

**Japan sans sex?**

TOKYO, June 12 (Reuters): Japan, a nation often regarded as obsessed with sex, has decided the pursuit has no place in the World Cup.

A top weekly magazine reported today a "sex ban" had been imposed on Japan's 22-players during the event.

In its latest edition, the Shukan Bunshun quoted Japan's 41-year-old coach Takeshi Okada as saying: "We will allow our players to have free time but they will not be allowed to take any day off until the championship is over."

The magazine said Okada's obliquely worded comment amounted to a "declaration of sex ban."

The players have been banned from inviting their wives or girlfriends to their hotel.

"Although they could meet their wives or girlfriends elsewhere during their free time, they would need much courage to do so under the watchful eyes of the massed press," the magazine quoted a sports journalist as saying.

The team is staying at a luxury hotel in the spa town of Aix-les-Bains and hundreds of Japanese fans have set up camp alongside the site.

The magazine said some "young" players, irked by the sex ban, were passing around pornographic magazines to minimise the effect of the deprivation.

In an effort to alleviate the situation, coach Okada has also ordered set up a "relaxation room" equipped with video and computer games at their hotel, it said.

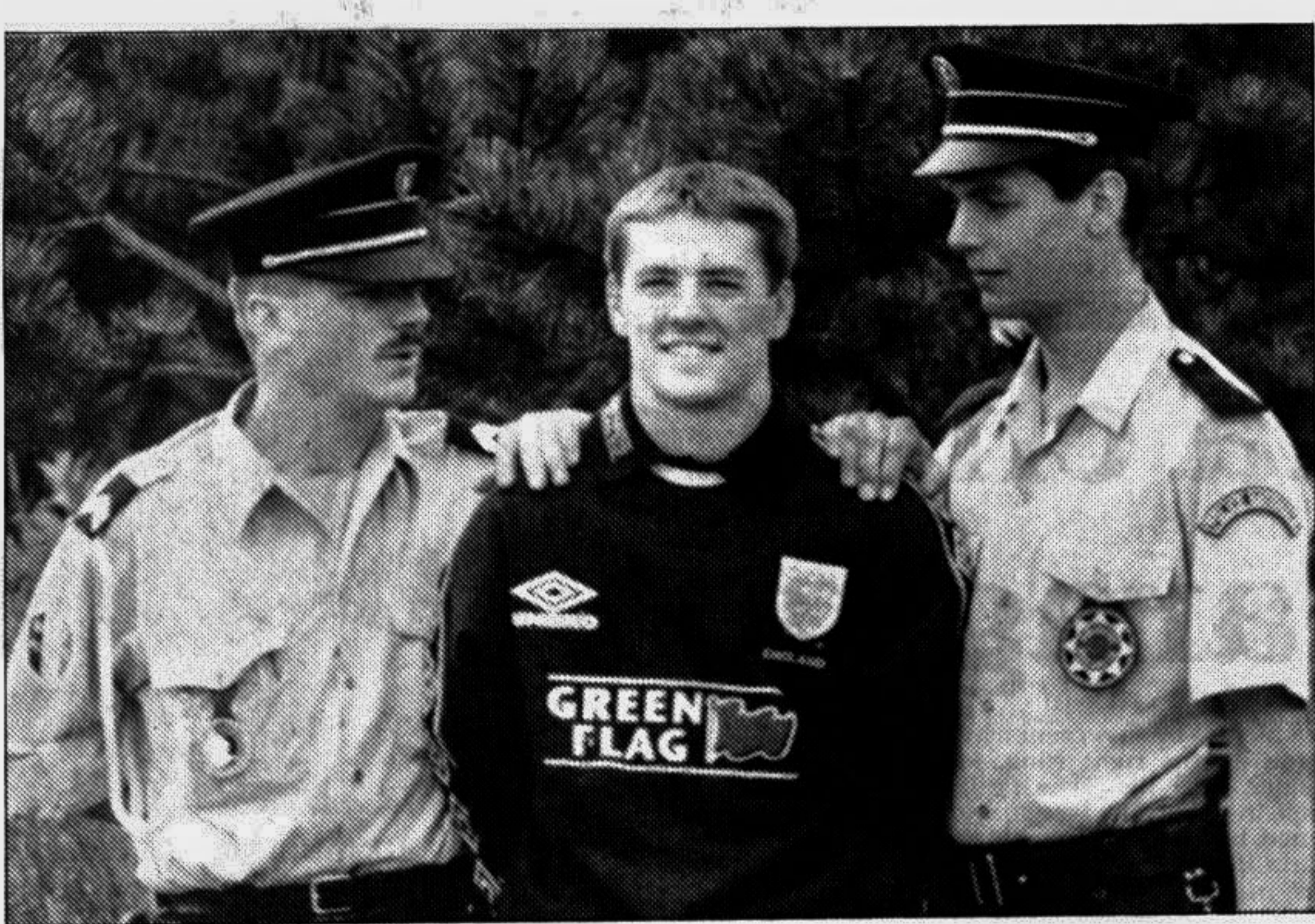
Soccer officials in Japan would not confirm the report but said they could not imagine a sex ban causing problems to Japanese players.

**Mobile match**

FRANCE, June 12 (AFP/Internet): Roaming France since June 10, "Screens of the Cup '98" caravans have been going to major French cities to screen broadcasts of live matches, as well as to provide entertainment, concerts, shows etc.

In a recent survey, the French overwhelmingly supported the World Cup: 93 per cent of them called it a festival for the people, while over 80 per cent said that the words "show" and "celebration" best describe football.

The French Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has obtained free broadcasting rights for World Cup matches to be shown in more than 800 urban areas classified as "sensitive zones."



CAUGHT RED-HANDED: Teenage Sensation Michael Owen (C) of England gets friendly with local policemen at La Baule, Nantes on June 11. — AFP photo

**Sky's the limit for Owen**

LA BAULE, France, Jun 12: Teenage striking prodigy Michael Owen is set to emerge as one of the stars of the World Cup finals. England coach Glenn Hoddle predicted Thursday, reports AFP.

Owen, meanwhile, issued a challenge to Hoddle, saying: "Pick me I'm ready to start."

Hoddle still has to decide whether the 18-year-old Liverpool scoring machine replaces, Teddy Sheringham — who incensed the coach with his recent late-night drinking exploits in a Portuguese night club — in England's starting line-up when they play their opening Group G match against Tunisia in Marseille on Monday.

Whether he starts alongside Alan Shearer, or comes on from the bench, Hoddle expects the precocious Owen to make a huge impact.

"Owen adds a whole different dimension to our play," said Hoddle. "If he comes on from the bench he gives us something different. If he starts, his pace is dangerous."

"He's fresh and alive and has a youthful feel about him. As a player he has two major assets. He's got genuine pace both with the ball and without the ball, and he moves far better than most players his age. He can turn and run at people, too. He has a lot of strings to his bow."

LA-TOUR-DU-PIN, France, June 12 (Reuters): It's all in the mind for Colombia as they seek

to bury the disappointment of the last World Cup.

That's the view of coach Hernan Dario Gomez ahead of their first match on Monday against Romania in Lyon.

"If Colombia get up well, fresh in their minds, they won't have any problem," Gomez said. "What we have to impose are changes of rhythm, surprise."

The man who should spark such changes is the famously mop-headed playmaker Carlos Valderrama, revealed on Thursday as an artist both on and off the pitch.

"I get by as a painter," he said with modesty. "I painted a lot at school I don't do much now, just occasionally to pass the time."

The former Montpellier player was prevented with a small painting by a group of French mentally handicapped boys who went to watch Colombia's practice near their World Cup retreat east of Lyon.

Valderrama saves most of his artistic talent for the pitch, creating the patterns of Colombia's quick-passing attacks with his deceptively slow gait and speed of thought for the telling through ball.

He wants to bow out of international football in style in France after a career as full of up-and-down as Colombia's own performances.

At the heart of arguably Colombia's best ever result, a shock 5-0 win over Argentina in Buenos Aires in 1993, he was also a member of the team that failed miserably to live up to the tag of favourites in the 1994 finals.

The memories of 1994 are bad, going out in the first round

but it serves us as experience," Valderrama mused.

Gomez has been working on Colombia's mental approach to the game against Romania, who shocked them by winning 3-1 when the two teams clashed in their first game of the 1994 finals.

The coach felt his team, like Colombian life in general, suffered from constant changes, but that they could not change their game.

"If this team had the Argentinians' mentality, it would be world champion," says Gomez. Argentina, also playing in France '98, has two world titles.

"Colombia can't be as aggressive or dynamic as the Europeans, they can't change their style," he said.

He placed his hopes on "the personality that the Colombians sometimes have" and their awareness of who they are facing.

Gomez said: "Colombia should never have been surprised by the defeat (to Romania in the US) Romania have more history than us, but we went in blind, thinking no-one else existed."

"If we focus on taking revenge next Monday, we'll lose," said veteran midfielder Freddy Rincon. "This is a new chance, a different tournament."

But, Adolfo Valencia, a veteran of the team that lost in the United States, sees things differently. "There is an unpaid debt," says the flashy forward of Italy's Parma.

Gomez, meanwhile, says the team needs to concentrate on the task at hand: Keep it simple, advance to the second round.

**Colombia hope to start afresh**

Owen is a player who admits he "can't stand to lose" at any game of sport and Hoddle admires his youthful will to win.

"His temperament is outstanding — way beyond his years," said Hoddle. "What he lacks in experience at this level, but he's learning quickly and he's an exciting prospect."

"He is a talent who can cause people problems, but what we have to find out is whether he can do it at World Cup level. He's certainly an added string to our bow."

Owen, cool and confident without being cocky, said he was ready to fill whatever role Hoddle requires from him.

"I feel ready. Anyone would prefer to start, but now it remains to be seen whom the manager, picks," he said, adding he felt he had built up a

good understanding with England spearhead Shearer in a warm-up match against French Second Division club Caen on Tuesday.

"If you are intelligent you can get a good feel for how the other player plays in just one match," he said. "It needs working on, but you can learn an awful lot in one game."

"I'd prefer to start, obviously, and I'll be disappointed if I don't."

"I'm ready to go in there and be positive. There is no point in being fearful. I like to run at people with the ball at my feet, and you have to go in believing you can cause any one in the world problems."

Hoddle has compared Owen's ability to unsettle defences to that of Brazilian ace Ronaldo, widely regarded as the best striker in the world, and the youngster is ready to live up to his manager's praise.

"It's nice for me to be compared to anyone like that, when people compared me to great players that is great to hear. It's all very well people saying things, but the proof is in the pudding when you go out there and play and show what you can do on the pitch. You want to get out there and do it."

"As a striker, you're going to each match believing you can score."

Owen, a brilliant allround sportsman who plays golf and is also a top-class snooker player, has been in superb form for Liverpool this season.

When he made his full international debut against Chile in February — at the age of 18 years and 59 days — he became the youngest player ever to represent England.

Now his mesmerising pace could put him in line to become the youngest England player to collect a World Cup winners' medal.

**Hristo sets his mark**

Cetus Saint-Aunés, France, June 12 (AFP/Internet): After training session Thursday Bulgarian star Hristo Stoitchev said, he is happy with the combination of his team.

"Despite many misconceptions, the mix of young and old players is working well."

"The team has matured a lot over the last four years and some of the players have gained the experience needed to succeed in this World Cup."

My dream, of course, is to beat my own record of six goals in the last World Cup in the United States."

**Savicevic wants to play Sunday**

SAINT GALMIER, France, June 12 (AFP/Internet): Yugoslav forward Dejan Savicevic is hoping to play against Iran on Sunday although he still awaits a fitness clearance from team doctor.

He said: "I've still got problems with the ligaments in my left knee. I haven't completely recovered. I still hope to play Sunday against Iran. Saturday morning training will determine whether I play. If I'm fit on Sunday, there's a great chance I'll be on the pitch." On Iran, Yugoslavia's first opponent, the mercurial forward declared: "I couldn't even give you the names of five Iranian players, but I know this team plays offensively."

Meanwhile, Dejan Stankovic, the youngest player of the Yugoslav team, doesn't seem to be intimidated by the idea of playing alongside Savicevic, Mijatovic and Stojkovic:

"It's not very easy playing amid great players like my teammates, but I think I'm really part of the team."

This young mid-fielder, mentally and physically matured ready, added that he'll do his best for his team which meets Iran at the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard.

**No ball games!**

KABUL, June 12 (AFP): Billions of people have been glued to television screens for the World Cup but not in Taliban-controlled Kabul and not in the Stalinist stronghold of Pyongyang.

In Kabul, the Taliban ordered television screens blackened when they took power in September 1996, an imposed strict Islamic law.

No reason is known why the famine-stricken people of North Korea are also starved of the global sporting event of the year. But diplomats in the capital Pyongyang and monitors in South Korea say there has not been a sign of the action on television or the strictly controlled press.

The Taliban have made it clear that they believe making pictures of living beings and displaying them is "idol-worshipping."

In the opposition controlled Northern Afghanistan, television can be seen with satellite dish antennas.

The Taliban allow football to be played but have introduced strict rules on how players dress on the field and to regulate the behaviour of spectators.

Football is still the most popular game in Kabul, dozens of youths playing it on dusty fields in their ruined neighbourhoods is a common sight.

Afghan fans could watch the World Cup in the 1980s on a television channel provided by the Soviet occupiers.

Michel Platini and Diego Maradona are still heroes.

This is bad we cannot see the World Cup this time," lamented Ahmad Farid, a doctor, who follows the football results through foreign radio.

Farid was among thousands who gathered Thursday in Kabul's only stadium to watch a football match between two local teams.

**Bomb hoax**

MONTPELLIER, France, June 12: World Cup organisers received two bomb threats before Friday's match between Bulgaria and Paraguay at a stadium here, but dismissed them as "not serious," reports AP.

Eric Champel, a member of the organising committee, said the two threatening phone calls were received about 2 1/2 hrs before the match was scheduled to start.

"We briefly evacuated the press stands and brought in the sniffing dogs, but that's our usual procedure before every game at the World Cup," he said, adding that there was no concern for the security at the match.

Most of the evacuated reporters found out about the threats only after the all-clear had been given.

**Zagallo calls critics to keep their cool**

FERRIERE, France, June 12 (AFP, AP/Internet): Brazil, who had to be propped up by a Scottish shoulder to win their World Cup opening game, were split on Thursday about where to go from where.

"We won, but that's not enough," said coach Mario Zagallo. "We have to learn to be true to our tradition."

Zagallo's dream is to revive the skill and artistry of the great Brazilian sides of the past. But some players are just as happy with the three points from their 2-1 win against Scotland on Wednesday.

Heading for the team bus,

team captain Dunga succinctly said. "Three points and a little tranquillity."

There's little chance of that. Brazil has the points, but the team's inconsistent play in the opener did little to allay the anxiety of its demanding fans.

Brazil needed an own-goal by defender Tommy Boyd in the 73rd minute to down the tenacious Scots, who have never passed the first round of World Cup play in eight tries.

"We got the win, but without the brilliance expected," admitted Cesar Sampaio, who scored Brazil's first goal and then conceded the penalty that led to

Scotland's score.

"The problem is that, because of our history, people always expect more from us," he said. "I know that with two goals many teams would be satisfied, but not us."

Indeed, Brazil is a victim of its own success. With the great Pele as a yardstick for players and a record four Cup titles in 1958, 1962, 1970 and 1994, Brazilians hold their team to a higher standard.

They expect "the art, the magic that has always been the calling card of the national team," said Tostao, a member of the 1970 Cup team that some consider the best Brazilian side ever.

Brazil did show glimmers of brilliance against Scotland, mainly at the feet of Ronaldo.

The two-time FIFA Player-of-the-Year drew on a repertoire of stutter-step dribbles, feints and sudden changes of speed that created panic in the Scottish backfield and forced goalie Jim Leighton into acrobatic saves.

But the midfield — once the domain of maestros such as Gerson, Rivelino and Zico — seemed flat.

Zagallo admitted that the team often was "just decent" but promised Brazil would improve during the tournament. A member of all four Cup winners as player, coach or team coordinator, Zagallo says he dreams of reviving the elegant play of Brazil's golden era.

"I was part of the beautiful soccer of 1958, 1962, 1970," he said before the game. "Our objective is 'art soccer' above all."

For now, he'll take the three points and the lead in Group A. Norway and Morocco, which tied 2-2 on Wednesday, have one point, while Scotland has none.

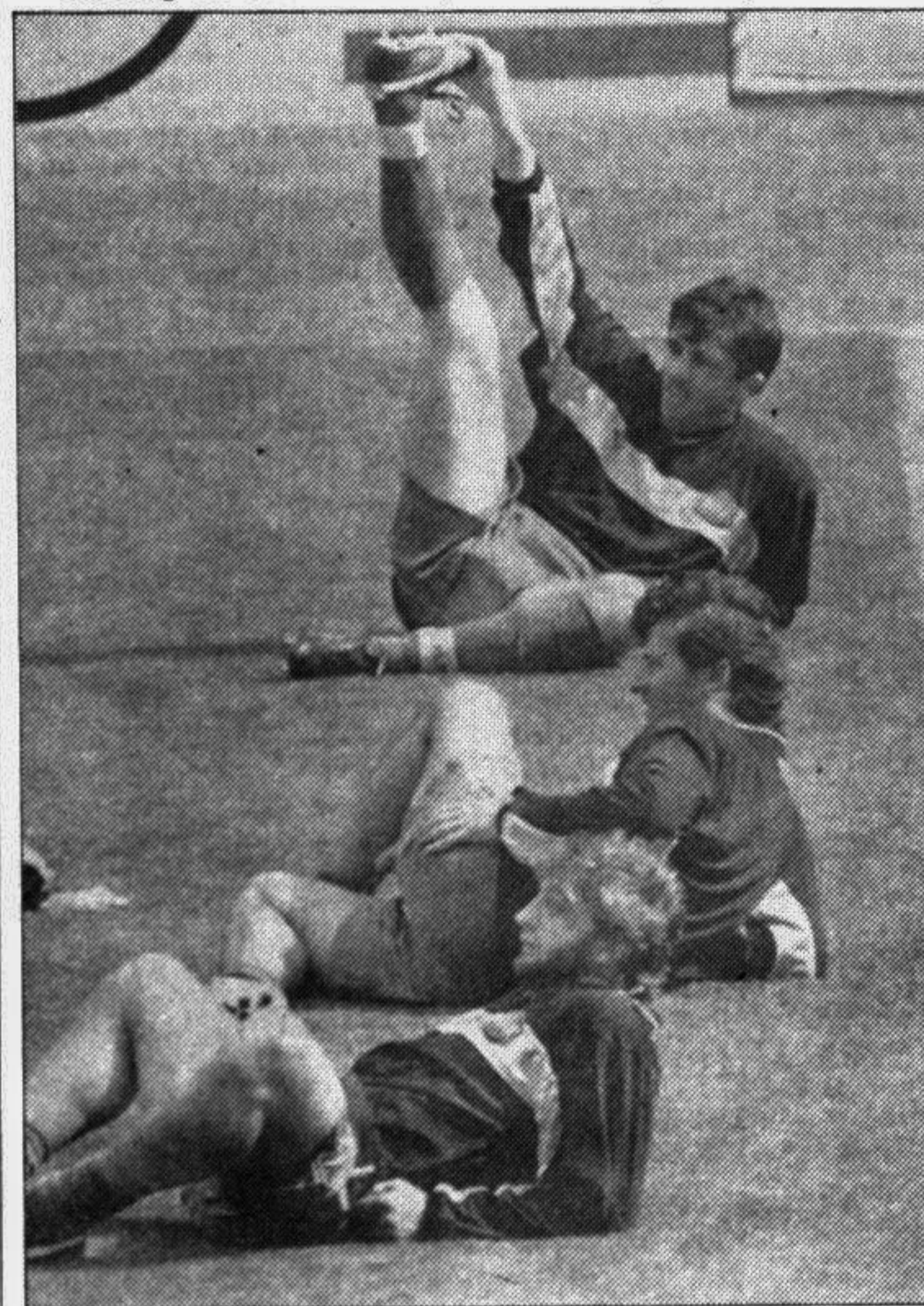
"Brazil is a team that starts to grow game by game," he said. "It's too early to despair."

For any other team, "despair" might seem an odd word to use for a winner and group leader. But not for Brazil.

Back home, the players got the thumbs down from the media for not putting the plucky Scots to the sword.

But the headlines were none too harsh and the general feeling in the cradle of the beautiful game was clearly one of relief.

"Ouch," screamed the Rio de Janeiro's Daily Lance front page. "Brazil get a fright."



FOOLING AROUND: Bulgaria's captain Trifon Ivanov (foreground), Emil Kostadinov (C) and Ivaylo Jordanov relaxing during a practice session at Montpellier on June 11. — AFP photo

**Spanish coach angered by training spies**

CHANTILLY, France, June 12 (AP/Internet): Angered by photographers who attempted to enter the Spanish training ground clandestinely, coach Javier Clemente said Thursday he will forgo polishing up some play strategies in case Nigeria got wind of them.

"That spying stuff did me in," said Clemente, moments before the side went into its last closed-door training session before flying later from Paris to the western coastal town of Nantes for Saturday's Group D game against Olympic champions Nigeria.

"If someone like Bora saw what we were going to do, he'd immediately work to cancel it," Clemente said, referring to Bora Milutinovic, Nigeria's coach.

On Tuesday, French police caught four media photographers trying to enter the Bourgnogues Sport Complex as Clemente's squad carried out its first team-only training. Spanish federation spokesman Fernando Garrido said.

The team is to hold one more training session Friday in Nantes' Beaujoire stadium before its World Cup opener Saturday.

Spying apart, Clemente was in an optimistic mood, saying the team "was full of enthusiasm because of the positive results of the past four years."

Under Clemente, Spain have been defeated just four times in 58 games since 1992.

The Basque coach has frequently been criticised for playing too defensively and conservatively and not freshening up the side more often with new talent.

The 48-year-old, chain-smoking coach had a dig for the critics: "There are always detractors but I don't care about them one bit."

Typically, Clemente declined to give any hint of what lineup he will use against Nigeria until an hour before kickoff, as is obligatory.

Earlier in the week when asked his opinion of Nigeria he described the team as "sensational." On its weaknesses, he said he couldn't think of any.

Meanwhile, the Spanish players were kept away from the press Thursday. Team officials said the feeling among them was one of anxiety to get on the road.

"So many days here, just can't wait to get started playing." Atletico de Madrid striker Kiko Narvaez said on Wednesday. Spain arrived at Chantilly, just north of Paris, a week ago.

The team's injury slate, brimming when it arrived, has been wiped clean with Kiko, veteran keeper Andoni Zubizarreta, Real Madrid's striker Raul Gonzalez and midfield kingpin Fernando Hierro all declared fit for the match.

Spain's other Group D opponents, Bulgaria and Paraguay, face off Friday in Montpellier.

**Scots downbeat**

PARIS, June 12: Scotland may have found their luck was out against Brazil on Wednesday, but they don't have to play second fiddle to anyone at the World Cup when it comes to playing stylish football, midfielder Paul Lambert insists, reports AFP.

The Celtic star, who won a European Cup winners medal with Germany's Borussia Dortmund, says Scotland are just capable of playing the beautiful game as the reigning champions, whom they gave a scare before going down 2-1 thanks to a cruel Tommy Boyd own-goal.

And Lambert says the same kind of performance can see off long-ball specialists Norway in their second game in Bordeaux on Tuesday.

With Norway and Morocco having drawn 2-2, the match against the Scandinavians is now one the Scots must win.

Lambert says the Scots are by no means downhearted after their opening loss and believe they can reach the second phase for the first time.

"I thought we deserved a draw at least against Brazil but the bottom line is we lost and that means a massive game against Norway," said Lambert.

"I think we are under-estimated, perhaps even by some people in Scotland."

"But I think the national team proved to the whole world that against the likes of Brazil we are happy to play a passing game."

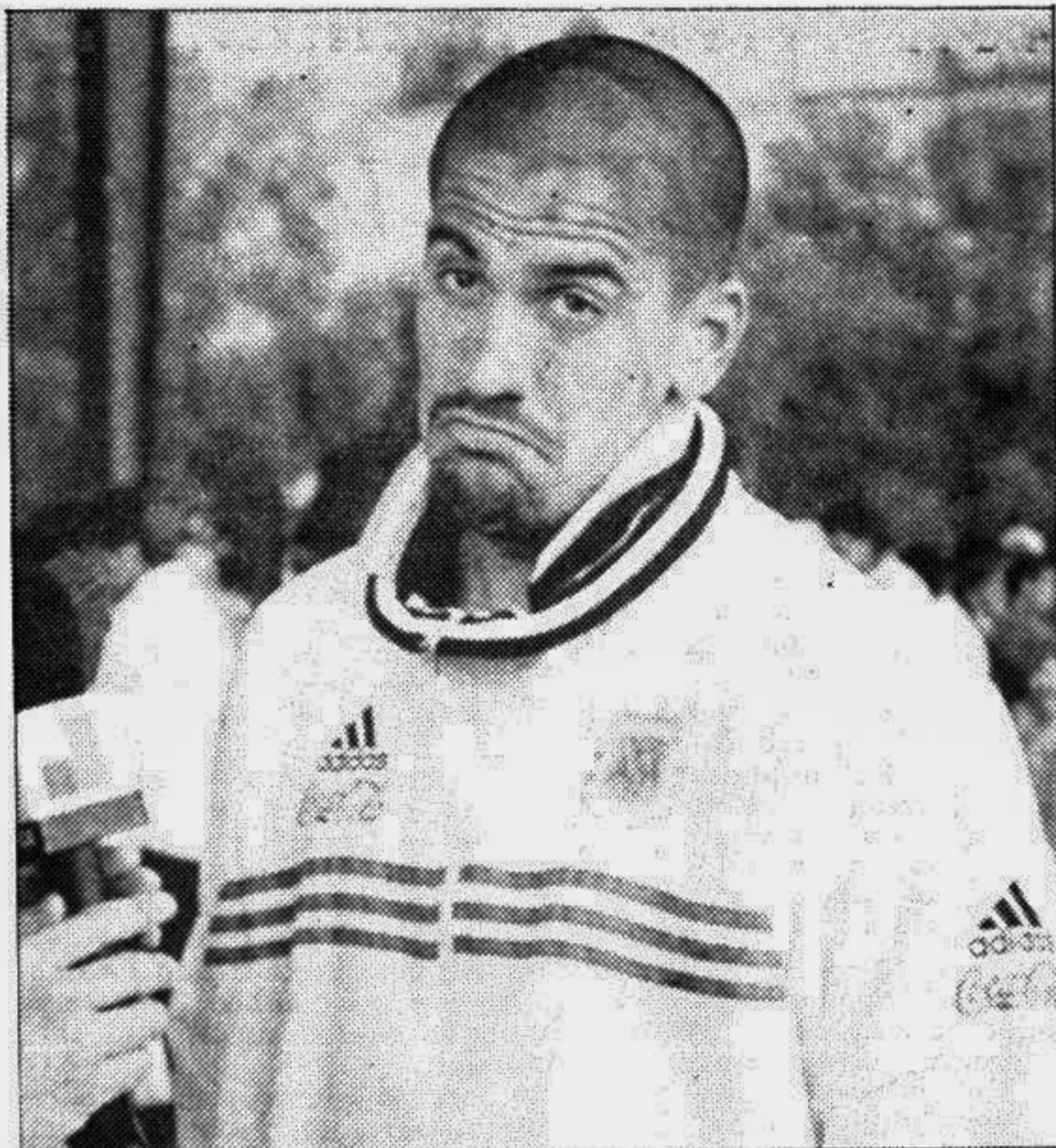
"We have good players, who are comfortable on the ball and have the ability to hurt teams. Perhaps we have now convinced most people that Scotland can produce good footballers."

"Now we need to show that same kind of assurance against Norway and not drift from our normal style."

"We know what they are about but we mustn't get sucked into their way of playing."

"We have run the champions close but it is important we win not just the match against Norway but the final group game with Morocco."

Scotland manager Craig Brown has indicated he may make changes against the Norwegians.



BASHFUL! Juan Veron of Argentina talking to the media at their L'Etrat base on June 11. — AFP photo

**FRANCE '98 SIDELINES**

UNDATED, June 12 (AP): The playing field is off limits at the World Cup for all but a handful of people, even if you happen to be the Wee Scot and Agent 007.

Jackie Stewart, the former Formula One champion and TV racing commentator, and Sean Connery, still best known for his role as James Bond, were barred from exchanging on-the-field greetings with their home Scottish team before the tournament's first match, FIFA officials said Thursday.

Stewart and Connery had made it to a tunnel leading from the belly of Stade de France onto the field when they were stopped by Keith Cooper, the communications director for the international soccer federation.

"They said they had planned to come on the pitch and say hello to Craig (Brown, the Scottish coach)," Cooper said. "We said, 'No Sorry... They took it like gentlemen.'"

"If Sean Connery was still in James Bond mode, I might have had a different matter on my hands," he said.

**BEWARE DOPERS!**

The first games of the World Cup brought the first doping tests and, while the results aren't in yet, FIFA said it would be watching closely for players who use drugs.

Two players from each team are selected at random during halftime of each game and taken to doping control for urine samples immediately after the match. FIFA spokesman Keith Cooper said Thursday.

Results usually take 2-3 days to be finalised. Cooper said FIFA would only announce when players flunk a drug test, although he did identify the first players tested as Colin Hendry and Scott Booth of Scotland, Talfare and Goncalves of Brazil, Abderrahim Ouakili and Salaheddine Bassir of Morocco, and Stale Sollbakken and Oyvind Leonhardsen of Norway.

Any player failing a dope test could be thrown out of the tournament, as was the case in 1994 when Argentina star Diego Maradona was found with a mixture of stimulants in his system.

**ANNOYED GERMANS**

Reported remarks by a television talk-show host have angered the German national team, which is looking at possible legal steps against the entertainer.

"We will look at it without emotion to decide whether anything needs to be done," team spokesman Wolfgang Niersbach said Thursday. "Even satire should not insult players."

The Harald Schmidt show on a German cable channel is an almost exact copy of David Letterman's late night talk show in the United States.

Schmidt reportedly used a Lothar Matthaeus "diary" to insult Juergen Klinsmann, the team captain. Matthaeus once published a real diary of a season in Bayern Munich in which he criticised his then teammate Klinsmann. The two have a frosty relationship.

Schmidt's nightly shows

during the World Cup feature a purported Matthaeus diary — invented by the show's writers.

**TICKETLESS JAPS OFF TO FRANCE**

Hundreds of angry Japanese soccer fans left for France Thursday uncertain of whether they would obtain tickets they had ordered for their national team's World Cup debut against Argentina.

Of the 14,700 tickets ordered by travel agents for Japan's opening match Sunday, only 2,200 had been delivered before the beginning of the departure rush Thursday.

Several travel agencies have cancelled their World Cup tours for the Argentina match because they fear they won't receive the tickets in time.

News broadcasts showed incensed fans at Tokyo's Narita International Airport shouting at tour company representatives and demanding an explanation for the missing tickets.

Many have been forced to give up their dream of cheering on the Japanese side in person because of cancelled tours. Among them: The father of national team midfielder, Hiroship Nanami.

"I called my son to tell him that I will be there if his team advances to the finals," Motoshi Nanami told a national broadcaster NHK.

In Paris, World Cup spokesman Bruno Travade said he could not explain what had caused the problem.



SALAS' SALSA: Superstriker Marcelo Salas (R) heads in Chile's second goal against Italy at Parc Lescure Stadium, Bordeaux on June 11. — AFP photo