

Del Piero cries foul play

SENLIS, France, June 15: Alessandro Del Piero hit out at Italian state broadcaster RAI Sunday, accusing it of trying to drive a wedge between him and Italy teammate Roberto Baggio, reports Reuters.

Del Piero was angered by television pictures from Italy's World Cup 2-2 draw with Chile that suggested he was less than enthusiastic about Baggio's late equaliser.

The Juventus striker said he was pleased Baggio had scored and slammed RAI's coverage as "excessive."

"I was deeply disappointed with the way some of the media, not the written media, covered the way I reacted to Baggio's penalty," Del Piero told a news conference at Italy's training base.

"It seemed to me excessive. They showed shots of me four minutes after the goal and then suggested I wasn't celebrating. What am I supposed to do, keep my arms in the air until the end of the match?"

"People who were sitting with me saw how I reacted to the goal. I was as pleased as anyone Baggio played against Chile largely because Del Piero was injured."

After setting up Christian Vieri to score Italy's first goal and then grabbing their second from the penalty spot, Italian soccer's favourite son may have cemented his place in Cesare Maldini's first team — at Del Piero's expense.

Del Piero said he had congratulated Baggio on his performance at the end of the 2-2 draw.

"I was particularly pleased he scored the penalty. It can't have been easy for him, partly because it was the decisive strike of the match and partly because of what happened in the last World Cup."

Baggio famously missed a penalty in the shootout at the end of the 1994 tournament, handing the trophy to Brazil after he had almost single-handedly propelled Italy into the final.

"The fact Robby's done so well while I've been injured hasn't denied my confidence at all," said Del Piero, who played with Baggio at Juventus for two seasons in the early 1990s.

"We're great friends and there's nothing negative about our rivalry."

Italy's failure to beat Chile and Del Piero's recovery from injury has presented coach Cesare Maldini with a selection headache ahead of Italy's second match against Cameroon on Wednesday.

The coach must decide whether to break up the Baggio-Vieri partnership to cater for Del Piero, who had an inspired 1997-98 season for Juventus and has been heralded as Italy's great hope for the France finals.

FIFA verdicts

FRANCE, June 15 (AFP/Interfax): The FIFA Disciplinary Committee announced the following punitive measures on Sunday.

Patrick Kluivert (9) of the Netherlands will be suspended for two matches after he was sent off during the Group E match (against Belgium) on June 13. He will miss his team's next two matches.

Ju Seok Ha (17) of South Korea will be suspended for one match after he was sent off during the Group E match (against Mexico). He will miss his team's next match against the Netherlands.

Anatoli Nankov (16) of Bulgaria is also suspended for one match after he was sent off for his second yellow card during the Group D match (against Paraguay). He will miss Bulgaria's next match against Nigeria.

S Africans got frightened!

VICHY, France, June 15: World Cup debutants South Africa admitted today stage fright played a part in their dismal performance against France, reports Reuters.

Captain Lucas Radebe said that he and his teammates had been overawed by the occasion on Friday, when South Africa lost 3-0 to the home side in front of 60,000 fervent spectators in Marseille.

"We had stage fright," added midfielder Helman Mkhalele. "We couldn't settle down in the game. We lost confidence both individually and collectively."

Radebe said the team had been taught a lesson by the slick performance of the French.

"It was quite a shock. We didn't expect to lose by that margin, particularly as we had played against them before in France and lost by just one goal."

"It was a lesson and hopefully we've learnt from it." South African players say now that the burden of the opening game has been lifted from their shoulders, they are more confident about their chances of winning their next two matches against Denmark and Saudi Arabia.

"We'll relax more now and really focus on the next game. We know that will determine our fate," said Mkhalele. South Africa play Denmark in Toulouse on Thursday.

Mkhalele said convincing performance by other African countries at the World Cup finals had added to South African motivation. Nigeria beat Spain on Saturday while Cameroon and Morocco have both taken a point from their opening games against European opposition.

"The results from the other African teams has put pressure on us. We don't want to be the only team that lets Africa down," he added.



Predrag Mijatovic (L) of Yugoslavia tries to get the better of Iran's Nader Mohammedkhani on Sunday at St. Etienne. — AFP photo

Scots: Sink or swim?

BORDEAUX, France, June 15 (AFP): Norway and Scotland have a win-or-bust clash here on Tuesday with both teams needing to win as the World Cup pressure mounts with the first of the second stage of matches (kick off 5.30 PM GMT 1530).

With Norway facing defending champions Brazil in their final first-round match, they realistically need success against Scotland to have any chance of progressing past the first round for the first time.

Should Scotland lose, the worst case scenario becomes a reality and they will be the first team ruled out of making progress to the next phase.

However Scotland manager Craig Brown knows both the Norway and Morocco games are winnable and that would almost certainly ensure passage to the second round, despite skipper Gary McAllister being ruled out of the finals through injury.

Brown is ready to ring the changes to put an end to his country's dismal World Cup record.

Brown knows the Norway match is vital if he is to end their losing streak, only the first two in each group go through to the next round.

In a bid to turn things round Brown is likely to drop Celtic striker Darren Jackson, who played in the hole behind Gordon Durie and Kevin Gallacher.

Brown may instead opt to use either Craig Burley or Billy McKinlay in the centre of midfield. Burley played right wing-back against the world champions but operates in the middle for Celtic.

His clubmate Jackie McNamara could replace him on the flank when Scotland face the Norwegians.

Brown said: "I'll certainly think about adjusting tactically for the next game and we may also look at changing the personnel."

Norway manager Egil Olsen is adamant they will continue to play to their strengths despite their Moroccan setback, he said "maybe our style evolves around a lot of high balls and set-pieces, but that won't change against Scotland."

Norway might have earned a 2-2 draw against Morocco on Wednesday, but they were pilloried by their nations press who have become to express great results.

Egil Olsen's men were last beaten 17 months ago and are Europe's in-form side. Among their successes was a stunning victory in a friendly against Brazil in Oslo. The Norwegian public are expecting their side, who won six of their eight qualifiers, to go beyond the first round for the first time in three World Cup finals.

Olsen is contemplating changes to tighten up the Norwegian backline, with up to

attempted lob by Cafu clattered against keeper Jim Leighton and then off the shoulder of Boyd into the Scottish net.

It is Scotland's eighth World Cup appearance but they have never gone beyond the first round but coach Craig Brown is determined to change all that.

Now at their eighth finals, the Scots are still to reach the second phase of the tournament having missed that target in 1954, 1958, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986 and 1990.

It was Brown who took Scotland to their first European championship finals so why not another first with second round qualification here.

Central defenders Colin Hendry and Colin Calderwood, although embarrassed at times by Ronaldo's skill, are still and an impressive pairing and Scotland's defence as a whole only let in three goals in their 10 qualifiers.

And Scotland have still not conceded more than two goals to anyone in Brown's four and a half year stint in charge.

Kevin Gallacher is a proven goal scorer with six in the qualifiers and could cause danger in and around Norway's box.

In fact Norway defender Henning Berg cited his former Blackburn colleagues Gallacher and Hendry as the danger men.

Scottish keeper Jim Leighton, 39, who won his 87th cap in the Stade de France against Brazil and reduced a thrilling first-half performance, will need to pit in another inspired performance.

Scotland meanwhile have midfielder Darren Jackson already on a yellow card and a further one would rule him out of their last match against Morocco in Saint Etienne on June 23.

"I think we are all a bit more relaxed now. We've got our first match out of the way. We know we can do a lot better than we did against Morocco."

Norway have only one injury problem ahead of their meeting with the Scots.

Defender Vegard Heggem suffered pulled groin muscles during Friday's training session and is expected to be out of action for at least 48 hours.

Scotland are trying to bounce back from an unfortunate own goal from Tommy Boyd which gifted Brazil a 2-1 victory in the World Cup opener.

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attempted lob by Cafu clattered against keeper Jim Leighton and then off the shoulder of Boyd into the Scottish net.

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PROBABLE TEAMS

SCOTLAND: 1-Jim Leighton, 8-Craig Burley, 4-Colin Calderwood, 5-Colin Hendry, 3-Tom Boyd, 22-Christian Dailly (or 6-Tosh McKinlay), 14-Paul Lambert, 10-Darren Jackson, 11-John Collins, 7-Kevin Gallacher, 9-Gordon Durie.

NORWAY: 1-Frode Grodas, 5-Stigg Inge Bjornebye, 4-Henning Berg, 3-Ronny Johnsen, 15-Dan Eggen, 7-Erik Mykland, 8-Oyvind Leonhardsen, 6-Stale Solbakken, 10-Jettil Rekdal, 17-Havard Flo, 9-Tor Andre Flo.

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A record in S Korea

SEOUL, June 15: While Korea's World Cup crash to Mexico may have come as a devastating blow to the football-crazed nation, the televised match drew the highest viewership in the country's history, reports said today, says AFP.

More than 79 per cent of television-owning households in this nation of 45 million people, were glued to their small screens in the early hours of Sunday, to see the national team fall 3-1 to Mexico, according to a polling agency.

But Media Korea Service, quoted by the Korea Times, said that the ratings began to fall off following the first 45 minutes after Korean midfielder Ha Seok-Ju was sent off just after putting South Korea into a 1-0 lead.

The ratings dropped to 78.3 per cent 20 minutes into the second half as cheers of excitement and support for the Korean team began to fade across the darkened and disappointed capital.

This surprising rating is about 5.6 per cent higher than the previous highest (viewership poll) recorded during the Korea vs Japan match last April, an MSK spokesman said.

Most lights across Seoul unusually burned well into the night, as the nation sat on the edge of its seat, to see if its team would finally end their 44-year wait for their first win in a World Cup finals in Lyon on Saturday.

But the referee's decision to send Ha off after the 28th minute under tough new FIFA rules dashed the country's hopes, and any planned celebrations gave way to a gloomy but stoic calm here.

Salas scare

MARIGNAC, June 15: Striker Marcelo Salas, the World Cup's joint top-scorer, gave his Chilean teammates a scare Sunday when he left the practice field holding a painful right thigh, reports AP.

But the team doctor said it was only a minor strain and that Salas will be able to play in Wednesday's match against Austria. Salas scored both goals as Chile tied Italy 2-2 in their first game of Group B.

Five minutes into a practice game between starters and reserves, Salas felt a minor pull in the right thigh and left the field.

He was quickly examined by doctor Eugenio Valdecantos, who treated Salas with heat pads and a massage. Salas was able to walk without limping.

Salas and Mexico's Luis Hernandez share the Cup's scoring lead with two goals each.

QUIPS & QUOTES

UNDATED, June 15 (Reuters): Here is a selection of World Cup quotes on Sunday:

The Reggae beat goes on at the World Cup despite Jamaica's 3-1 defeat by Croatia.

Players and coach Rene Simoes put the game down to experience but, while disappointed, the Reggae Boyz from the Caribbean said they were not out to it yet.

"Jamaica doesn't lose, Jamaica is always the winner because they learn," said Simoes.

"They were the better team and more experienced and I have to congratulate them, they deserved to win."

"Their midfield especially took control and made it very difficult for us to counter-attack. That was experience and the talent of players like (Zvonimir) Boban and Suker," Simoes said.

"The second goal really hit us because it came so early in the second half, it was a real blow and that made it very hard for us."

"We are disappointed but we showed we can play well and we can improve, there are two games more — let's play two games and try and qualify."

Robbie Earle said Jamaica were disappointed at how they conceded the last two goals.

"There was a bit of anxiety — it's the first time we have been here, the first time on this stage, we were always chasing the game," Earle said.

"We knew they were a good side and that they were going to keep it away from us and move it about."

"I don't know if it's naivety at this level but we'll have to do better at set pieces if we are going to have a chance of getting to the second round."

Earle was one of five English-based players in the team who were drafted in by Jamaica to guarantee qualification, his header was straight out of the long ball textbook of his club side, Premier league Wimbledon.

"It's been a long time coming for me, my international career has really started and I was here to make the most of it," said Earle 33.

"It we can take a bit of confidence from this game and go in the Argentina game — we've got nothing to lose and who knows?"

Winger Pauo Hall, who plays for English First Division Portsmouth, said it had been a night to remember in front of a packed house at Lens.

"It's been an experience I'll never forget. It's my first time playing on such a big stage and I was really tentative."

Croatian coach Miroslav Blazevic said experience had made the difference, Croatia played in the 1996 European Championship and many players have started for top clubs across Europe.

"Probably we won it because we had a little bit more experience and, without any disrespect to Jamaica, because we were also the better team."

Mind your own business

SENLIS, France, June 15: Coach Cesare Maldini fired a broadside at Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi on Sunday, telling him to mind his own business over the choice between Roberto Baggio and Alessandro Del Piero, reports AFP.

The tactical pincer has turned into a soap opera in soccer-mad Italy, with even the head of the government wading into the debate over whether Baggio, Del Piero or both should play against Cameroon next Wednesday.

With Baggio starting in the 2-2 draw against Chile and Del Piero recovered from a thigh injury, Prodi claimed on Saturday that both men should be on the pitch.

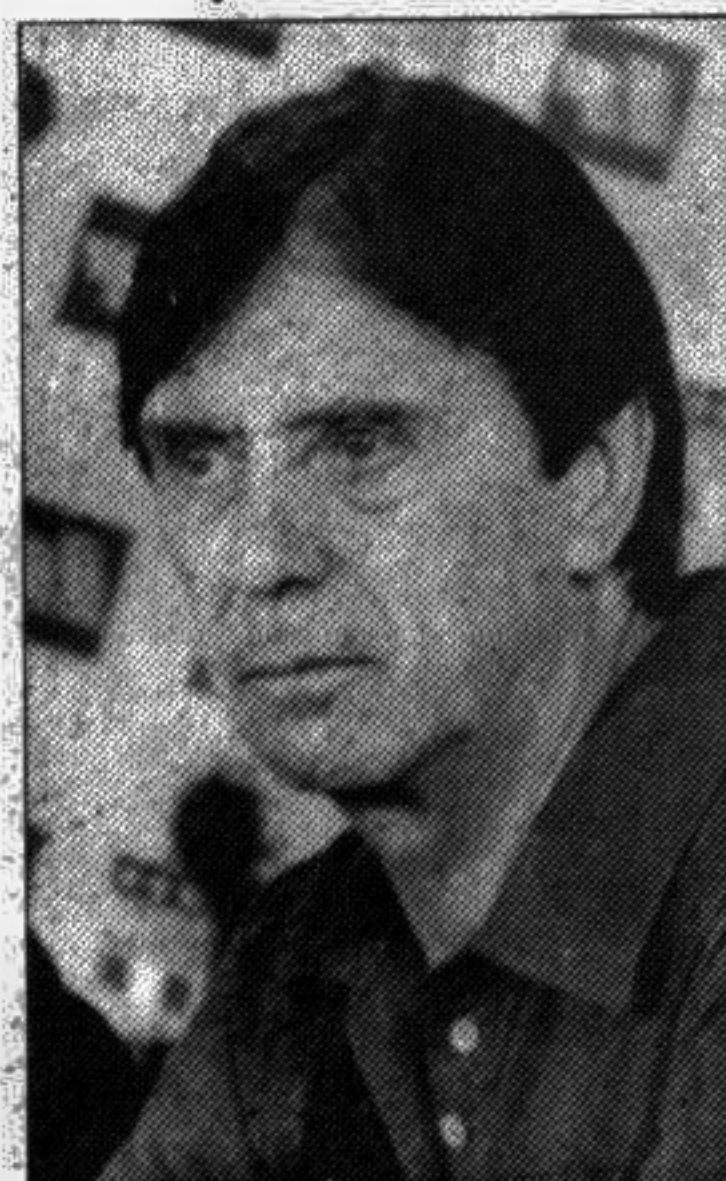
"They're both great athletes and they should be on the pitch together," Prodi told reporters in Italy. "They are a great resource for Italy. It's up to the coach how to use them in the side."

But Maldini told a news conference on Sunday: "I believe that Prime Minister Prodi is a great admirer of cycling... leaving a pregnant pause that allowed the Italian press to shout 'And he should stick to that.'"

Maldini continued: "As far as I am concerned, I am not very happy about it and I'll tell you why straight away. Here we are

talking about only two players but there are 22 in the squad, and I'm absolutely against it."

"They are all working with the same objective and it's only right that they all get the reward they deserve. I understand



CESARE MALDINI the issue of the two players, but I just can't accept people talking only about them. The others who played and also those who didn't play

should also get some attention." Maldini knows full well that he is bound to take some stick if they fail to take three points in Montpellier, but denied there was any jealousy lurking in the shadows of their chateau at Gouvieux.

"Whatever decision I take, if we don't win, I lose," he said. "But at our home here, we're all friends, we're all professionals and we're all on the right road together."

He also tried to play down Saturday's first workout here with a three-man attack including burly centre forward Christian Vieri.

"These are just tests," he said. "We'll do another one today, another one tomorrow and then we'll decide. I don't want to say whether the two of them are compatible or whether they're not compatible."

"Let's just say we are working on it."

Moving on to the position in Montpellier, Maldini said: "Cameroon are a team who are very, very strong physically and have good players, and who are playing in Europe."

"I've seen bits of their match against Austria and they did well. They caused them problems," he said. "And their coach Le Roy knows how to do his job."



LEG PULLING! Brazilian stars Junior Baiano (L), Rolando (C) and Roberto Carlos stretching at their Ozoir la Ferriere base on June 13. — AFP photo

Asians don't deliver the goals

PARIS, June 15 (AFP): A lack of firepower, and in one crazy-filled moment a lack of discipline, led to all four Asian teams in the World Cup finals losing their opening matches.

The Asian Zone has four teams in the finals for the first time and with Japan and South Korea co-hosting the tournament in 2002, and automatically qualifying, sides from the region are under intense scrutiny.

There are already rumblings that Asia has too many representatives in the finals but first-timers Japan and South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Iran all showed that they can play quality football against class opposition.

Sepp Blatter, the newly-elected president of FIFA, said Asian sides had performed well but added that football matches were won by scoring goals, only South Korea have found the tar-

get so far.

Japan and South Korea in particular are eager to show their potential in the World Cup finals ahead of the 2002 tournament.

"The World Cup in 2002 is the first to be held in Asia and for Asian countries the World Cup has not been a great success in the past, said South Korea's coach Cha Bum-Kun before the competition started.

"More than any other years, this year we must at least reach the last 16 to save the face of Asian football and to prove to the football world that Asian sides do not just reach the finals and then fail."

South Korea had looked well on their way to a historic first win in five World Cup finals after taking a first half lead against Mexico on Saturday, but goalscorer Ha Seok Ju was sent off just 80 seconds later for a tackle from behind and his

rash challenge sealed the South Koreans fate, eventually losing 3-1.

With the Netherlands and Belgium to come Cha has admitted that his depleted side's chances of qualification are very slim and that the World Cup is now a face saving operation, that elusive first win was South Korea's main target in the final and they will try and achieve that in the up-coming group matches.

Japanese football has improved markedly since the advent of the professional J-League earlier this decade and in Asian footballer of the year Hidetoshi Nakata the country has a potential world class midfielder.

Nakata tormented Argentina in their match on Sunday and the former world champions were mightily relieved that striker Gabriel Batistuta grabbed the winning goal.

Japanese coach Takeshi Okada said that his side had played well but he was disappointed they failed to find the net.

"The defeat by just one goal we can accept that as a fact of life. But I really regret that we have ended up without any goals regardless of whether we won or lost. In the World Cup, the result is all that matters. In that sense we were unfortunate," he said.

Nakata operated well from midfield for Japan but the only real scoring chance fell to Brazilian born striker Wagner Lopes who shot just wide.

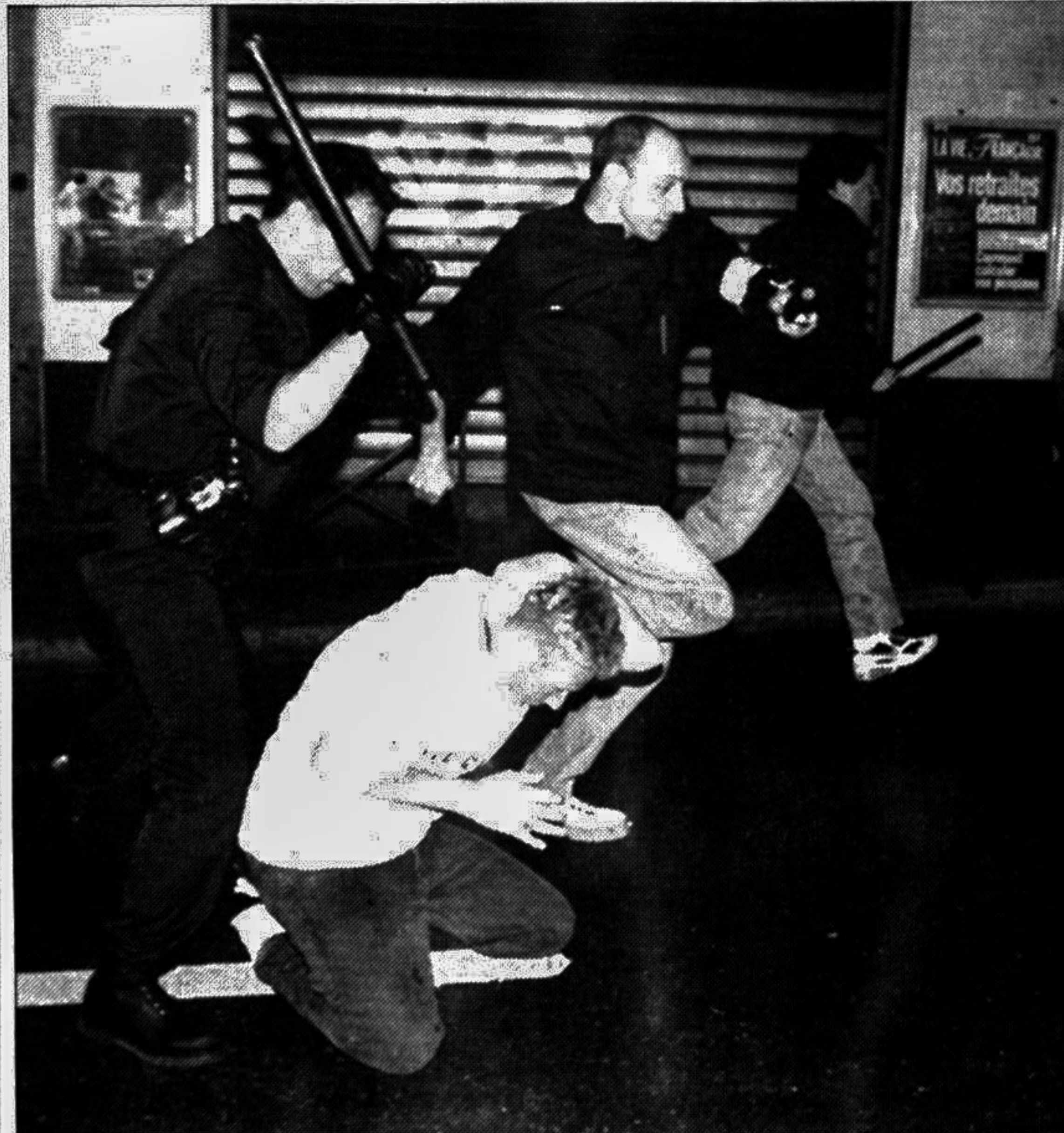
Iran, playing in their first finals since 1978 looked impressive in their match against the highly-rated Yugoslavia.

The Iranians who made the finals with a dramatic win over Australia, fell to a Simsa Mihaljovic free-kick which whistled past young stand-in keeper Nima Nakisa, who was out of position.

Iran's three German-based stars Khodad Azizi, Karim Bagheri and Ali Daei were in impressive form and Daei nearly grabbed the equaliser with a textbook header near the end.

"I told them Iran was a strong team but nobody believed me said Yugoslavia's coach Slobodan Santrac.

"Saudi Arabia who made the second round four years ago, also lost by a single goal to 1992 European champions Denmark. The Saudis matched Denmark for most of the game but strikers Sami al Jaber and Saeed Owairan, scorer of arguably the best goal in USA '94, did not threaten goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel.



YOU BE THE JUDGE: A number of English hooligans, with their total disregard for civilised behaviour apparent, create a menace at Marseille on June 14. — AFP photo