

Brazilian captain Dunga juggles the ball during training at the Trois Sapin Stadium in Ozoir la Ferriere on June 13. —AFP photo

Argentina stutter

TOULOUSE, June 14: Gabriel Batistuta scored the only goal of the match as World Cup favourites Argentina laboured to brush aside debutants Japan in their opening Group H match today, reports Reuters.

Sampdoria's Juan Sebastian Veron won the ball close to the Japanese box and fed Ariel Ortega, whose through pass found Batistuta.

The Fiorentina striker took two steps and chipped the ball over advancing goalkeeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi into the net for his fifth World Cup goal. He scored four, including a hat-trick against Greece, in the 1994 finals in the United States.

The Argentines started slowly and cautiously with Japan doing more attacking in the opening quarter of an hour.

Double trouble for Saudis!

MARCO-EN-BAROEUL, France, June 14 (Reuters/Internet): Thieves stole money, gifts and *jainamaj* (Islamic prayer mats) from the Saudi Arabian World Cup hotel while the team were playing its opening match against Denmark, police said on Saturday.

They said 10 rooms were broken into during Friday's Group C match in nearby Lens. Around 60,000 French francs (\$10,000) were taken along with a number of personal items.

The robbery was reported by hotel staff who arrived to clean the rooms after the game, which Saudi Arabia lost 1-0.

Security guards left the hotel to have a coffee shortly before the break-in, media reports said.

But after some neat build-up work, notably from Hidetoshi Nakata and Hiroshi Nanami, Japan did not show enough conviction to make the breakthrough although they created some good chances late in the game.

In the last 15 minutes of the first half, Argentina could have gone two goals up.

Batistuta, whose international tally now stands at 44 goals in 62 matches, rose high above Japan's diminutive defenders to hit the post with a header seven minutes before the interval from a cross from the left.

Winger Claudio Lopez dived to head the rebound only to see his close range effort saved by Yamaguchi.

Once the talented Argentine midfielder had settled, they had Japan's defence under pressure, Ortega darting through on the ground while Veron was close twice with shots from outside the box.

In the second half Argentina, despite several chances, failed to make their superiority tell against the massed Japanese rearguard.

Yamaguchi saved Japan again 20 minutes from time when he turned a shot from Simeone wide after a Batistuta free kick.

Sweeper Roberto Sensi, Argentina's best player, had to come off 20 minutes from time after hurting his hand in an aerial challenge.

Defender Yutaka Akita created Japan's best chance 10 minutes from time with a header across the face of goal but left back Naoki Soma failed to reach the ball at the far post.

TEAMS

ARGENTINA: 1-Carlos Roa, 14-Nelson Viva, 6-Roberto Sensi (3-Jose Chamot 74), 2-Roberto Ayala, 22-Javier

Zanetti, 5-Matias Almeyda, 8-Diego Simeone, 11-Juan Veron, 10-Ariel Ortega, 7-Claudio Lopez (18-Abel Balbo 62), 9-Gabriel Batistuta.

JAPAN: 20-Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi, 2-Akira Nishizaki, 17-Yutaka Akita, 4-Masami Ihara, 19-Susuke Nakanishi, 3-Naoki Soma (22-Takashi Hirano 85), 6-Motohiro Yamaguchi, 8-Hidetoshi Nakata, 10-Hiroshi Nanami, 9-Masashi Nakayama (12-Wagner Lopes 67), 18-Shoji Jo.

Referee: Mario van der Ende (Netherlands).

CFF in the clear

PARIS, June 14: FIFA on Saturday cleared the Colombian Football Federation (CFF) of trafficking World Cup tickets as thousands of fans continued to seat on getting tickets they had paid for but still not received, reports AFP.

Football's ruling body opened a probe Friday into illegal ticket distribution by the Colombian and Cameroon soccer federations as French officials denied any blame for the World Cup ticket sales fiasco as fans blamed the French Cup-organising committee for their plight.

But Colombian federation president Alvaro Fina issued a sharp denial and the head of the delegation at the team base in Tour Du Pin Gustavo Moreno-Jaramillo, said Saturday he was outraged that the finger of suspicion was being pointed at his country.

"We have absolutely no involvement in this affair," Moreno said.

FIFA spokesman Keith Cooper said that there was no evidence linking the Colombians with ticket fraud and that they were innocent.



Mexican defender Claudio Suarez locked in aerial combat with South Korean forward Non Jung-Yoon during their World Cup Group E clash at the Stade de Gerland in Lyon on June 13. —AFP photo

'Gazza factor' goes on trial today

MARSEILLE, France, June 14 (AFP): England will find out just how badly they miss Paul Gascoigne here Monday when Glenn Hoddle's World Cup novices take on Tunisia.

Bad boy Gascoigne was booted out of the squad before England reached French shores.

His absence has cast a question mark over Hoddle's ability to deliver on his promise to bring the World Cup back home. Without the gifted Geordie life is duller on and off the field and the squad is without a single player with World Cup experience — and only a handful who chill a defender's spine.

But Hoddle is convinced he has the ammunition at his disposal to make up for the Middlesbrough midfielder's absence.

Asked who he is counting on to unlock defenses and find space for the likes of striker Alan Shearer, Hoddle had this answer.

"I still feel we've got people — like David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Darren Anderson, Paul Merson and Steve McManaman — with enough offensive ability," he said.

They were ahead of Paul Gascoigne at the stage where he was with his fitness and what he could have done in the World Cup.

Hoddle was left with no option but to bar Gascoigne whose battle for fitness was a lost cause.

Tunisia hammered Wales 4-0 just nine days before they take the field against England in Group G of the tournament which also includes Colombia and Romania.

"That win showed the team has found an effective pattern in attack and is tactically ready," said Tunisia's long-serving Polish-born coach Henri Kasperczak, who will join French club Bastia when his contract expires after the World Cup.

In their only previous appearance in the World Cup finals, Tunisia did Africa proud in Argentina in 1978. They held West Germany to a 0-0 draw and beat Mexico 3-1.

And Tunisia held England to a 1-1 draw in their last meeting

in 1990. Hoddle is aware that no side is easy in France, pointing to Morocco's 2-2 draw with Norway. Regarded as the forerunner of Europe after their brilliant run in qualification and warm-up matches.

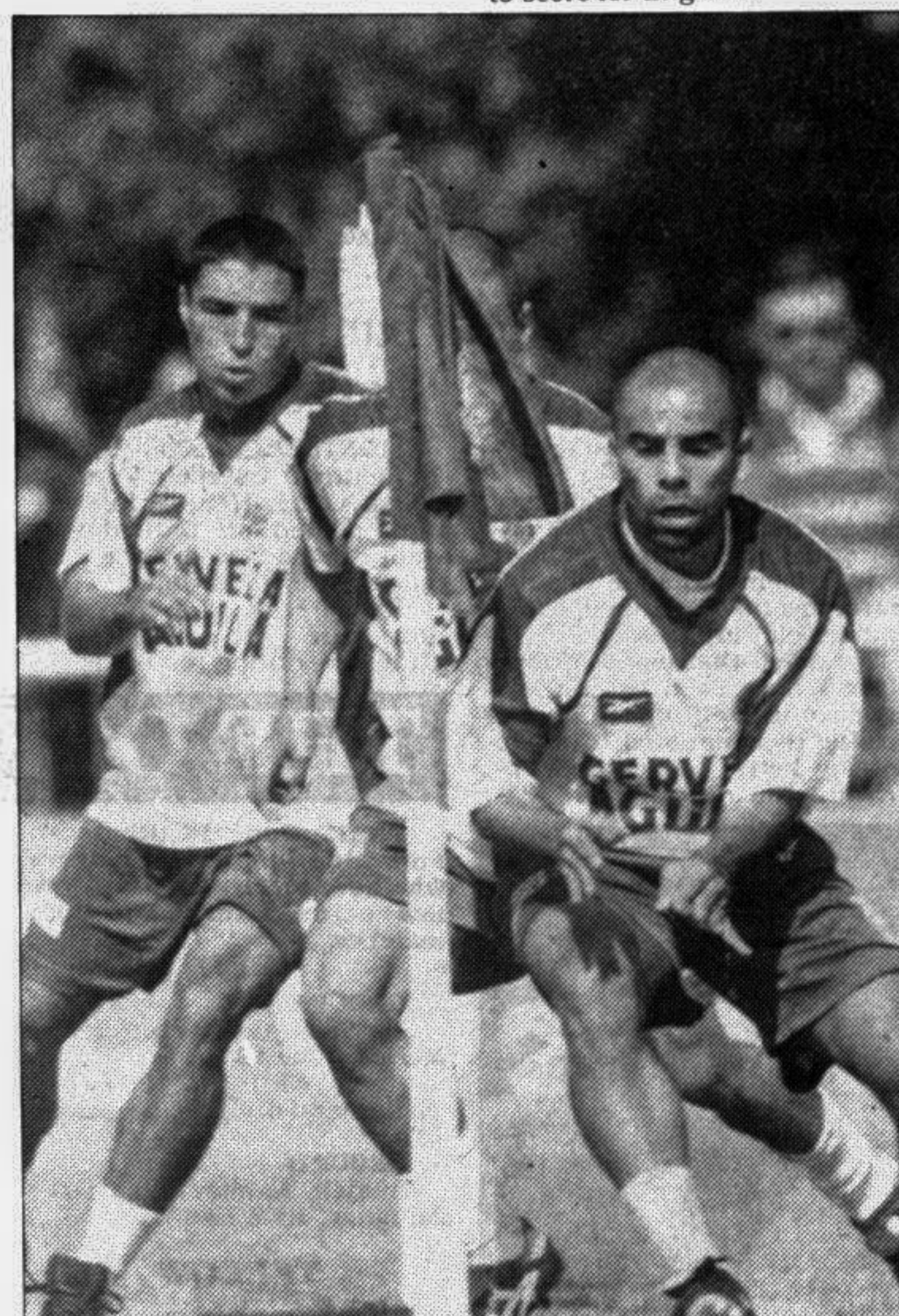
Hoddle is counting on Newcastle striker Shearer to carve up the Tunisian defence.

Hoddle believes England are better prepared than any team sent to compete in the World

Cup. "We want to get off to a flier and I think it is going to be the toughest World Cup to win," he said.

Striking prodigy Michael Owen has impressed Hoddle, who must decide whether the 18-year-old Liverpool scoring machine replaces Teddy Sheringham in England's starting line-up.

He has already broken the record for the youngest player to score for England.



Colombia's Mauricio Serna (R) and teammates in practice at La Tour du Pin Stadium in Paris on June 13. —AFP photo

Hagi vs Valderrama: Who's in the mood?

LYON, June 14 (Reuters): Colombia, a side as changeable in mood as the weather, have tried to bury memories of their terrible 1994 campaign but they face an early reminder of that World Cup debacle when they face Romania in Group D on Monday.

Tipped to be the sensation of USA '94 after losing just once in 34 matches, Colombia were brought down to earth by Romania, who defeated the South Americans 3-1 in their opening match with Gheorghe Hagi scoring one of the goals.

Colombia never recovered and went out in the first round.

But Romania reached the quarter finals. They were seeded for the 1998 World Cup and expect to clear the first round hurdle again despite the loss of several experienced players.

That is an understatement, coach Hernan Dario Gomez admits he can coach his players all he likes but if they are not in the mood for playing to their potential, he can do nothing about it.

"Colombia get up well, fresh in their minds, they won't have any problem" Gomez said he has tried to make the side more pragmatic but know they like to express themselves, none more than playmaker Carlos Valderrama.

Now 36, Valderrama, and his famous mass of hair, still runs the show abetted by striker Faustino Asprilla and forays from midfield of Freddy Rincon.

But age seems to be affecting a side appearing in their third successive finals. Colombia came out of the World Cup warm-up without a victory from eight international games and performed well below par in their final tune-up last week when they struggled to beat a local regional side 1-0.

To make matters worse, the team doctor said that several players had the first signs of influenza.

Romania qualified easily for the World Cup finals and are one of the tournament's dark horses despite the fact Iordanescu had to call up two relatively inexperienced defenders

because of injuries.

Liviu Cibotariu, brought into the squad after defensive mainstay Daniel Prodan failed to recover in time from surgery, looks set to win only his fifth cap.

Utility player Iulian Filipescu will replace Anderlecht's left-sided defender Tibor Selymes, still recovering from a knock to the right ankle.

Iordanescu, who has kept his team well away from the press, has persuaded midfield general Hagi to track back when necessary to help the defence.

"I am very happy that Hagi sees the problem of the team's defence the same way everyone else does... but that doesn't mean he'll be playing too deep," said the coach.

Iordanescu made clear he wanted to see a good performance from Valencia striker

Adrian Ilie, dubbed "the cobra" by adoring fans, who has recovered from a minor calf problem.

"I expect Ilie to have a great World Cup because he has great potential and above all must make sure that he can gradually take over from Hagi," Iordanescu said.

PROBABLE LINEUPS

ROMANIA: 12-Bogdan Stelea, 2-Dan Petrescu, 18-Iulian Filipescu, 6-Gheorghe Popescu, 13-Liviu Cibotariu, 8-Dorinel Munteanu, 10-Gheorghe Hagi, 5-Constantin Galca, 16-Gabriel Popescu, 11-Adrian Ilie, 9-Viorel Moldovan.

Colombia: 22-Farid Mondragon, 4-Jose Santa, 5-Jorge Bermudez, 3-Ever Palacios, 13-Wilmer Cabrera, 8-Harold Lozano, 6-Maurizio Serna, 10-Carlos Valderrama, 19-Freddy Rincon, 15-Victor Aristizabal, 11-Faustino Asprilla.



Hernandez (L) slots the ball home in the first of his two goals in Mexico's 3-1 win over South Korea, at the Stade de Gerland in Lyon on June 13. —AFP photo

Bora for Pope

NANTES, France, June 14 (Reuters/Internet): "Yes, I know I look like the Pope," said a grinning Bora Milutinovic garbed in traditional Nigerian robes.

Around him, his Nigerian players danced and sang to a rhythmic beat in celebration of their rousing 3-2 win over Spain in the World Cup on Saturday.

"This win is so special for me, for the players and for the people of Nigeria," said the Belgrade-born Milutinovic.

Nigeria's stirring victory climaxed an emotional roller coaster for Milutinovic's squad over the past eight days and left them dreaming of a place in the World Cup quarterfinals.

"I will be disappointed if we don't do that and do better than we did last time," said Sunday Oliseh, whose blistering long-range drive cemented Nigeria's victory. "This result was deserved and it has given us belief."

"After we lost 5-1 to the Netherlands in a warm-up we were down, very down. Now we are back on a high. But that is football. There is no real answer."

Nigeria's thrashing in its final warm-up match almost cost Milutinovic his job last weekend, according to sources close to the players.

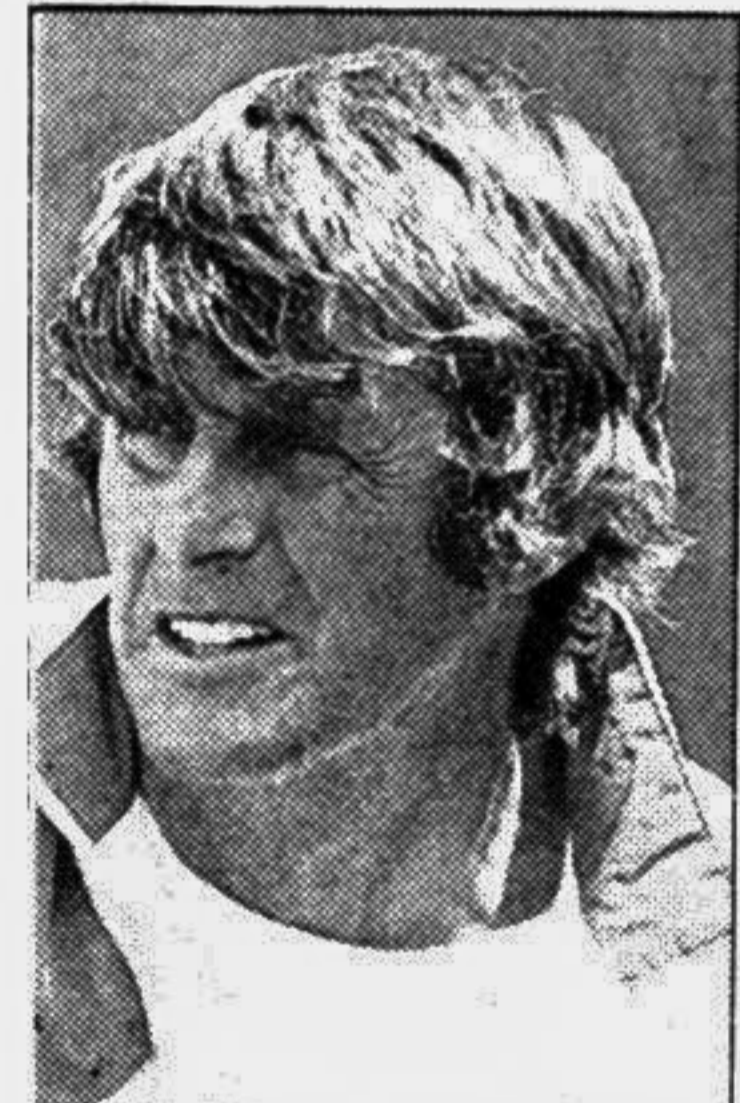
"There were a lot of rumours and there was some trouble," team official Fanny Amua said. "We held a team meeting and that helped solve a lot of the problems. Now everyone is happy again."

But the shock waves of the defeat against the Netherlands on June 5 were forgotten when Nigerian ruler Sani Abacha died last Monday. The players were unified and the in-fighting was forgotten.

"This team had to work harder than anyone else to get to this stage," said Oliseh. "So we all pulled together. We knew we had problems and we came into this game for a draw. But my goal changed that -- it was the most important goal of my life."

"We have a lot of good players and we enjoy playing. That's important for us. In Europe, football is a business. But in Africa, it is a pleasure and that makes a difference."

"Eight years ago, we would have lost this match 4-0 with bad organisation and discipline. But now we don't do that. We have learned our lessons from Europe and we are more confident."



MILUTINOVIC
"Now we are ready for it." As Oliseh departed, he pointed to the slogan on the Nigerian squad T-shirts which read: "Just Do It."
"Yes," he said. "That's we plan to do now."

The Tritanic didn't sink after all

MEXICO CITY (AP/Internet): For Mexico, Saturday was a day of forgiveness.

After ridiculing their national soccer team as it lost game after game in preparation for the World Cup -- even dubbing it the "Tritanic" as a play on the tri-colour uniforms it wears -- fans were jubilant after Mexico's 3-1 win over South Korea on Saturday.

"It looks like the Tritanic didn't sink after all," said Oscar Espindola, 29, dancing in the street with his wife, Rosalva. "I'm so happy!"

Thousands of people ran laps around the Angel of Independence, a major Mexico City monument, lying down on the ground to make a wave and spraying one another with foam and with red, green and white spray paint.

"Mexico! Mexico!" they screamed. Rodrigo Gonzalez, 17, squeezed his soaking T-shirt. "They bathed me in beer!" he yelled.

"Even if it seemed impossible, we're going to win," he said. He conceded that he had been drinking rum, tequila and beer -- and a lot of each. "We're sucking them down for the victory," he said.

Gerardo Vela, 42, stood still as three teenagers painted his bald head in red, white and green. "What can I do? They painted me up," he said. "The people are very happy. You have to let them do what they want."

He raised his arms and hooped, then joined the crowd running around the monument. But according to three young men, the most enthusiastic fan around was their bulldog Baxter. His fur was painted in the national colours, and he was wrapped in a Mexican flag.

"He's so happy," said Gilberto Gutierrez Vazquez, 17. When a reporter pointed out that the dog actually looked a bit sullen, Gilberto waved away that possibility.

"He's angry because they sprayed him with foam," he said. "But believe me, he'll be celebrating again in a minute."

HAGI vs VALDERRAMA
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