



THEIR TIME TO PARTY: Euphoric Nigerian fans celebrate the win against Bulgaria at Parc des Princes, Paris on June 19. — AFP photo

Nigeria dance

PARIS, June 20 (AFP): World Cup images of celebration remain in the memory and become a nostalgic reminder for years after the event. The Nigerian squad had an end-of-pitch Parc des Princes party which allowed full rein to their footballing high.

Grinning players and officials embraced each other as well as supporters and even the photographers in the blue bids who must have felt they were lucky to be at the Auteuil stand end to get all the great snaps.

The Red Bib end, imprisoned at side of the stadium under special World Cup rules, looked on enviously as their colleagues cleaned up to give the world images of Nigeria's celebrations.

Nigeria had just beaten Bulgaria to make it to the second round. At that time they did not know they were to be assured of winning the group following the 0-0 draw by Spain and Paraguay later on Friday.

But the hugs, kisses and spontaneous *joie de vivre* among the million crowd at the Auteuil end was as infectious as it is rare in the serious world of football these days.

African teams have over the years given the world a lesson in how to celebrate with unrestrained emotion after what is, after all, only a sport. Far from being patronising to a continent which will surely win the World Cup soon — Nigeria must now be one of the favourites — it is merely an observation.

Nigeria are already Olympic Champions and a power in world football. They are no longer the naive underdogs who merely give the World Cup a bit of colour but no serious football.

But, on the other hand, there is a definite trend for exuberance on that continent which has something important to



WHEN A TIE IS SWEETER THAN A WIN: Paraguayans celebrate after holding fancied Spain. — AFP photo

Iran vs USA: Mother of all matches

LYON, France, July 20 (AFP): The politics that have seen the US-Iran clash billed as the "mother of all football matches" will be forgotten here tomorrow as the two sides scrap for World Cup survival.

"If we do not beat Iran I think we can forget about reaching the second round," admitted US skipper Thomas Dooley.

US coach Steve Sampson was furious at his players for allowing themselves to be overawed by Germany in Monday's 2-0 defeat in Paris. But he is confident that his side have learned their lesson.

"We have had some time to pick up the pieces and we are ready for Iran," he said.

After watching Yugoslavia struggle to beat Iran 1-0 in the other opening match in Group F, Sampson believes that the US has a realistic prospect of

matching their performance on home soil in 1994 by reaching the second round here.

"Both Iran and Yugoslavia are beatable," he said.

While all the fuss surrounding the match seems to have had more effect on the Iranians than their American rivals, it is Jalal Talebi's side that emerged from their first Group F match with greater confidence.

The Iranians were desperately unlucky to lose the match to a late free-kick that should have been saved and their two German-based strikers Khodadad Azizi and Ali Dai gave the Yugoslav defence serious problems.

Karim Bagheri also played impressively through the middle and the Americans know they will have to pick up his powerful runs.

"There are about three or

four players who we need to watch closely," Dooley said. "If we manage to close them down we can dominate."

Talebi will be hoping that his regular goalkeeper Ahmad Abedzadeh will have recovered sufficient fitness to start in place of the inexperienced Nima Nakissa, whose positioning was at fault of the Yugoslav goal.

Apart from that, neither side has any injury worries, Talebi is expected to field the same line-up of outfield players but there could be a number of changes on the American side.

Tab Ramos, one of the veterans of the US squad that competed in the 1990 and 1994 finals, and the exciting young midfielder Frankie Hejduk, are set to come into the midfield as Sampson looks to give his side, which plays in a defence-minded 3-6-1 formation, more attacking options.

Hejduk, 23, looks like the California surfer-boy that he is, but the laid-back style is deceptive, on the field his blistering pace and apparently limitless capacity to make forward runs make him one of the most dangerous American players.

South African-born Roy Wegerle may also start after a disappointing display by Eric Wynalda in the solo striker's spot against Germany.

Players on both sides have said they want to exchange jerseys at the end of the match — a gesture that will be a powerful symbol of football's capacity to overcome barriers and help boost the political reconciliation that both the US and Iranian governments now say they want.

The Iranians have also promised some other "special gesture" of friendship.

After ping-pong diplomacy with China comes soccer diplomacy with Iran

YSSINGEAUX, France, June 20 (AP): Twenty years of hostility can't be set aside with the tweet of a referee's whistle. Yet when the United States and Iran meet in the World Cup on Sunday, it will be something more than a soccer game and something less than the ultimate diplomatic breakthrough.

It will be the latest example of two bitter enemies meeting in sport and hoping it will encourage a thaw in official relations.

Last winter, a team of American wrestlers went to Tehran for a tournament and received a warm welcome. In the spring, Iranians wrestled in a tournament in Oklahoma. There was talk of a parallel with the ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s, which used US sports teams to open the doors to China.

But the World Cup match in Lyon, France, is somehow different, as was underscored from the highest levels of American diplomacy this week.

In a major overture, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright held out the olive branch to the Iranian government, responding to Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's call for non-governmental exchanges to improve.

"As the wall of mistrust comes down, we can develop with the Islamic republic, when it is ready, a road map leading to normal relations," Albright said in a speech this week in New York.

It came just four days before the Iran-US game, the first time these allies-turned-adversaries have met on a soccer field. On Thursday, President Clinton made a direct link between the game and an easing of political

tensions.

"I hope it can be another step toward ending the estrangement between our nations," Clinton said.

Shortly after Khatami's overture to Washington last year, the wrestlers became the first American athletes to visit Iran since the Islamic revolution and taking of hostages at the US Embassy in 1979. Competing in the international Takhti tournament in February, they got a rousing welcome from Iranian fans and VIP treatment by the Iranian government.

"We had a lot of trepidation," said Larry Sciacchitano, president of USA Wrestling. "I fully respect that religious groups didn't want us there. But they respected the fact that we were there for sports, not politics."

The visit broke a taboo on



CLINTON
high-profile US visits to Iran, and a week later a group of

American academics went to Iran to attend a conference.

The sports thaw has not been entirely without friction. When Iranian wrestlers went to compete in the United States in April, instead of getting a taste of American hospitality they were photographed and fingerprinted by immigration authorities on arrival at O'Hare Airport in Chicago.

Iran's foreign minister was not amused.

Sports exchanges may have helped Iran-US relations. But the road ahead might be long, because there is still a lot of animosity in the 20-year standoff between Iran and the United States.

Iranians can't forgive the United States for supporting the dictatorial rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was overthrown in the revolution led by the late Ayatollah Khomeini.

Washington severed ties with the new revolutionary government after militants loyal to Khomeini stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.

For Americans, there is the unforgettable image of the militants parading blindfolded and handcuffed US hostages before television cameras.

Iranians can't forget that a US warship, USS Vincennes, shot down an Iranian airliner over the Persian Gulf on July 3, 1988, killing 290 people. The naval captain said the plane was shot down by mistake.

Despite the conflict between governments, many Iranians never truly hated Americans,

and have largely welcomed their president's calls for better relations.

Iran's World Cup coach, Jalal Talebi, said his team will go out of its way to show its goodwill to US players on the day of the match. Asked what he would do, he said: "Let me surprise you."

With soccer fans around the world watching the televised match, Iranian players are expected to hand out flowers to the US team, as they did with Yugoslav players in their last match.

In Tehran, hard-line opponents of Khatami have demanded that the government instruct players not to exchange jerseys with the Americans after the game. But Talebi put that concern to rest.

"If an American player comes up to an Iranian player

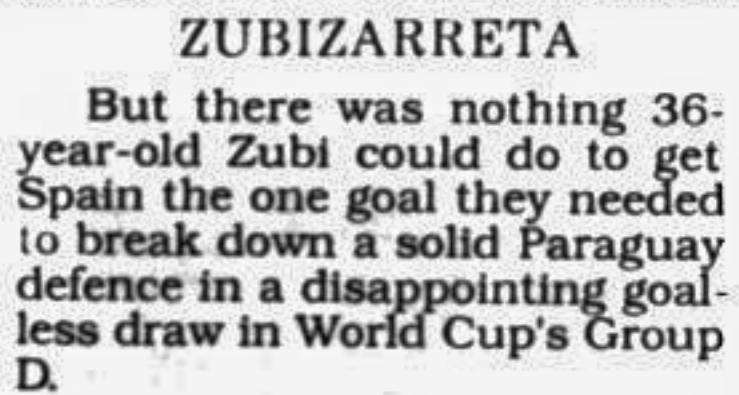


KHATAMI
See page 10

Zubi equals Shilton

ST ETIENNE, June 20: Spain's veteran goalkeeper Andoni Zubizarreta bounced back on Friday from a nightmare defeat against Nigeria to keep a clean sheet as he equalled the record number of international appearances for a keeper, reports Reuters.

Spain will need a lot of that, and some luck, if they are to beat Bulgaria and keep Zubi's dream of World Cup glory alive.



But there was nothing 36-year-old Zubi could do to get Spain the one goal they needed to break down a solid Paraguay defence in a disappointing goalless draw in World Cup's Group D.

Spain's ageing 'keeper was blamed for two of Nigeria's three goals in the 3-2 defeat last Saturday in Nantes, but on Friday he made some fine saves including an acrobatic effort to tip over a curling shot from Paraguayan dangerman Miguel Benitez.

"He's one of the best goalkeepers in the world," said his opposite number Jose Luis Chilavert. "Because of an accident (against Nigeria) the press have killed him."

"Even the Spanish public whistled him when he was making a save. But all the satisfaction that Zubi has given the Spanish fans can't be forgotten. The people shouldn't be so unjust."

Nevertheless, Zubizarreta must have been pleased with his performance against Paraguay as he matched the record 125 caps completed by England keeper Peter Shilton at the 1990 World Cup.

He also pleased his 14-year-old son by making sure that Chilavert did not have the opportunity to become the first goalkeeper to score in the World Cup.

Zubi Junior, a budding 'keeper in Valencia, had called his father before the match and told him, "Whatever you do, don't let Chilavert score against you in St Etienne."

"Spain have a double need to recover their morale and to win," he said. "I hope, for a change, luck will be on our side when we play Bulgaria on Wednesday."

As the 36-year-old Zubizarreta prepares to draw down the curtain on his international career he reflected on his aims.

"Every footballer has two dreams," he said. "One is to play in a World Cup and another is to win it."

"I have had quite a few attempts and now I have one more. It has become more complicated than it looked at first, but then you don't get anything without effort."

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Victor Ikpeba (L) scoring the goal that won the match for Nigeria against Bulgaria on June 19. — AFP photo

Chilavert smothers Spain

SAINT-ETIENNE, France, June 20: Spain stood on the brink of first round elimination from the World Cup Friday after they were held to a 0-0 tie by Paraguay, reports AP.

The Spaniards, strongly favoured to reach the quarter-finals at least, forced Paraguay's star goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert to make several top-class saves.

Having already lost 3-2 to Nigeria, the Spaniards have only one point but at least moved up to third above Bulgaria on goals scored.

The result means that the Nigerians, who downed Bulgaria 1-0 at Parc des Princes earlier Friday, clinch first place in Group D while the Paraguayans, who haven't seen a goal scored in two 0-0 ties, are best placed to join them in round two.

Paraguay have two points and Bulgaria and Spain have one each while the Nigerians have already qualified for the second round after two victories.

But Paraguay, who were held to a 0-0 tie by Bulgaria, created the first danger in the 15th minute when a low, 25-metre free kick by Miguel Angel Benitez got through the defensive wall.

The shot was confidently held by 'keeper Andoni Zubizarreta who was fortunate to stay on the team after his blunder gifted Nigeria its second goal.

A chance fell to Spanish striker Juan Pizzi in the 21st minute when the Paraguayan defence failed to clear a cross. The striker headed powerfully goalwards from 12 metres but 'keeper Jose Luis Chilavert punched the ball acrobatically behind for a corner.

After Zubizarreta had punched away a powerfully-struck 25-metre shot from Benitez, Paraguay won a free kick 30 metres out and 'keeper Chilavert, who has scored three times for his country, moved up to take a shot at goal.

His well-hit free kick hit the defensive wall and deflected to Francisco Arce whose 12-metre shot was deflected for a corner.

Aristides Rojas then got through on goal but was foiled by a well-timed tackle by Carlos Augliera as the forward was about to shoot from 10 metres.

In the final minute of the first half Spanish striker Raul wriggled clear of the defense and shot from eight metres only for Chilavert to dive to his right to get his hand to the ball.

Pizzi ran in to try and force the ball home but Celso Ayala got in a tackle to sweep the ball away.

Early in the second half, Zubizarreta saved a low shot from the ever dangerous Benitez and then dived full stretch to his left to keep out a curling shot from the same player in the 63rd minute.

At the other end, Chilavert pushed a shot from Luis Enrique over the bar and the Spanish midfielder came up with a close range header which the Paraguayan 'keeper again tipped over the top.

Watch Persia carpet Uncle Sam!

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