

Will the Germans put up another wall tonight?

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS



Spanish supporters watching the proceedings at the Geoffroy Guichard Stadium in Saint Etienne. — AFP photo

Tino no more

LA TOUR DU PIN, France, June 20: Colombia coach Hernan Gomez will not allow striker Faustino Asprilla back on the squad, even though Asprilla apologised for remarks that got him dismissed, reports AP.

Gomez said Friday the case is closed and he is pleased with the way his team weathered a stormy week that also included a loss to Romania. Gomez also was criticised by Colombian club presidents, who asked that Gomez be dismissed.

But he says the team survived the worst and is focusing on Monday's Group G match against Tunisia.

"We had a very complicated week, but everything improved and there's a sense of solidarity on the team," Gomez said at Friday's practice. "Some say the team is a disaster, but that only hurts us."

"The players were able to deal with the situation and overcame it. Now they're getting ready for a win against Tunisia. We're still quite alive."

Asprilla's dismissal for publicly criticising Gomez and some of his teammates is irreversible, Gomez said.

"At no time did I consider the possibility of reversing the painful measure I took against my friend... almost my son," Gomez said Friday.

"There was great pressure" to take back Parma's striker, but Gomez refused to say who pressured him.

"What happened was best for Faustino and for us," he said.

Team captain Carlos Valderrama also said the situation has steadied on the Colombian squad.

"We've forgotten our troubles and now we're thinking about only Tunisia," the Miami Fusion midfielder said. "We're in the hunt."

Dumb 'dommer'

COPENHAGEN, June 20: The referee who handed out three red cards during the Denmark-South Africa World Cup soccer match was a "whistling insanity" who left local fans in a "red shock", Danish news media said Friday, reports AP.

"Dumb, 'dommer' (Danish for referee, dumbest)," the BT daily said about John Jairo Toro of Colombia, who expelled two Danes and one South African in Thursday's game.

The Politiken daily said Toro gave "the most miserable referee performance in Danish soccer history." Toro "whistle and tore cards out of his pockets three red and seven yellow cards — as if he was The Law in person in some violent American movie," the newspaper said.

Danish substitute Miklos Molnar was sent off in the 67th minute after knocking over South African captain Lucas Radebe. Then Toro showed the red card to South African substitute Alfred Phiri two minutes later for elbowing aside Thomas Helveg.

In the 85th minute, another Danish substitute, Morten Wieghorst, went off for bumping Benni McCarthy from behind and knocking him down.

A Danish radio sports reporter said Toro had been "too zealous" in his response to FIFA president Joseph Blatter's complaint that referees were too lax. The Ekstra Bladet daily, which called Toro "a jerk" and "a scandal referee," said he "had spoiled the game with his peculiar expulsions. Hopefully he himself will get the red card."

Denmark's 1-1 draw with South Africa left them with a good chance to advance to the second round.

Will Batistuta crash reggae party?

PARIS, June 20 (AFP): The 'reggae boyz' of Jamaica are ready to rock the footballing world by beating two-time World Cup winners Argentina in their Group H meeting here tomorrow.

Their Brazilian coach Rene Simoes, who saw his side hold their own against Croatia before going down 3-1 last Sunday, says he has detected a major weakness in the South American side and his team are ready to exploit it.

Certainly there would be no sweeter a result for the 45-year-old than to guide his side to a win over his home country's bitterest rivals, and many people's favourites for the trophy.

Despite Simoes' belief that Argentina are a more aggressive outfit he need not worry that his players will shirk the tough tackles that will be required if Jamaica are to win the midfield battle and disrupt the fluent strikeforce of Gabriel Batistuta and Claudio Lopez.

Wimbledon's Robbie Earle, who was highly thought of by previous England coach Terry Venables but was picked by the Jamaicans when he did not fit into Glenn Hoddle's Tottenham Hotspurisation of the England squad, is a highly creative midfielder who scored a splendid goal against Croatia and can mix it with the best if it's needed.

The 32-year-old Earle, who is as eloquent of pitch as he is elegant on it, will be aided by fellow premiership player Frank Sinclair at the back, and the Chelsea man is no respecter of reputations as plenty of million pound English strikers can testify.

However, Simoes wants goals tomorrow and Sinclair will have to get forward to support the likely front duo of Deon Burton, who missed a great opportunity last Sunday, and Paul Hall.

Batistuta, who is Argentina's leading all-time scorer, is mindful of the physical aspects of the Jamaicans and has demanded that Norwegian referee Rune Pedersen look out for any rough stuff tomorrow.

"I am expecting a much more violent match than we had against Japan," Batistuta said.

"If the referee interprets the rules, there won't be a problem," the 29-year-old Fiorentina striker added.

It is no coincidence that the striker, who only recently made up with coach Daniel Passarella, has made it public that he wants to move from the Serie A side and any injury that curtails his World Cup would damage the likelihood of a lucrative move.

However, if there is one thing that "batigoli" and his teammates agree on it is that the Jamaicans will prove as obstinate an opponent as Japan did last Sunday, when the South Americans prevailed 1-0.

"I hope we play a little bit better against Jamaica but the most important thing is to win. How we do it does not matter," Batistuta said.

Passarella, who would probably not appreciate the striker's comments as he was an uncompromising defender, also acknowledged that the Jamaicans would not be any walkover.

"That are a tough unit with plenty of spirit and while we may have the names that counts for nothing if you don't play as a team on the pitch,"

said Passarella. Fortunately for the Jamaicans games are not won on the paper that the games are announced on because, as Passarella said, it would be a no-contest.

Aside from the fact that the majority of the Argentina side play for elite clubs in the European leagues while the Jamaicans are on the whole honest journeymen, the South Americans also have several players with World Cup finals experience.

Midfield hardman Diego Simeone, who created Ivan Zamorano's opening goal in Inter Milan's UEFA Cup win over Lazio last season. Jose Chamot and Ariel Ortega were all members of the exciting team that were beaten 3-2 by Romania in the second round of USA '94.

However, the man who will want no unnecessary slip-ups is Argentina's most experienced campaigner Nestor Sensini.

The 31-year-old, who went off with a hand injury during the Japan encounter, has endured two miserable World Cup finals campaigns.

He conceded the penalty that Andreas Brehme converted to give Germany the title in 1990 and then in 1994, where he impressed alongside veteran Oscar Ruggeri, there was the Deigo Maradona drugs scandal that ruined their campaign.

"We may not be as exciting as we were in 1994 Alfio Basile, but in the end we may have more success," Sensini said.

"If we go goal up and defend with 11 men behind the ball against the Jamaicans so be it because I want to end up with the trophy that I got so close to in 1990, that's all that matters."

False alarm!

OZOIR-LA-FERRIERE, France, June 20 (AFP/ Internet): Brazil's World Cup star Ronaldo denied on Saturday he needed a pain-killing injection in his right knee before every match.

He admitted he had picked up a knock against Scotland but it was nothing more than usual.

"There's nothing in the story," the inter Milan striker said of reports in the Italian press he would need an operation as soon as the World Cup finished.

Defensive duo okay

NICE, France, June 20: Germany's defensive midfielders Jens Jeremies and Thomas Helmer have recovered from injury and are fit to play against Yugoslavia at Lens on Sunday, reports AFP.

However, Germany assistant coach Rainer Bonhof would not say if they would be in the starting lineup, nor whether Lothar Matthaeus would be given a run-out.

One more game would allow Matthaeus to beat the record of 21 World Cup matches held by compatriot Uwe Seeler. Poland's Wladyslaw Zmuda and Diego Maradona of Argentina.

He would also become the second player to have competed in five finals alongside Mexican goalkeeper Antonio Carbajal, who played 11 games between 1950 and 1966.

Jeremies was the more likely to start against Yugoslavia as he had an outstanding game in Germany's 2-0 win over the United States when he picked up an ankle injury.

Helmer has recovered from a thigh strain.

Apart from injured second-choice Steffen Freund and Jens Lehmann, Germany were at full strength.

Visa refused

PARIS, Jun 20: France confirmed on Friday that its Consulate General in Washington had refused an entry visa to an Iranian exiled opposition figure who said he wanted to attend the World Cup, reports Reuters.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman said no explanation had been given to Eskandr Filabi, a popular Iranian heavyweight wrestling champion of the 1970s, who was joined the exiled National Resistance Council (NRC) dissident movement.

Two reasons to be cheerful

PARIS, June 20 (AFP): Nigeria's Jay-Jay Okocha, involved in the move for the decisive goal in their 1-0 World Cup win over Bulgaria on Friday, revealed his wife Nkeche was about to give birth.

Monaco's Victor Ikpeba scored a 27th minute goal to earn Nigeria a second round spot for their second successive World Cup.

Okocha, who plays for Turkish side Federbahce, started the decisive move by passing to Daniel Amokachi, who in turn fed Ikpeba, whose clever check in front of goal wrongfooted the "keeper to earn himself an easy tap in.

The 24-year-old Okocha, who was discovered by non-league side Neukirchen while he was on holiday in Germany before going to Eintracht Frankfurt in early 90s, said he was looking forward to fatherhood.

Croatia edge out Japan

NANTES, France, June 20: Davor Suker finally converted in the 77th minute after several near misses, giving Croatia a 1-0 victory over Japan on Saturday and putting them on the edge of the second round of the World Cup, reports AP.

Suker had several chances that went wide or high in the first half and put another off the top of the crossbar in the 72nd. His frustration seemed to be at capacity when he settled a cross from Aljosa Asanovic, and, with Eisuke Nakanishi unable to recover, drove a ball from 10 metres off keeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi's left hand inside the post.

The victory virtually assured Croatia's place among the final 16 and all but ended Japan's chances in its first World Cup.

Japan showed some spark at the start of the second half, especially when Shoji Jo sent a scissors kick wide of the post in the 58th minute.

But most of the game was Croatia's.

Suker put his chip off the top

of the crossbar, the closest of several near misses before the goal.

Suker ran on to a ball he had touched past a defender and caught Kawaguchi off his line. As he neared the edge of the penalty area, Suker lofted a ball over the keeper but it had too much and bounded off the top side of the bar as Kawaguchi fell back into the goal.

Suker had three shots at goal in the first 13 minutes but poor accuracy plagued Croatia early.

Suker sent a header one metre wide of the post from the top of the penalty area in the eight minutes; volleyed a cross high from 11 metres in the 11th; and then curled a free kick less than a half metre wide of the post in the 13th.

Mario Stanic had Croatia's best chances in the first half, breaking in alone on Japanese keeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi in the 19th, but hit a right-footed shot from 10 meters that bounced several times before missing wide left.

Japan's best chance was

thwarted when Croatian keeper Drazen Ladic was able to get his half of left hand to a shot by Japanese forward Masashi Nakayama.

Japan, who lost 1-0 to Argentina in their World Cup debut on June 14, extended their scoreless streak to five full internationals, having gone without a goal since Naoki Somo scored in the 86th minute of a 1-1 draw with Paraguay on May 17.

JAPAN: Yoshi k a t s u Kawaguchi; Akira Narahashi (Hiroaki Morishima, 79th minute); Yutaka Akita, Masami Ihara, Naoki Soma, Eisuke Nakanishi; Hiroshi Nanami (Wagner Lopes, 84th); Hidetoshi Nakata, Motohiro Yamaguchi; Shoji Jo, Masashi Nakayama (Masayuki Okano, 61st).

CROATIA: Drazen Ladic; Zvonimir Soldo, Igor Stimac (Goran Vloavic, 46th minute); Slaven Bilic, Robert Jarni, Dario Simic, Kratoslav Juric, Aljosa Asanovic, Robert Prosinecki (Silvo Maric, 67th); Mario Stanic; Davor Suker.



YUMMY WORLD CUP: Toulouse Chocolate-maker Rene Pillon shows his mouth watering collection of chocolate replicas of World Cup accessories on June 19. — AFP photo

Foes fuse into formidable force

PARIS, June 20 (AFP): Victor Ikpeba and Daniel Amokachi rival the 'Za-Sa' twins and the 'Ro-Ro' show any day as an attacking partnership to create fear even in the World Cups best defences.

Monaco's Ikpeba and Daniel Amokachi ran rings round Bulgaria in the first half and showed the kind of skill and understanding which all great strike partnerships need.

Ivan Zamorano and Marcelo Salas of Chile and Brazil's Ronaldo and Romario, before the 1994 World Cup star pulled out with a calf injury, were known partnership of deadly skill.

Ikpeba, who is the French leagues' highest scoring for-

eigner and Amokachi, whose exploits in pre-World Cup friendlies have hardly been inspiring, left Bulgaria's experienced rearguard nonplused.

Amokachi played just behind Ikpeba in a supporting role to the more traditional centre forward.

Ikpeba fired home in the 27th minute with a move started by Jay-Jay Okocha of Fenerbahce. Okocha passed the ball to Amokachi who set up Ikpeba for a clear shot on Bulgarian keeper Zdravko Zdravkov.

More surprising is that Ikpeba, a Christian from the south of Nigeria and Amokachi, a Muslim from the north of the

military-rule country, are off-pitch rivals.

Earlier in the tournament, Ikpeba revealed to a French newspaper that certain players were trying to influence team selection and were undermining the authority of coach Bora Milutinovic already under fire following a 3-0 loss to Yugoslavia and a 5-1 setback against Holland before the June 10 to July 12 event.

Ikpeba said Milutinovic should crack the whip and get players into line and Amokachi looks likely to have been one of those in the line of fire.

Amokachi was even seen with Dutchman Jo Bonfere, tipped as a possible successor to Milutinovic as head of the Nigerian squad, chatting in an Amsterdam cafe to give more fuel to the split with in the Nigerian camp.

Ikpeba said some players, and one of them was almost certainly Amokachi, were upset at his comments to the press, but Ikpeba said it wasn't important whether teammates were upset or not and that they were being childish if they begrudged his right of freedom of speech.

"All that matters is that we're united when we're playing," Ikpeba said, and when he embraced Amokachi after the goal, it was a symbol of on-pitch unity despite troubles away from the sporting arena.

Nigeria held on to a 1-0 victory over Bulgaria at the Parc des Princes which meant they were the third team behind champions Brazil and hosts France to book their place in the second round.

Amokachi now plays for Besiktas and Ikpeba for principality Monaco and the pairing has already been dubbed the Bosphorous Bull and the French prince.

Amokachi and Ikpeba were both substituted in the second half and, like the rest of the Nigerian side, had gone off the boil after their first half frenzy.

But defences had better watch out in further matches should these two get their act together once again.

And on their performance against Bulgaria, Ikpeba admitted Nigeria, who conceded 12 goals in three friendlies prior to the finals, had been given a lift by the win over Spain.

"It was a little bit tense within the squad before the Spain match but after beating them it all dissolved," he said.

"I was delighted to score my first goal in the World Cup but it was team effort and the credit for the win should go to the team."

Del Piero to go all the way

SENLS, France, Jun 20: Alessandro Del Piero is ready for his "real" World Cup debut: a full match against Austria on Tuesday, reports AP.

The 23-year-old Italian striker, who has just recovered from a thigh strain, played 25 minutes as a second half substitute against Cameroon last Wednesday, but that was not the way the star had hoped to start in the competition in which he's expected to rival Ronaldo in popularity and attention.

"I'm looking forward to start from the first minute against the Austrians and begin my full-time duties in the World Cup," Del Piero said at Italy's training camp Friday.

The self-confidence of the young striker to regain his place in the team for Italy's third Group B match seemed to indicate that Roberto Baggio was heading toward the substitutes bench.

Coach Cesare Maldini was elusive, as usual, about who may start in the match against Austria at Saint-Denis.

However the coach said his policy was to start fit players in good form.

"I am fit and in good form," Del Piero joked Friday before travelling to Paris along with his teammates to enjoy a half day off in the French capital.

Baggio, 31, is nursing leg bruises suffered in the 65 minutes he played against Cameroon before being replaced

by Del Piero.

In the absence of Del Piero, Baggio started in the first match against Chile and scored with a late penalty to tie the match at 2-2.

"It's a boost of confidence for me to hear that Roberto (Baggio) has said that he's here as my substitute and that this is going to be my World Cup," said Del Piero, who has not played a full match since the May 20 Champions Cup final against Real Madrid, where he felt a thigh strain in the final minutes.

Del Piero, expected to pair with striker Christian Vieri against Austria, said he was looking forward to an offensive match by the Italian side.

"We must not think of the outcome of the other match (between Chile and Cameroon). We must play with personality. We must win to qualify as Group B winners to avoid a second round clash with Brazil," he said.

"Austria is physically strong and its late goals (in the two previous matches) are an indication of great determination. As all teams they have weak points. We will try to take advantage of them Tuesday," he said.

Italy enter Tuesday's match as Group B leaders with four points from two matches. Austria and Chile are tied with two points, with Cameroon on one point.



WHIPPING BOYS NO MORE: Jubilant Paraguayan fans cheer their team against Spain on June 19. — AFP photo