

Baggio's luck runs out



PASADENA, July 18: Even Roberto Baggio could not conjure up one last miracle to rescue Italy. With the Italians trailing 3-2 to Brazil in the cruel World Cup final penalty shoot-out, up stepped "The divine ponytail" for the kick which would have kept his country's hopes alive, reports Reuter.

But Baggio put his shot over the bar, the man who had rescued Italy so many times on their white-knuckle ride to the final had blown their last chance.

"I missed a penalty that may not have been decisive," Baggio said, realising that Brazil only had to net their last kick to take the trophy anyway.

"Normally I side foot them but I had so little energy left that I just tried to blast it," he said.

There was a sad irony to Baggio missing the last penalty, for this World Cup has been "the Roberto Baggio show" as far as the Italians are concerned.

The team's fortunes have ebbed and flowed with those of their star man.

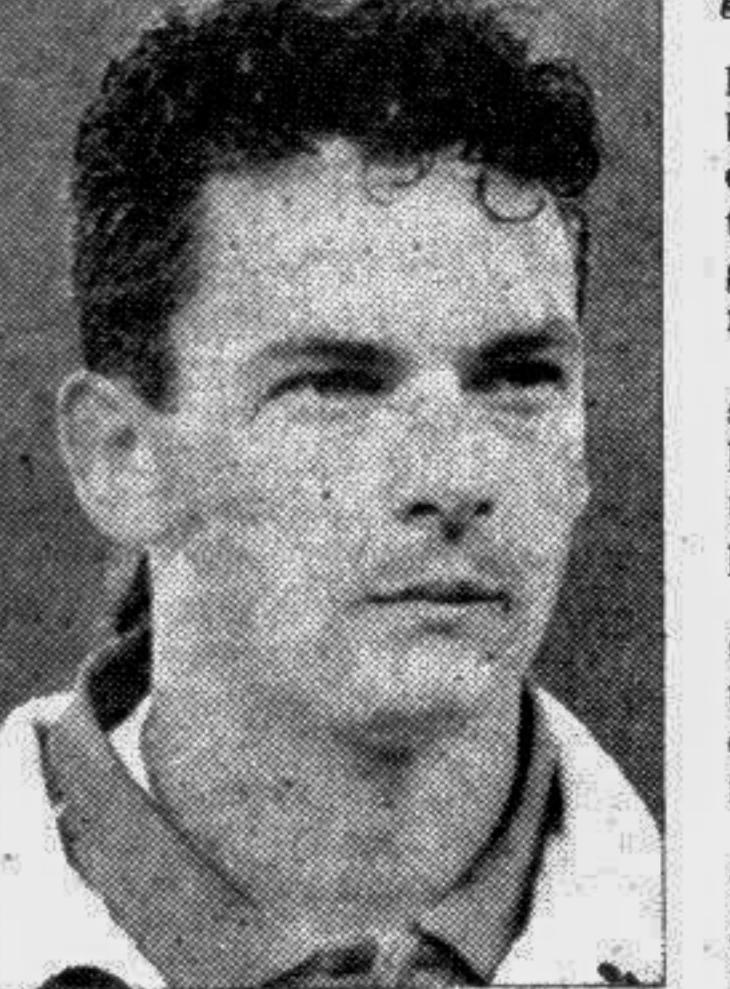
Hailed as the world's greatest player before the tournament, Baggio struggled for form and fitness during Italy's stuttering early performances.

He even suffered the indignity of being hauled off just 21 minutes into Italy's Group E game with Norway after goal-

keeper Gianluca Pagliuca had been sent off, coach Arrigo Sacchi deciding he was the most expendable player.

Had Italy's clash with Nigeria ended a couple of minutes early, Baggio would have been labelled the flop of the tournament and the Italians from the tightest of angles.

But Baggio netted an 89th minute equaliser in that sec-



ROBERTO BAGGIO

ond round tie with the Nigerians and then scored the winner in extra time from the penalty spot.

"We were on our way home, I stopped the plane's engines," a relieved Baggio said after that match.

Italy's World Cup then took off, with the shy Buddhist Baggio at the controls.

The European footballer-of-the-year again looked below his best in the quarter-final with Spain but came up with a vital late winner, dancing round goalkeeper Andoni Zubizarreta and screwing and ball home from the tightest of angles.

Baggio finally showed all his ability with two superb goals in the semifinal against Bulgaria to take his tally to five in three games.

The first strike against the Bulgarians in which he dribbled past two defenders before curling a 20-metre shot into the bottom corner was arguably the goal of the tournament.

But Baggio strained a hamstring in that match and millions of Italians had been fretting over his fitness for the past four days.

Playing with his right leg strapped, Baggio showed touches of class in the final but did not seem able to play to his full potential.

The doctors told me to test the injury this morning and I felt I could give it a go in the final. It was a very tactical game and I could not get involved all that much," he said.

It was a sad end of Baggio and Italy but veteran captain Franco Baresi showed the respect his teammates have for him.

"Roberto Baggio has played a great World Cup. He's the most important player in the Italian national team," said Baresi.

Technical hitch!

ROME, July 18: Technical problems darkened a huge screen Sunday in a piazza where 30,000 fans had come to watch the World Cup final, reports AP.

Many people yelled protests and some threw glass bottles at the blank screen in the historic centre's Piazza del Popolo.

Police with riot gear arrived and took some members of the crowd away in vans.

The police suggested that people go to the Olympic Stadium, a 20-minute bus ride away, where the game also to be broadcast on large screens.

Officials blamed a burned-out generator for the problem.

Italians draped in gloom

ROME, July 18: A deep gloom descended over Italy on Monday after the country's dream of a fourth World Cup soccer title in the final against Brazil evaporated in the first penalty shoot-out in the history of the competition, reports AP.

Rejected fans who had flocked to outdoor television screens in stadiums and piazzas across Italy wrapped up their flags and discarded their hooters after Robert Baggio fired Italy's fifth penalty shot over the bar.

Rome police said they had made two arrests when fans in the central Piazza del Popolo began throwing fireworks and coins at police after a giant television screen broke down briefly at the start of the match.

Minor trouble was also reported in Milan, where police said one officer and one Brazilian fan were slightly hurt in scuffles that erupted as Baggio, the hero of Italy's World Cup campaign, missed the do-or-die shot.

Jeers also went up from a crowd of around 30,000 who watched the match on television.

"It was a miracle that Baresi had played at all. He was so tired, I don't know why he was sent to kick from the spot," said Bearzot.

"It's so sad, what a way to lose," said Claudio Micsella, who watched the match, goalless after extra time, with thousands of other fans on a wide-screen television in central Rome's Piramide district.

"I can't believe Baggio missed from the penalty spot," said student Giorgio Brancoli.

Paolo Rossi, the striker who led Italy to their last World Cup title the last time the country appeared in a final in 1982, said fans should be happy with second place after Italy's disastrous start to the competition.

To have reached the final after such a terrible start to the tournament is an accomplishment in itself," he said.

Enzo Bearzot, coach of the 1982 squad, said in a television interview he was shocked that captain Franco Baresi had been allowed to kick from the penalty spot.

Baresi, a veteran defender who returned to play in the final after keyhole surgery on his knee 23 days ago, missed Italy's first penalty shot.

The only real left down was that, after a month of entertaining soccer, the title was decided on a penalty shoot-out following a frustrating match. Brazil won 3-2 after Italy's Roberto Baggio missed his spot kick.

Pele, one of soccer's rare household names in the United States, had already hailed it all as a runaway success even much of the country was more concerned about the murder hearing of American football legend OJ Simpson.

Many critics had said hosting the sport's showpiece in the United States, a country with no great soccer tradition, could only mean a colourless event devoid of fans and atmosphere.

For the most part, they were proved wrong.

The Brazilian media, used to interviewing players on the pitch if they have to, provided plenty of colourful language in exchanging punches and kicks with security officers determined to keep them away from the stars.

The Bulgarians won few fans early on by barring the media

from training but, recast in the role of underdogs, became popular favourites after beating champions Germany.

Cameroon feuded over money. Saudi Arabia impressed on their debut, a match was played indoors for the first time and German midfielder Stefan Effenberg was kicked out of the team for making an obscene gesture to taunting fans.

Most important of all to local fans, the United States won through to the second round against all odds.

Officials said even the stifling heat in many of the nine venues, with temperatures sometimes up to 100 degrees Fahrenheit (34 Celsius) during matches, failed to be as big a problem as many coaches and players feared.

The defeat of their top players here was even more shocking as they went out in straight sets to unfeasted players.

For lost to Indonesia's Yuliani Sentosa 11-8, 11-8 while Han bowed out to South Korea's Ra Kyung Min 12-11, 11-4.

Tickets for clashes such as Ireland against Italy at Giants Stadium near New York were almost priceless.

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Baresi, from hero to culprit

LOS ANGELES, July 18: Italy's man-of-the-match Franco Baresi may be remembered as one of the culprits in their World Cup final defeat, but his heroics in Sunday's final were an inspiration, reports AP.

Central defender Baresi who had an operation for an injured right knee on June 24, was shock last-minute call-up by coach Arrigo Sacchi for the showdown against Brazil at the Rose Bowl.

Paulo Maldini was set to skipper the side but it was Baresi who took over the leader's role.

The 34-year-old Baresi who only played the first two group matches against Ireland and Norway before damaging his knee, kept the central route into Italy's penalty area almost permanently closed.

Time after time he either made a crucial interception or a vital tackle to keep the finest strike partnership in the world of Bebeto and Romario out of harm's way.

But what is almost certain to be Baresi's final international game ended in heartbreak when he lifted Italy's first penalty over the bar. Minutes earlier he had collapsed with cramp in the goalmouth.

However, the AC Milan veteran was philosophical about losing the match on a one-off kick. Roberto Baggio also shot wildly over the bar and Daniele Massaro had his effort saved as Italy lost the penalty shoot-out 3-2.

Reflecting afterwards about his first penalty miss, Baresi commented: "Penalty kicks are a little bit like playing a lottery. You do your best and you do not know what may happen."

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Brazilians partied in piazzas in Milan and Rome, where about 200 people sang, waved green and yellow Brazilian flags and danced to conga drums in front of the Brazilian Embassy in the capital's Piazza Navona.

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