



History cautions  
Argentina

LETRAT, France, Jun 12: Powerhouse Argentina have endured enough humiliations in their World Cup debuts to know they cannot take anything for granted against Japan on Sunday, reports AP.

Thus, head coach Daniel Passarella has been drilling his starters in the style used by the Japanese defence, which includes one sweeper, two stoppers and quick counterattacks.

Japan also changes defenders and sometimes plays with two sweepers and only one stopper, said Passarella, who last week travelled from this small French village to Switzerland to scout Japan in a match they lost to Yugoslavia 1-0.

At first glance, Japan seem easy prey to the powerful Argentinians, the favourites in Group H, which also includes debutants Jamaica and Croatia. But Argentina are keenly aware of the many blows they have endured in a first matches of their brilliant World Cup history.

"We have to be careful with Japan. We can't take them for granted because they could surprise us," said Passarella, who as a player suffered through one of those early losses against weaker teams.

In 1982, with Passarella and Diego Maradona at the height of their game, Argentina went to Spain having won the title four years before in Buenos Aires, but lost 1-0 to Belgium in the opener.

In 1990, with Passarella already retired and the Maradona star beginning to dim, Argentina once again showed up as world champions in Italy, having won in Mexico. But lowly Cameroon shocked the soccer world by defeating the Argentinians 1-0 in the first match. The team recovered and reached the final, where they lost 1-0 to West Germany.

Four years later, however in the United States, Argentina made easy work of Greece and won 4-0, with three goals by rising star Gabriel Batistuta and one by Maradona, who was kicked out a few days later after failing a drug test.

Even though they are among the favourites to reach the final, the Argentinians are making sure they do not underestimate Japan, Jamaica and Croatia, all of them newcomers to World Cup play.

Batistuta, now in his second World Cup, says the Japanese are "young and combative. Besides, one should never tally points until they've been earned."

Just as a reminder, the South Americans should bear in mind Japan's 3-2 win over Argentina in the Tokyo Olympics in 1964.

SAINTDENIS, France, June 12: One of the fiercest rivalries in European football will be rekindled when Belgium and the Netherlands meet in their opening Group E match here on Saturday evening, reports AFP.

Neighbours and political allies they might be, but whenever they meet on the football field, the intensity of their mutual hostility is almost tangible.

But the 1998 vintage seems until now to be somehow lacking in that spark which could set the game alight.

For both sides seem to be past their best, and it is the veterans who have captured what limelight there is to speak of.

The major blow for the Dutch is that they will have to do without their key man, striker Dennis Bergkamp, the English player of the year, who is still carrying the third injury which ended his season early.

And there is a strong likelihood that captain Frank de Boer, the defensive lynchpin, may also miss the clash as he has not shaken off an ankle injury picked up in training earlier in the week.

Bergkamp's absence means that coach Guus Hiddink has to decide who to pair with Patrick Kluivert up front, and with Kluivert out of sorts after a disappointing season, it could be the moment for Bergkamp's Arsenal colleague, the erratic Marc Overmars, to earn a return.

Much will hinge on the form of Real Madrid's European Cup winner Clarence Seedorf, and if he does not deliver it might turn out to be the often-wayward Edgar Davids' turn to run the midfield.

Belgium have an injury doubt in solid Bosnian-born defender Fordan Vidovic, who suffered a groin strain while training in the rain this week, which would seriously unbalance an already unsteady-looking back four.

Coach Georges Leekens have another dilemma just behind the front-runners — whether to

persist with the workhorse Marc Wilmots behind Luis Oliviera and Luc Nilis, or whether to bring in the veteran Enzo Scifo for his fourth World Cup.

Scifo is now back with Anderlecht in the twilight of a career of largely unfulfilled promise which has taken him on a Pan-European tour of leading clubs, and playing as well as ever.

A crowd-pleasure and highly skilful individual, Scifo does not have Wilmots' application, a point underlined by Leekens following the recent victory over Paraguay in last Saturday's friendly.

He replaced Wilmots at half-time and ran the show, celebrating his recall after being ignominiously dropped against the United States in February, and scored the decisive goal, his 18th international strike.

And Leekens said: "I was very happy with the way Enzo slotted back into the side, but we must make sure he is not put under unnecessary pressure — and certainly no comparisons should be made between his style of play and Wilmots."

The message seems clear. If the Belgians are going to beat their arch-rivals and for once they have an excellent chance, they will need both the discipline of Wilmots — and if they need an injection of individual skill, he will have to make way for Scifo.

**PROBABLE TEAMS**

**NETHERLANDS:** 1-Edwin van der Sar, 2-Michael Reiziger (or 20-Aron Winter), 3-Jaap Stam, 4-Frank de Boer (or 15-Winston Bogarde), 5-Arthur Numan, 7-Ronald de Boer, 11-Philip Cocu, 10-Clarence Seedorf, 14-Marc Overmars, 9-Patrick Kluivert, 21-Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink.

**BELGIUM:** 1-Filip de Wilde, 2-Bertrand Crasson, 3-Lorenzo Staelens, 4-Gordan Vidovic (Doubtful), 5-Vital Borkelmans, 6-Frank Vander Elst, 15-Philippe Clement, 7-Marc

Wilmots, 21-Danny Boffin, 8-Luis Oliveira, 10-Luc Nilis.

**Geoff Hurst knighted**

LONDON, June 12 (AP): Call him Sir Geoff.

Geoff Hurst, whose three goals earned England the 1966 World Cup in the final against West Germany, receives a knighthood Saturday from Queen Elizabeth II.

The honour for the former West Ham star comes on the eve of Monday's World Cup opener for England against Tunisia, 32 years after Hurst brought England their one and only World Cup trophy.

Hurst is the only player to have scored a hat-trick in the championship game of the World Cup, although some believe that one of his three goals in the 4-2 victory didn't cross the goal line.

Hurst is just one of many British sports figures on the Queen's Honours' List.

**THE SCORERS**

PARIS, June 12 (Reuters): World Cup scorers after Thursday's matches:

2: Marcelo Sales (Chile).

1: Cesar Sampaio (Brazil), John Collins (Scotland), Dan Eggen (Norway), Mustafa Hadji (Morocco), Abdeljilil Hadda (Italy), Christian Vieri (Italy), Rjanko Baggio (Italy), Pierre Njanka (Cameroon), Tony Polster (Austria).

**English business under WC threat**

LONDON, June 12 (AP): Why fight the expected chaos Monday when London's underground (subway) is on strike?

Soccer fans have a better idea: Skip work and watch England's opening World Cup game against Tunisia.

"Let's Have It Off For England," the tabloid Sun newspaper blared Friday in a front-page headline, starting a campaign to make Monday afternoon an unofficial holiday.

In any case, much of the capital is expected to grind to a halt as employees stop work to watch the game on TV.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair will apparently miss the big game to attend a European Union meeting in Cardiff, Wales.

A spokesman said Blair had no plans to sneak in a small television set to watch the game, which Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi did two years ago at a meeting during the European championship.

Ten-man Bulgaria cling on to draw with Paraguay

MONTPELLIER, France, June 12 (AFP/Internet): A 10-man Bulgarian side held off Paraguay in the dying minutes to come away with a goalless draw in their World Cup opener here on Friday.

Midfield star Anatoli Nankov had the dubious distinction of becoming the first player to be sent off under FIFA's tough new clampdown on

tackles from behind when he scythed down Juan Carlos Yegros 10 minutes from the end. With one yellow card to his name after being booked in the first half, he left Saudi referee Abdul Rahman Al-Zeid no choice but to reach for the red card.

But Bulgarian coach Hristo Boney will rue how his aging stars squandered a host of

chances. Bulgaria should have put the game out of reach in the first half when, led by striker Hristo Stoichkov, the star in USA '94 when they reached the semifinals, tormented the South American defence.

For the opening 45 minutes it was nearly all Bulgaria with Nankov causing all sorts of

problems by his penetrating runs up the right wing. Midfielder Ilian Iliev was finding gaps in the creaky Paraguay defence, but age was keeping Bulgaria from cashing in. Bulgaria's triple strike force of Stoichkov, Ivaylo Jordanov and Luboslav Penev are all over 30 and it showed — the three of them being one step too slow to get onto Iliev's passes.

Even when Boney decided to bring off Penev half-way through the second half he replaced him with another veteran. 30-year-old Emil Kostadinov. The 32-year-old Stoichkov showed that while he might be a fraction slower than four years ago, he had lost none of his fiery temperament. The match was only four minutes old when he was screaming for a penalty after Pedro Sarabia appeared to bring him down in the area. But Stoichkov's reputation had arrived well before him and referee Al-Zeid was having none of it.

Stoichkov was lucky to get away with only a yellow card in injury time in the first-half when he hacked down Miguel Benitez from behind.

The chance of the match for Bulgaria came when Stoichkov pounced on a Paraguay defensive blunder. With the ball bobbling free just outside the Paraguay area, the former Barcelona star fired in a shot that hit the base of the post with Jose Luis Chilavert well beaten.

Paraguay's lacklustre attack sprung to life in the second half as the weary Bulgarian found age catching up with them. But ironically it was Paraguay's 32-year-old goalkeeper who came closest to scoring. Chilavert, as well known for his goalscoring ability as his goalsaving, rushed up to take a freekick just outside the Bulgaria penalty area. His dipping kick over the wall very nearly caught his opposite number. Zdravko Zdravkov out but the 27-year-old managed to just get a hand to it to palm over the bar.

A minute later Stoichkov had another chance to put his side ahead when Chilavert found himself caught in no-man's land but Stoichkov's volley from an acute angle crashed into the side netting. Paraguay had several chances in the dying moments but the Bulgarian defence managed to hold on to take a point.



ROCK-A-BY BABY: Thomas Haessler, the shortest member of the German squad, is becomes the subject of playful teammates during practice at Nice on June 11.

A duel of intense proportions

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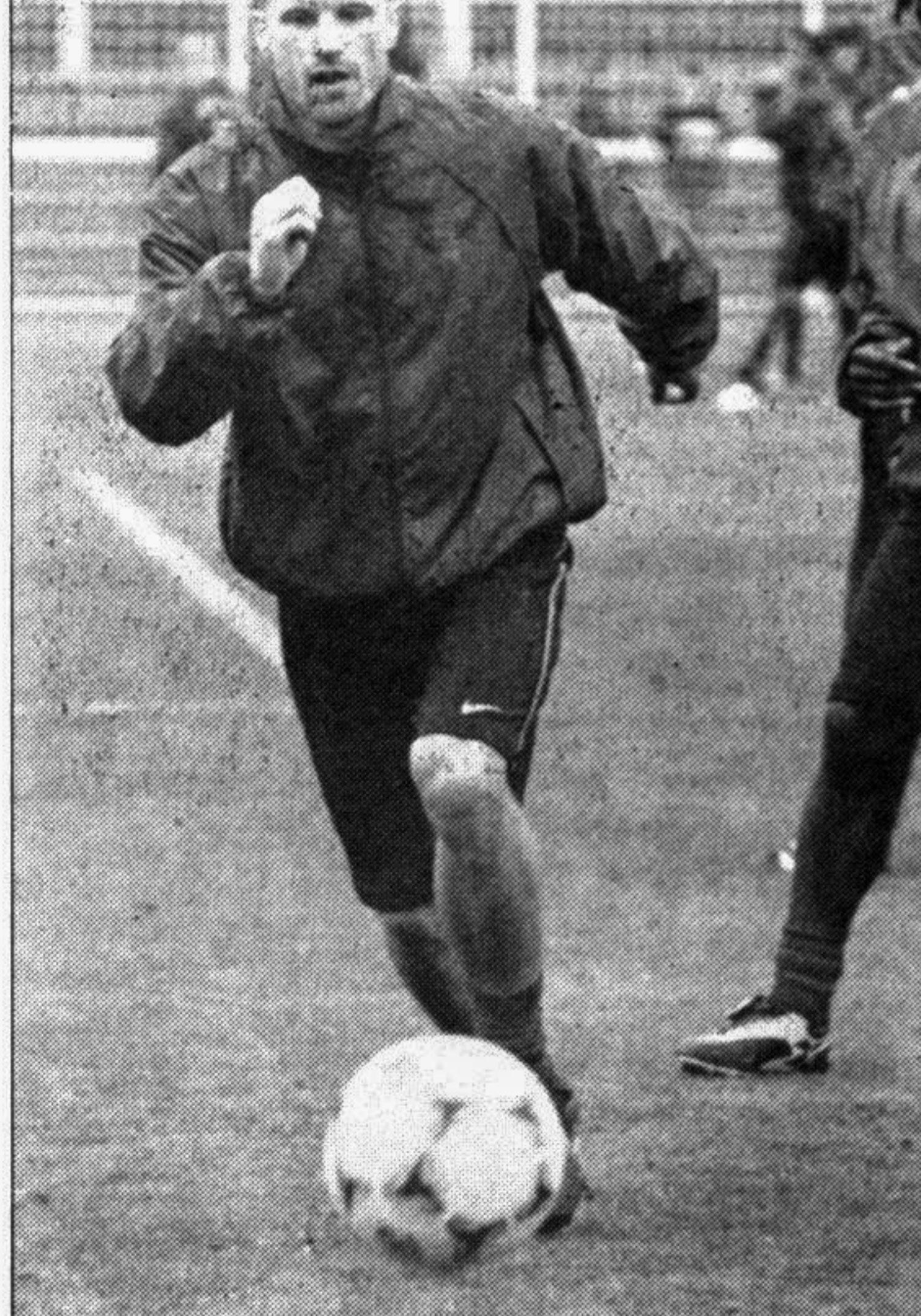
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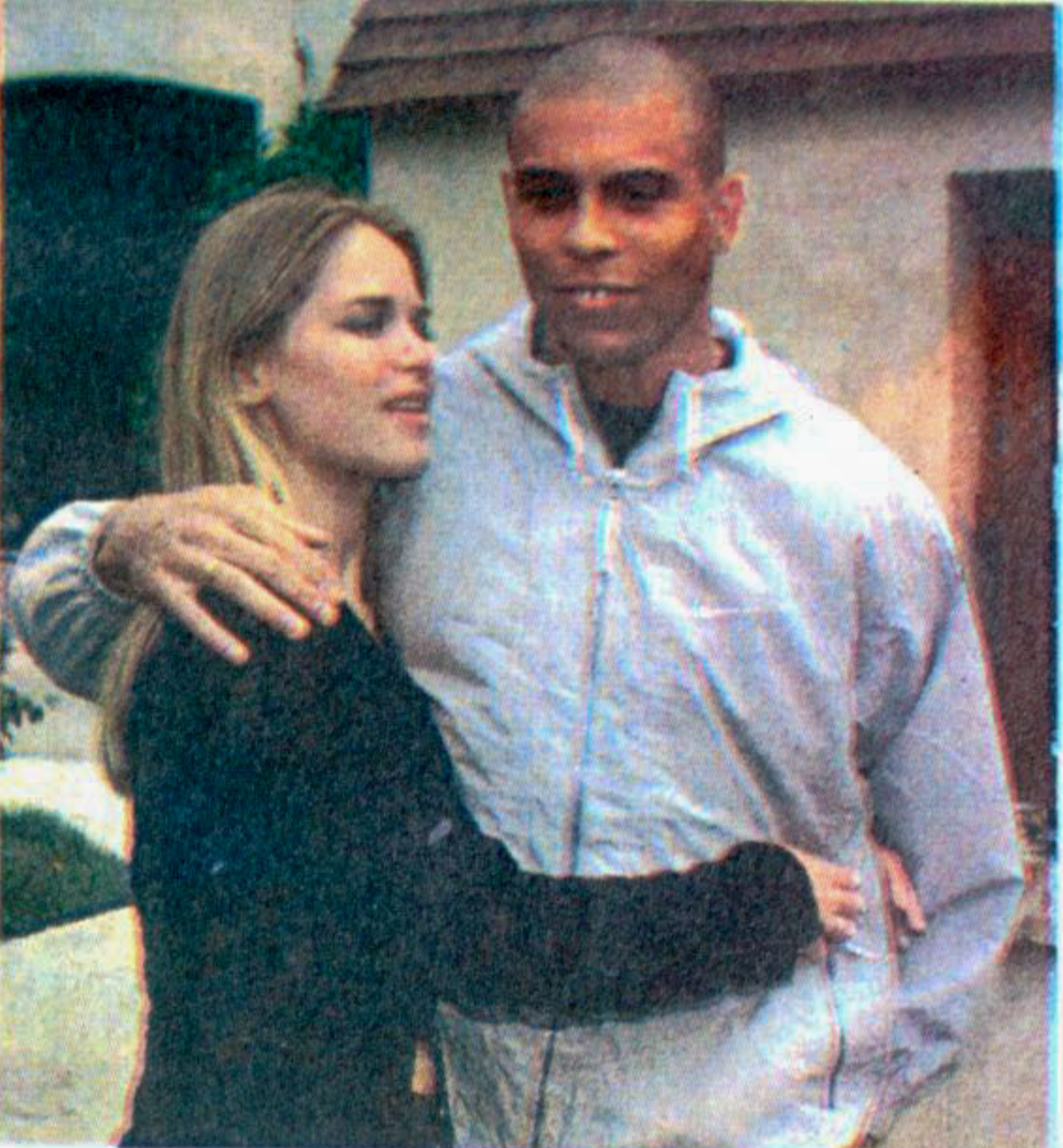
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FIGHTING FIT: Injury-prone Dutch striker Dennis Bergkamp trains at their Versailles base on June 11.



ROMANCING: Superstar Ronaldo and girl friend Suzana in front of his parents' temporarily rented house near Paris on June 11.

Matthaeus' twilight tranquility

NICE, France, June 12 (AFP): At the ripe old age of 37 Lothar Matthaeus, Germany's winning captain eight years ago, is knuckling under at his fifth World Cup and says he will be satisfied with a place on the bench if it means a fourth triumph for the fatherland.

If Bert Vogts chooses to put me on the substitutes' bench I will accept his decision," says the usually impetuous Matthaeus — often a controversial figure since he won the first of his 125 caps 16 years ago.

Out of the side since December 1994 after gearing an Achilles tendon, the once bad boy Matthaeus has made a surprise return, and transformed himself into something of a choir boy in the process.

He owes his return to the long term absence of Dortmund libero Matthias Sammer and doubts about the fitness of alternative sweeper Olaf Thon, who could now keep Matthaeus in the cold.

But he said Thursday he was hoping for a new lease of life, telling reporters, "It's as if I've never been away."

Matthaeus was booted out of the Germany team acrimoniously two years ago, just before Euro '96 in England, after verbally attacking Vogts and former Bayern Munich teammate Jurgen Klinsmann for allegedly lobbying to have him removed from the squad.

But he has buried the hatchet with both men and is now on the verge of making an unprecedented 22nd appearance in a World Cup finals match.

And the headstrong Matthaeus insists:

"I know the score and I accept the situation. If I wasn't happy with my role I wouldn't be here. A World Cup lasts a long time, it's not just the first three matches."

That assumes the Germans will qualify from Group F, where they are favourites to push Yugoslavia into second place.

But despite Matthaeus' insistence that nobody would be allowed to rock the German boat here, the controversy which often dogs their build-ups to major tournaments emerged right on cue following a broadcast on sat. 1 television where satirist Harold Schmidt parodied Matthaeus' diary.

Details of the player's intimate diary were published last year and caused a storm.

He had few kind words for his former — and now current — teammate. In the take-off version of the diary, Schmidt remarked that it would be an idea if Thon fell under a lorry.

German federation spokesman Wolfgang Niersbach said the team had not seen the programme because they could not pick up the station at their luxury headquarters in Saint-Paul-De-Vence near Nice.

But he said: "Our role is to protect our players and not allow them to be insulted. We will dispassionately examine whether we should take legal action," Niersbach said.

Varsailles, France, June 12 (AFP): Holland's star striker Dennis Bergkamp is looking forward to his World Cup challenge to add to his superb English Premiership and FA Cup double this season.

Admittedly Bergkamp had been out injured for the last six weeks and missed the culmination of Arsenal's English Premiership and FA Cup double triumph.

However that could work to the advantage of Dutch coach Guus Hiddink as a rested Bergkamp has now made what seems a remarkable recovery from a hamstring injury.

Just four days ago, Dutch physio Frits Kessel said the injury was far worse than thought at the beginning. Bergkamp was thought to be certainly missing the opening match against Belgium on Saturday and probably sit out their second match against South Korea on June 20.

But the 29-year-old could not wait to start his tournament against Belgium and Kessel gave him a clean bill of health on Thursday morning.

Bergkamp admitted he had been on an incredible high after this year despite not featuring in the final part of the season. Arsenal beat Newcastle 2-0 in mid-May in the FA Cup final and had rousing league celebrations after beating Everton.

He said, at their Stade Montbaouron training ground in Versailles, that he had to get his mind back on international duty.

"It's the back of your mind that you have had so much success but the main thing is that I focus on this tournament. It's a completely new challenge. I have never won the World Cup," he said with a smile.

Bergkamp started his career at Ajax where he began as a winger and was transferred to a central midfield position.

He had a disappointing spell at Inter Milan but his career

revived at Arsenal and he is now playing the best football of his career.

Perhaps Bergkamp is not particularly comfortable in the limelight, but now his hamstring problems are a thing of the past, he could shine at this tournament.

Holland have also had problems with team spirit in the past. In fact a self-destructive streak raised its head at Euro'96 when the players of Surinamese extraction — Edgar Davids, Clarence Seedorf and Patrick Kluivert — claimed they were discriminated against in the squad.

But Bergkamp claimed there were no such problems now. "The spirit is good and I don't think we'll have any problems," he said.

Bergkamp served Holland well in the build-up to France 98, too, scoring seven goals, and he will have quality assistance up front with Arsenal teammate Marc Overmars pressing home his claims and the surprise recall of Davids.

In six previous World Cups, Holland have reached the final twice, finishing runners-up to Germany in 1974 and Argentina four years later. And with old rivals Belgium, Mexico and South Korea in their group, Bergkamp fancied their chances of getting through to the knockout stages.

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**Dennis cured and kicking**

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