Spain), Ilie Dumitrescu (Romania), Georges Bregy (Switzerland), Adolfo Valencia (Colombia), Luis Garcia (Mexico), Fuad Anwar Amin (Saudi Arabia), Claudio Caniggia (Argentina), Hong Myong-Bo (South Korea), Daniel Amokachi (Nigeria), Rudy Voeller (Germany), Philippe Albert (Belgium), Wim Jonk (Netherlands), Dino Baggio (Italy), Emmanuel Amunike (Nigeria), Yordan Letchkov (Bulgaria).

1 goal — Julio Salinas (Spain), Hwang Sung-Hong (South Korea), Soe Jung-Won (South Korea), Eric Wynalda (United States), Ray Houghton (Ireland), Marc Degryse (Belgium), Kjetil Rekdal (Norway), Roger Ljung (Sweden), David Embley (Cameroon), Francois Omam-Biyik (Cameroon), Raul (Brazil), Gaston Taument (Netherlands), Diego Maradona (Argentina), Bryan Roy (Netherlands), Rashidi Yekini (Nigeria), Finidi George (Nigeria), Alberto Garcia (Mexico), Alain Sutter (Switzerland), Stephane Chapuisat (Switzerland), Adrian Knipf (Switzerland), Ernie Stewart (United States), John Aldridge (Ireland), Marcio Santos (Brazil), Dmitry Radchenko (Russia), Sami Al-Jaber (Saudi Arabia), Georges Grun (Belgium), Mohamed Chaouch (Morocco), Samson Siasia (Nigeria), Daniel Borimirov (Bulgaria), Harold Lozano (Colombia), Herman Gaviria (Colombia), Karlheinz Riedle (Germany), Erwin Sanchez (Bolivia), Josep Guardiola (Spain), Daniele Massaro (Italy), Marcelino Bernal (Mexico), Fahd Al-Ghshayri (Saudi Arabia), Roger Milla (Cameroon), Saeed Owairan (Saudi Arabia), Hassan Nader (Morocco), Nasako Sirakov (Bulgaria), Fernando Hierro (Spain), Luis Enrique (Spain), Altar Beguiristain (Spain), Abel Balbo (Argentina), Branko (Brazil), Aron Winter (Netherlands), Lothar Matthaeus (Germany), Dan Petrescu (Romania).

WORLD CUP DIARY

LOS ANGELES, California, July 14 (AFP): Wednesday's World Cup diary:

UNLUCKY 17 PLAGUES ITALY

The dreaded number 17 continues to haunt Italian players unlucky enough to draw it. It all began four years ago when Roberto Donadoni was given shirt number 17 in the 1990 World Cup. He missed a crucial penalty in the semifinal against Argentina, dashing Italy's victory hopes.

When the draw was made for shirt numbers for the '94 World Cup Roberto Baggio's name was pulled out. The draw was immediately scratches. Coach Arrigo Sacchi did not want his 1993 FIFA player-of-the-year burdened with the curse.

Instead shirt number 17 fell to Alberigo Evani. The poor Evani survived the opening match against Ireland but was then pulled a hamstring in training and has missed the rest of the World Cup.

DELIGHT IN DEFEAT

Hungarian goalkeeper Antal Szabo was delighted when he let in four goals in the 1938 final against Italy to lose 4-2.

"I have never felt so proud in my life. We may have lost a match but we have saved 11 lives. The Italian players received a telegram from Rome before the game which read 'win or die'."

"Now they can go home heroes," said Szabo afterwards.

The telegram had been sent by Benito Mussolini.

CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK

Bulgarian goalkeeper Boris Mihailov said his father, Biser, was weeping when they talked by telephone after Bulgaria's quarter-final upset of Germany.

Biser Mihailov played five international matches in goal for Bulgaria.

BRAZIL HEAD THE RED CARD RECORD

The sending-off of Leonardo after he elbowed America's Tab Ramos in the Brazil-US second round showdown gave the three time champions the unchallenged record in World Cup finals expulsions.

Since the World Cup began in 1930 Brazil have managed to have eight players red carded. Machado and Zeze were given their marching orders in the 1938 meeting with Czechoslovakia. Humerto and Nilton Santos received the same fate in 1954 against Hungary.

Garrincha had his wings clipped in 1962, being sent-off in the game against Chile. Luis Pereira had an early bath in 1974 when Brazil played Holland and four years ago against Argentina, Ricardo Gomes was shown the red card.

BRAZILIAN BENEFACTORS

Brazilian defender Jorginho has recruited teammates to join a national anti-hunger campaign. The team have given an imported car to the cause and now Jorginho is trying to talk his colleagues into handing over their World Cup bonuses.

The programme to assist some 32 million starving Brazilians is led by sociologist Herbert de Souza. Like his footballing compatriots, the Nobel Peace Prize nominee is known in his country by a one-name nickname: Betinho.

TAKING HIS MEDICINE

Swedish defender Stefan Schwarz was banned for Wednesday's semi-final against Brazil after receiving two bookings in the quarter-finals, but he wasn't complaining.

"Of course, everybody wants to play in the semifinal, but I accept the decision," he said. "I never talk about the referee's decision. I always accept."

BULGARIA NO SAINTS

Regardless of the result of the Italy-Bulgaria semifinal World Cup match Bulgaria has no chance has any hope of winning FIFA's fairplay award. Bulgaria's "Take no prisoner" style of play has seen them collect a tournament-high 19 yellow cards.

Italy have proved be no saints either. They have had two players sent-off.

WHITNEY SINGS ON — DESPITE PERSONAL TRAGEDY

Pop star Whitney Houston, who announced on stage last week that she was expecting her second child, has had a miscarriage. But the singer will go ahead with her planned performance at the Rose Bowl before the World Cup final on Sunday.

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 Petter 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

Swedish mood subdued

STOCKHOLM, July 14: About 10,000 Swedish soccer fans were in subdued mood as they trooped out of a Stockholm park early today after watching their team go down 1-0 to Brazil in the World Cup semifinals, reports Reuter.

Police said they did not expect any serious trouble as the fans dispersed from the park where the match was shown on a big outdoor screen.

The centre of Stockholm was reported quiet. Swedish soccer experts said Sweden had done well to lose by only a single goal to one of the best teams in the world.

"The Brazilian dominance game them a fair victory, but the Swedes really tired their best," said one.

A gloomy silence fell over the crowd when Romario sent Brazil into the World Cup final against Italy on a header 10 minutes from the end of regulation. Most of the spectators seemed to take the loss with composure, and looked forward to Sweden's consolation game for third place Saturday against Bulgaria, which lost their semifinal 2-1 against Italy on Wednesday.

Stockholm police spokesman Hristian Dasgaard described the night as quiet, with only two persons taken into custody for assault and battery and 10 for drunkenness.

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.

Stockholm police spokesman Hristian Dasgaard described the night as quiet, with only two persons taken into custody for assault and battery and 10 for drunkenness.

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.