



DANES DANCE: Thomas Helveg (L) leads the celebrations after scoring the fourth goal against Nigeria at Stade de France on June 28. — AFP photo

Danish dynamite

PARIS, Jun 29 (Reuters/AP): Everyone said they could not match the great national sides of the past, but it turned out the "dynamite Danes" of 1986 were on a delayed timer.

In the Mexico World Cup, Denmark played some of the most exciting football of the competition in the first round, sweeping away Uruguay 6-1 amongst others, only to blow up themselves by losing 5-1 to Spain in the second round.

This time, there was nothing in three limp first-round performances that could have foreshadowed the explosion of pace and intelligence that would sweep away the Nigerians 4-1 and secure the Danes the quarter-final place that many felt should have been theirs 12 years ago.

They scored more goals in one match than in all their group games against Saudi Arabia, South Africa and France combined, and it could easily have been two or three more.

"It was a little bit the old famous Danish way of playing," said their Swedish coach Bo Johansson. "In 1986 they played a fantastic couple of games. This was a little bit of the same."

It had been saving themselves, they kept it very quiet. Most observers said they did not even compare with the team that unexpectedly won the 1992 European Championship.

"We didn't even try to play like this against France because we knew we could lose by one goal and still go through," Johansson said.

But the truth was that even Johansson looked surprised by the Danes' detonation — even if he knew who had laid the charges.

"We had a playmaker tonight, Michael Laudrup, in fantastic form," said Johansson. "It's about players who suddenly find their way of playing."

As ever, Laudrup's timing was perfect.

Laudrup, the only survivor of the Danish team of 1986, the team of Soren Larby, Preben Elkjaer and Jesper Olsen, retired after the World Cup. As he earned his 103rd cap, he perhaps wanted to see to some 12-year-old unfinished business.

Laudrup always seemed to have space on the left side of midfield to steer Denmark's attacks and to exude an aura of calm.

On a night of explosions, it was perhaps appropriate that Laudrup should have set up Ebbe Sand for Denmark's third goal just 22 seconds after he was brought on as substitute — the

fastest substitute scorer in World Cup finals history.

Ironically, if Group D had gone with the pre-competition formbook, Denmark could have expected to face Spain again in the second round, rather than Nigeria, and seek revenge for 1996. Now they take the quarter-final place against Brazil that could have been Spain's.

Brian Laudrup, who scored one goal in Denmark's rout of Olympic champions thinks the Danes have a fighting chance.

"We know that it's a dream come true for any footballer to play against Brazil," Laudrup said after Sunday's win.

"Everybody expects Brazil to win. We might be able to do it again. You never know. We were criticised a lot after the first three (first-round) games, but tonight I think we showed the whole football world that we can play attractive football as well."

The Danes got off to a dream start as surprise starter Peter Moller, who had not played a single minute in the first round, scored with barely two minutes gone. He set up another goal for Laudrup nine minutes later.

Moller wasn't even a regular on his club team PSV Eindhoven this season, but he practised hard in training camp throughout the first round.

"I think he practised more than the other players. He was patient. When you're patient, it pays off," said coach Bo Johansson.

Moller is strong in the air but has a reputation for inconsistency with PSV. Most of the time, he has warmed the bench, although he did play a few matches in the Dutch league.

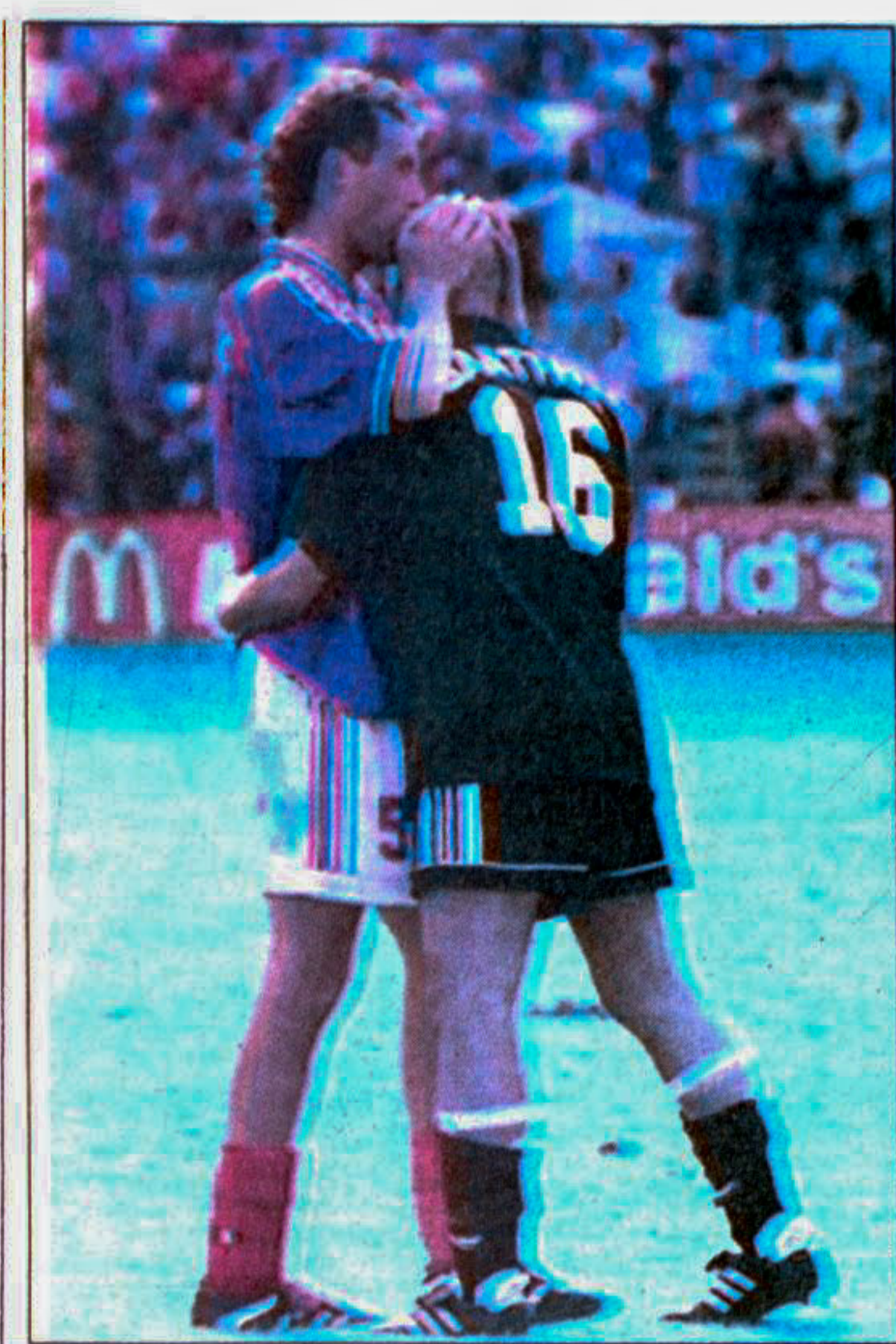
"It was a dream for me ... Moller said of his goal. 'I'm not that kind of player who makes those nice moves. I'm a hard-working man.'"

Laudrup warned that other teams could be in for a nasty surprise if they underestimate Denmark.

"I think Nigeria was thinking about Brazil today," he said. "We played extremely well. It was one of the best games I've been involved in with the Danish team. It's just fantastic."

Johansson, naturally, was looking ahead to the Brazilians.

"We have to try," he said after his biggest thrill as a coach. "Nigeria can't try any longer. We play the world's best team (Brazil). We'll give them a hard game. It will be fantastic for us."



France's hero Laurent Blanc returns the compliments of custodian Fabien Barthez at Lens on June 28. — AFP photo

Golden goalscorer

PARIS, June 28 (AFP/Internet): Cometh the hour, cometh the man and Laurent Blanc's destiny was to be in the right place at the right time to advance France into the World Cup quarter-finals for the first time since Mexico 1986.

The 32-year-old Blanc, a tall dominating central defender, has scored his fair share of important goals and was even once top scorer for Montpellier with 14.

Anyone reading a World Cup guide on this player would learn something like: "Blanc is dangerous from setpieces where his ability in the air poses a real threat and is known to score few but important goals."

Perhaps Blanc's 114th minute last-ditch golden goal, the first in World Cup history, has gone some way to wipe away the memory of Emil Kostadinov's goal for Bulgaria which ruined France's hopes of qualifying for USA 94 when they were seconds away.

Substitute Robert Pires, who replaced Thierry Henry who went off with a twisted left ankle, dribbled down the right wing, beat two defenders and crossed from the right.

What happened next will be printed on the memory of French football fans for years.

Monaco's David Trezeguet leapt into the air and headed the ball back in the same direction where Blanc was standing.

Blanc afterwards explained what was going through his mind just before scoring.

"I made the decision to push further forward in the last few minutes because all the action was happening around Chilavert's goal. We had been hitting high balls into the box and I thought my ability in the air could disrupt the defence."

Ironically it was a single swipe of his right boot and not his aerial ability which lodged the ball past keeper Jose-Luis Chilavert to leave the Paraguay defenders distraught on the ground.

Blanc said his reaction to the goal was very personal. "First my thoughts went elsewhere and I even forgot to thank Trezeguet for a superb pass. But then I thanked him very sincerely because it really was a gem of a pass."

"I had promised myself, and my son who was watching, I would score at this World Cup and I have now. It is certainly one of the most important goals I have ever scored for France."

Blanc's class was first seen way back in 1990 when he was French footballer of the year. He is just one of only two players who remain from their 1992 European championship bid in Sweden, captain Didier Deschamps of Juventus being the other.

He joined Napoli in Italy after Euro 92 but only stayed just over a year as he was a bit too adventurous going forward for the Italian club's liking.

He also played for Nimes, Saint Etienne and Auxerre and helped Barcelona to the European Cup winners Cup title in 1996/97, before returning home to Marseille the following season.

It was ironic too that France, with so many players based abroad, it was one from a French club who was the hero of the hour.

Blanc revealed he did not like the golden goal rule. "Asked if France had planned to take risks, he said: 'There wasn't anything planned.'"

History won't wait for Chilavert

LENS, France, June 28 (AFP/Internet): Paraguay goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert was only six minutes short of history.

Before the second round game against France he had predicted a win for Paraguay and a World Cup goal for himself.

Chilavert, with the cropped hair and the Mussolini jaw, is a strong character and deeply religious.

He crosses himself repeatedly and keeps a religious meditation by the goalpost, which he kisses.

But luck deserted him on Sunday. Laurent Blanc's golden goal after 114 minutes ended the agony of the host nation and ruled out the possibility of the match being decided on penalties.

Chilavert rarely misses with his powerful left foot and has scored 41 for club and country. The biggest disappointment for the millions of Paraguayans

watching the game at home was that their star player, motivator and team hard-man never got a chance.

They had fought France to a goalless draw in regulation time and looked set to produce a devastating blow to the host nation when Blanc struck.

"If the match had gone to penalties, we would have won, and Chilavert would have scored the winning goal," said defender Francis Arce.

Chilavert, 32, who plays club football for Velez Sarsfield in Argentina, goes home with his reputation enhanced. In four World Cup games, one of which went to extra-time, he has let in only two goals and his breath-taking save from Spain's Raul in the group stage will be remembered as one of the best in the tournament.

It was one of 13 saves he made in the first round. Real Madrid striker Raul fired a low

and that spills over onto the field of play, where indiscipline is rampant.

"We are not just playing for Nigeria -- we are carrying the hopes of a whole continent," Milutinovic stated before the Danish encounter.

"We are the best team in Africa but we didn't prove it," the coach said afterwards.

Former Scotland legend Billy McNeil, who captained Celtic to their 1967 European Cup triumph over Inter Milan and in France for British television, put his finger squarely on the issue Monday.

"African sides have some wonderfully gifted individual players but generally they lack discipline," he said.

"You would have thought Nigeria would be better organised as so many of their players play in European leagues but against Denmark their defence allowed itself to drift out of position and they conceded those

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Africa's dream shattered

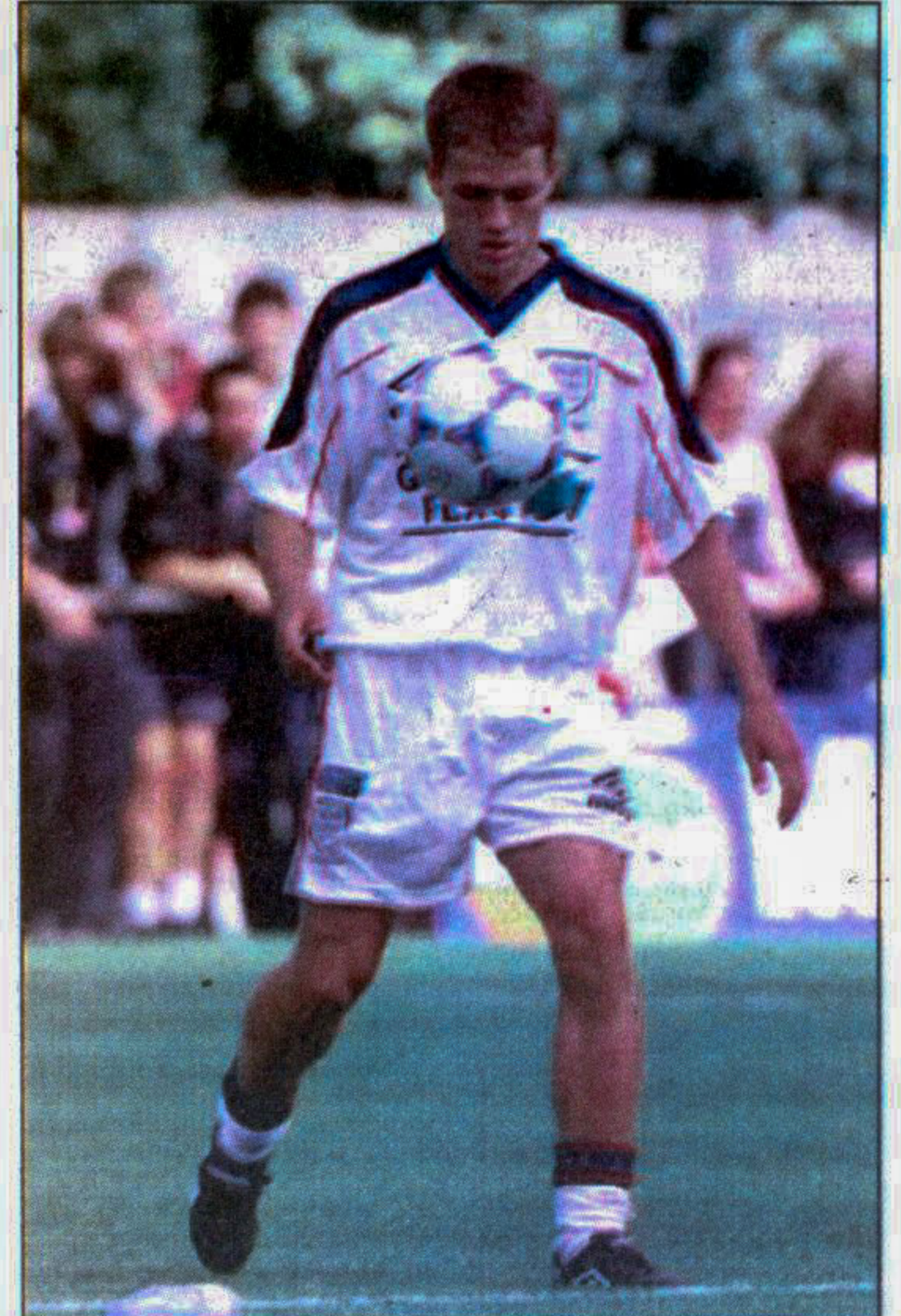
PARIS, June 29 (AFP/Internet): Nigeria's 4-1 hiding at the hands of Denmark at the Stade de France on Sunday not only dashed what proved to be false hopes of the Super Eagles' capabilities -- it shattered the dreams of an entire continent.

After Bora Milutinovic's side bundled out Spain on their way to winning their group, it looked odds on that Africa were set for their second quarter-final after Cameroon's ground-breaking performance in 1990.

But the euphoria which followed the 3-2 win over the Spanish died a painful death against the Danes, who laid bare some uncomfortable home truths about where African football stands today.

The inescapable answer is that while the continent possesses a goldmine of talent, it patently falls short in areas such as infrastructure and administrative organisation -- and that spills over onto the

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CALM AND COMPOSED: Michael Owen, England's highly rated teenager, practicing at La Baule on June 28. — AFP photo

England vs Argentina: The Grudge Match

UNDATED, June 29 (AP/Reuters/AFP): It's been a nagging wound in England's pride for 12 years, one that coach Glenn Hoddle says England will have a chance to salve on Tuesday when they face Argentina in the second round of the World Cup.

The winners advance to the quarter-finals, but for Hoddle there is an extra incentive — Justice.

Hoddle was a member of the England team that was beaten by the help of Diego Maradona's legendary "Hand of God" goal in the quarter-finals of the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

Maradona scored twice in that game, once on one of the most memorable goals in World Cup history, the other on a ball punched into the net as Argentina edged England 2-1 and went on to lift the trophy.

The punched goal, which Maradona said was aided by the "Hand of God," was still on Hoddle's mind Sunday as his 22-strong squad all reported fit for training and ready to face the South Americans.

Hoddle vividly recalled how Maradona turned the game with his sleight of hand before clinching the victory with his spectacular second goal.

"It was a tight game until that handball which turned the situation completely," Hoddle said. He claimed England never

settled from the handball before Maradona struck again.

"That second goal, which was a fantastic goal, would never have been scored if it was 0-0, but that was the sickening blow we had to take on the day. This game now has given us a chance to address the balance," he noted.

Defeating Argentina would also exorcise a personal ghost for the English coach. It was Hoddle who lost the ball to Maradona leading to the second goal.

Now, 12 years later, he has the chance to win back possession.

But Hoddle stresses he is looking for justice, not revenge. "I am the only one here in our party who was involved on the pitch and that feeling of injustice has stayed with us a long time ... we have got a chance of redressing that balance and turning that result around and getting it out of our system," he said.

"There is nothing more important than getting through to the next round, but life comes round in a circle some times," he said.

Hoddle said no member of the 1986 team felt bitter toward Maradona, who went on to play in two more World Cup finals. "The officials were the problem on that day. No one blamed Maradona from inside the camp. At the end of the day, he

did what he did."

Hoddle even hailed Maradona as the greatest player ever, even better than Brazil's Pele.

"Pele was probably a better team player, but I think Maradona was a better individual talent than anyone who has played football on this planet," he said.

Looking ahead to Tuesday's match, Hoddle said he was glad England were the underdog. Although Argentina won all three Group H games without conceding a goal, he preferred the South Americans as England's opponents rather than Croatia, who finished second in their group.

England would have met Croatia if they had won Group G instead of losing to Romania, who finished first.

"In many ways, we are stronger when we have got our backs to the wall a little bit. Psychologically that suits us rather than the other way around," he said.

Daniel Passarella's side started slowly, struggling to overcome Japan by a single goal. But they moved up a gear to thrash Jamaica 5-0 and kept just enough pressure on the accelerator to clinch top spot in their group with a 1-0 win over highly-rated Croatia on Saturday.

England in contrast went into their final group match

facing possible elimination after losing to Romania.

"Although they rose to the challenge by outclassing a disappointing Colombia side in Lens, the earlier defeat was a reminder to Glenn Hoddle's men that they still have it all to prove at the highest level."

Hoddle, who believes his side is peaking at exactly the right time, is not expected to change the side that beat Colombia 2-0.

Argentina have yet to concede a goal in the tournament. But their prospects of resisting Owen and Shearer have been hit by the likely absence of key defender Roberto Sensi, who has not recovered from a thigh strain.

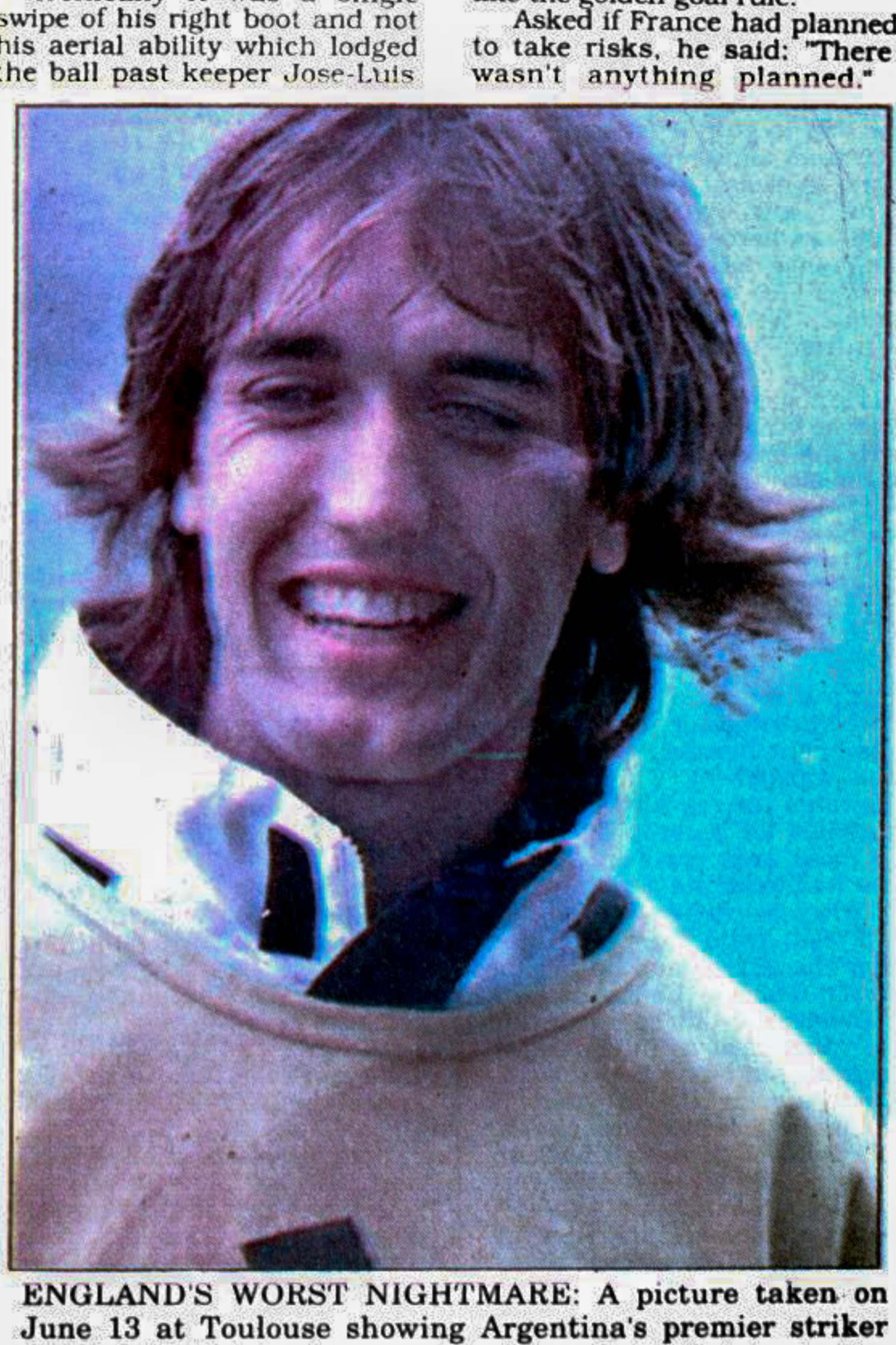
Midfielder Diego Simeone made it clear that the Argentinians had been impressed by England's form in their final group win over Colombia.

"England showed they are a very complete team," he said, "they have one of the best squads in the World Cup with a lot of players who are capable of turning a game, particularly Beckham and Owen."

Batistuta on Sunday played down the significance of meeting England.

"We've got to play whoever we get," he said. "Let's hope all goes well. Any match is difficult, you only have to look at what happened to France today to know this."

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ENGLAND'S WORST NIGHTMARE: A picture taken on June 13 at Toulouse showing Argentina's premier striker Gabriel Batistuta in an upbeat mood. Batistuta is the player England fears most as the teams meet in an emotion charged second round encounter today. — AFP photo

WILL GOD HAVE A HAND TO PLAY TONIGHT? JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS