

Saint-Etienne on guard

SAINT-ETIENNE, France June 29 (AFP/Internet): Saint-Etienne began pulling down the shutters on Monday as thousands of England fans poured in for Tuesday's World Cup clash with Argentina.

Local authorities have ruled that the city centre bars and restaurants can stay open and keep serving drinks until 11 pm. In contrast to the alcohol bans adopted when England played first round games in Toulouse and Lens.

But despite ringing up record takings last week when Scotland, the Netherlands and Mexico played in first round matches here, many establishments have opted to close during the final World Cup game in the city because of fears of hooligan violence.

Michael Laudrup, winning his 102nd cap, was a playmaker supreme against Nigeria in the number 10 shirt once worn by World Cup legends Pele, Maradona and Zico.

He escaped down the right and found PSV Eindhoven striker Peter Moller, making his first start of the tournament.

The 26-year-old promptly blasted a left-foot shot first time past keeper Peter Rufai from the edge of the area for their first goal.

On 11 minutes Nigeria had a mountain to climb as brother Brian Laudrup cracked home number two. Michael was once more there when it mattered. He rolled a short free-kick to Moller, whose fierce shot was parried by Rufai only as far as Brian Laudrup who gleefully rammed home.

Ebbe Sand, who had only replaced Peter Moller 22 seconds earlier, tore into the box and nodded on Michael Laudrup's lofted pass before beating two men and firing home past the despairing Rufai for Denmark's third.

Michael Laudrup can now look forward to a last eight battle with Ronaldo, Rivaldo and co.

It was our playmaker. He was fantastic, said Denmark's coach Bo Johansson.

England vs Argentina

From page 13

"Sure this match reminds us of that meeting," Batistuta said referring to the Mexico game.

"But none of us were around then, this is just another match," Batistuta, who scored four goals in Argentina's three group games said.

"It won't be anything extra special if I score against England. Sure, we'll celebrate it like we do any goal, but not thinking about Maradona's great (second) goal."

Someone, asked if the Argentines were worried about trouble between rival fans, said: "Let's hope (the authorities) resolve that well. This is a big match, Argentina and England are both capable of making it a good match."

But for all the diplomatic niceties, the Argentinians cannot help exuding self-confidence, "our fans will consider anything less than a place in the final as a failure," said Batistuta, "and they would be right."

History won't

From page 13

shot to the keeper's right from close range that seemed destined for the back of the net.

Instinctively Chilavert, a bulky man with a boxer's build, threw himself to the ground and got just enough of his hand on the ball to stop it crossing the line and allow stopper Celso Ayala to clear.

"I think we will go back home as heroes," he said after the France defeat.

"But I felt very sad for our defenders. We really felt the pressure from France in the last 15 minutes."

He took defeat on the chin. After a brief spell on his back with his face in his hands, lost in his own thoughts, he was up consoling and cajoling his teammates out of their despair.

The largely French crowd in Lens hated him, booing and jeering every time he came near the ball.

His own players respect and fear him and much of Chilavert's game on Sunday was spent harassing them. He was warned by United Arab Emirates referee Ali Mohamed Bujssam for roaming outside his goal area early on in the first half to berate a team-mate.

When he tried to box the ears of Celso Ayala a few minutes later the referee had no hesitation in flashing the yellow card.

What else did he do during the game? Not as much as the French would have hoped.

In the first half he was beaten by Thierry Henry but the ball hit the post in the 39th minute. He had made one very fine save from a dipping shot by Bernard Diomede in the 16th minute. In all, three good shots.

In the second period he was not much busier, making only one real save, from Marcel Desailly, though he did steal the ball bravely off the feet of on-rushing Henry.

His defenders were much busier, however, blocking 11 shots before they reached the goalkeeper.

"We've got the best defence in the world," said the goalkeeper with evident sincerity.

In that crucial period of extra time the game would have been over in the 102nd minute had he not turned David Trezeguet shot round the post at full stretch. He saved two more shots on target before the fatal winner.

All told half a dozen saves in 114 minutes and one costly miss.



THE DREAM IS OVER: Celso Ayala (R), Paraguay's defensive mainstay, breaks down in tears after their second round exit at the hands of hosts France at Lens on June 28.

For Ronaldo, good isn't good enough

PARIS, June 29 (AP): Just outside the winners' locker room, Brazilian coach Mario Zagallo ran down his personal honour roll for the team's best performance yet in the World Cup.

Cesar Sampaio? Perfect. Rivaldo? Sensational. Ronaldo? Pause.

"It was... better," Zagallo said. "He's still not the Ronaldo we all want to see. He has a lot more to give, and I'm sure we'll see it in the games we have left."

For any other player, the assessments seem harsh. After all, Ronaldo had just scored two goals and barely missed two others to lead his team past Chile 4-1 and into the Cup quarter-finals.

But Ronaldo isn't just any player. He's "the phenomenon," the most talented striker of a generation, twice voted FIFA player-of-the-year. For him, the bar is higher.

Of course, opponents also expect great things from the 21-year-old striker. Against Chile, Ronaldo had a hard time keeping his feet against a defence that barely let him breathe.

But he turned it to his advantage when he collided with goalkeeper Nelson Tapia and French referee Marc Batta whistled a penalty. Ronaldo took the shot himself for the score.

In the second period, he ranged all over the field, scoring his second goal on a pass from Cafu and bouncing two shots off the post and the crossbar.

"Ronaldo has the fame. He's the best player in the world, and the marking is always individual and tough," said Rivaldo. "He had a great game, and with two goals I'm sure he will be happier."

He clearly wasn't happy before, with just one goal in his first three games. Brazilians wondered what was wrong, and when there was no clear answer, they made some up.

Ronaldo was hiding a serious knee injury, ran one rumour. Another said he was depressed because his romance with Brazilian model Suzana Werner was on the rocks.

Denials didn't help, and Ronaldo seemed tense. After Brazil lost 2-1 to Norway last week, he complained that teammates weren't getting him the ball enough.

Zagallo had a more prosaic explanation. "A high-profile player like him has to shake his defender," he said. "He has to move on to

the wings, vary the play. He can't just play up front all the time because he won't produce."

After the game, Ronaldo admitted the coach was right. "I followed his instructions, and you see the result," he said. "I knew this drought had to end soon, that at any moment I'd find my rhythm, and thank God it happened at the best time."

While many may envy a youngster who has won fame, riches and glory at the peak of his profession, Ronaldo's teammates see the simple kid

from Rio's poor north side, whose talent has thrust him into a global limelight he can never escape.

"The expectations, the demands on him are something crazy," said Leonardo. "It's amazing how he deals with it. We always try to help him, but he doesn't need it."

For Leonardo, all the superlatives are justified. "Ronaldo is special," he said. "In the games we have left, I am sure he will show us all his magic."

What's eating Roberto Carlos?



PARIS, June 29 (AFP/Internet): Brazilian Roberto Carlos, one of the most feared free-kick artists in the world, has been reduced to an also-ran by the revolutionary new football being used in the World Cup.

The 28-year-old Real Madrid defender is furious over the ball introduced by Adidas for France 98.

"This new Adidas ball has ruined years of practice as far as I am concerned," he fumed.

Roberto Carlos scored what many pundits consider the greatest free kick goal ever during last year's Le Tournoi in France.

The Brazilian transfixed the world with a swerving kick that left French goalkeeper Fabien Barthez staring in amazement.

ment. Everyone was convinced that his shot over the French wall was going well wide of the post until, like a scud missile, it suddenly curled sharp left and flashed into the back of the net before Barthez had time to react.

"That kind of free kick is one of my favourite weapons but I have been completely ruined by this ball because it is far too light," complained Robert Carlos.

"My secret weapon is the swerve and spin I can put on those kinds of kicks but the ball is so light it is extremely hard to curve it in."

"It's like they are too full of air and that affects both the goalkeepers and those who practise free kicks and I don't think it's fair."

"Normally the curve I can put on things is lethal. It's impossible to do anything with it. Even though we have used this ball in the Champions League I still haven't got used to it," added the Brazilian.

England have also been suffering with the new ball. Goalkeeper David Seaman and defender Tony Adams both claim the construction of the ball, a construction of tiny gas-filled micro-balloons, is causing problems for defenders.

The ball can be a massive problem because it moves a lot in the air, said the Arsenal keeper after the Romania game which England lost 2-1.

Team-mate Adams agreed. "When the ball came in for the first goal it dipped and deceived me," he explained.

No pleasing the pundits

PARIS, June 29 (AFP/Internet): There's just no pleasing the pundits at the World Cup, but it's not just the media who are proving the most jaundiced observers.

While stating he had not seen anything for Germany to fear, he said disdainfully that "I've not really been impressed by any team yet," as the first round drew to a close.

Former teammate and current German coach Bert Vogts says he doesn't bother himself with what is in the newspapers.

That's probably just as well as Beckenbauer regularly fires off in his column for mass daily Bild, which demanded last week that the team stop running on diesel and switch to bi-grade

performances.

But Vogts jumped to it when Beckenbauer, the most respected figure in German football bar none, demanded that Lothar Matthaus should be in the side.

The veteran sweeper promptly won back his place.

Maradona, of course, has always courted controversy and his constant carping at Argentine coach Daniel Passarella is like water off a duck's back.

That didn't stop Maradona making the general criticism that "there are far too many players at this World Cup who are club-footed."

Before anyone could ginsay the assertion, Beckenbauer had leapt in to agree with him.

Some critics have had to eat humble pie, however.

Former Mexican idol Hugo Sanchez blasted Manuel Laupente's side when they went behind in their matches against South Korea, Belgium and Holland.

But after the team pulled good results out of the fire on each occasion he was moved to say: "I am very proud of what they have achieved so far in the tournament. They have played with their hearts and pride."

Laupente is doubtless grateful for the change of heart.

Beckenbauer, who skipped the Germans to victory in 1974 and then coached them to another triumph in 1990, is also happy to dish out the stick.

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Arrested so far 700

PARIS, June 29: French police have so far arrested 700 people in connection with incidents during the ongoing World Cup football competition, interior minister Jean Perre Chevenement said Sunday, reports AFP.

Speaking on radio, Chevenement said 80 had been sent for trial of whom 42 had been given jail sentences, eleven had been expelled from France, while a further 500 had been barred from entering the country.

They're the spoilers!

PARIS, June 29 (AFP): Denmark played partypoopers with a 4-1 thrashing of Nigeria in an event which has over the years had its fair share of gatecrashers.

Champagne corks flew as they upset the favoured Africans to become surprise quarter-finalists.

Germany were on the receiving end in the 1992 final when gatecrashers Denmark had a back door entry after the pull-out of Yugoslavia and went all the way to the Euro '92 title.

But partypoopers abound in World Cup history, just look at Bulgaria four years ago.

They were not going to the 1994 tournament until Emil Kostadinov scored with the last kick of a qualifying game against France, and when they got to the USA they went all the way to the semifinals after losing their first match to Nigeria.

In those same championships, Sweden were another surprise semifinalist, beating Argentina and Romania on the way to a defeat by Brazil, but third spot after beating Bulgaria.

Denmark's win last night was some consolation for the 5-1 defeat they suffered against Spain in 1986 after playing some fabulously fluent football in their first three matches.

Spain got no further as they ran up against a Jan Celemans-inspired Belgium, who had already surprisingly knocked out a talent-packed Soviet side. But in the semifinals the Belgians lost to an Argentinian team with Diego Maradona at his very peak.

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Maldini venerates Vieri

SENLS, France, June 29 (AFP/Internet): Italy captain Paolo Maldini said on Monday that World Cup ace Christian Vieri will be worth more than the home crowd when they face France in the quarter-finals.

The two sides meet in Paris on Friday for a place in the quarter-finals, and Maldini reckoned it was better to have one Vieri, the tournament's top scorer, than 80,000 home fans in the stands.

"It's going to be a difficult game... and obviously most of the crowd will be supporting France," he said. "I thought the team looked very good in the opening matches, although they seemed a bit slow against Paraguay."

"But they are a solid side, and they have the results to prove it. I think their strong point is the defence, and they have a midfield which also gives them plenty of cover too."

He went on: "Playing at home is an advantage, and the crowd can help you when things are not going well. From a technical point of view, it will be like a final."

Africa's dream

From page 13

first two goals," he said. McNeil had expected Morocco to do well after seeing them draw 2-2 with Norway.

"Morocco outplayed Norway but they were simply overruled by Brazil, as they just wanted to say we played against Brazil in the World Cup when in fact they could well have caused them problems," he added.

Nigeria's lack of defensive discipline was as evident on Sunday as on a memorable night in

Naples eight years ago when Cameroon slid out to two Gary Lineker penalties to let England off the hook.

In all fairness to the other African sides present at France 98, it was never to be expected that any of them would progress beyond the group phase.

South Africa are still well away from the top of the learning curve. But they still came away with two creditable draws on their debut.

Morocco deserved to qualify after crushing Scotland -- a country after all about the size of Denmark, and Tunisia showed flashes of brilliance against Romania, whom they could have beaten.

Cameroon impressed -- but only inconsistently and their disciplinary record, as at USA 94, left much to be desired.

Their French coach Claude Le Roy launched a bitter attack on the refereeing of Hungarian Laszlo Vagner after his side drew 1-1 with Chile and had three goals disallowed.

Defender Rigobert Song, dismissed along with Lavrano Etame, blasted Vagner on the disallowed goals.

"Bad refereeing decisions have gone against African sides in this tournament," he said.

The discipline issue overshadowed South Africa's stay in France, as players were fined and sent home by French coach Philippe Troussier.

But skipper Lucas Radebe insisted: "We are winners at heart -- we can still be a force to be reckoned with in the future."

And Shaun Bartlett, who scored both goals in the 2-2 draw with Saudi Arabia, said: "It's a learning curve for everybody."

ROUND 2 RESULTS

Italy 4 Norway 0

Brazil 4 Chile 1

France 1 Paraguay 0

Denmark 4 Nigeria 1

Wanted: A genuine striker

PARIS, June 29 (Reuters): France scored most goals in the first stage of the World Cup, but their inability to convert chances remains the greatest threat to their World Cup chances.

The host country struggled to find a way past a brave Paraguayan defence on Sunday and cannot afford to show such a lack of ideas against Italy in Friday's quarter-final.

"We kept trying but we lacked clear heads and confidence," coach Aime Jacquet said after France's 1-0 victory in Lens.

"An early goal would have made life easier for us," said Jacquet who had to live through 114 painful minutes before a Golden Goal by defender Laurent Blanc ended the agony.

"We need more efficiency in attack to avoid a repeat of that type of scenario."

After enjoying a relatively smooth passage to the knockout stages and scoring nine goals, France showed against Paraguay's compact defence that they badly lacked a natural goalscorer like Italy's Christian Vieri or Argentine Gabriel Batistuta.

While being blessed with abundant talent in defence and midfield, Jacquet has a real problem when it comes to strikers and the injury suffered by Thierry Henry in Sunday's match will make life even more difficult.

The 20-year-old Henry -- France's top scorer in the tournament with three goals -- came closest six minutes before half-time when he hit the far post. If Vieri had been given the same chance, though, there is little doubt he would have scored.

The promising Monaco striker had to leave the pitch on a stretcher with a sprained left ankle which makes him doubtful for the quarter-final against Italy.

"Z-Zou is very important to us and we missed him a lot," said Deschamps. "He can give us that little something and with him around, it's easier to score."

Zidane was suspended for two games for treading on an opponent in the match against Saudi Arabia.

"It was ever so happy after we beat Paraguay," said Jacquet. "He was close to tears. Now he's impatient to resume playing. He knows we count on him to help us reach new heights."

Return of Zidane

PARIS, June 29 (AFP/Internet): Zinedine Zidane has almost indispensable player in the side.

Jacquet summed up what the player meant to the team with a tale which harked back to his own playing days with St Etienne and a player called Rachid Mekloufi, who, like Zidane was number 10.

"Rachid was my provider and every now and again he would set me up to score. But when

Mekloufi left St Etienne, nobody wanted to wear his shirt. So I took it without knowing what I would do with it but you see Mekloufi was irreplaceable."

"And like Mekloufi, Zidane is also irreplaceable in his number 10 shirt. Whoever took Zidane's place would be put in an embarrassing situation because how could he live up to such class?"

The number 10 is a legendary number in football. Diego Maradona, Pele, Zico were simply legends. This World Cup has impressive number 10s in Ariel Ortega of Argentina, Nigeria's Jay-Jay Okocha who ran rings round Bulgaria in the first half, Brazil's Rivaldo and Italy's injury-hampered Alessandro Del Piero.

Zidane is the spark which ignites the engine of France's undoubted talent of stars who play in some of the world's top leagues, though a world class goal scorer is still missing from the squad though Trezeguet could make up for it.

Jacquet said on Zidane following victory over Paraguay: "He's the team leader, playmaker and he will be the happiest of the entire squad that the team has won. And we hope he will come back and make a real difference and carry the French team forward."

At the time Maradona described the goal as: "a little bit Maradona, a little bit the hand of God."

Four minutes later the scored an outstanding second goal, running half the length of the pitch to put Argentina further ahead in a match they eventually won 2-1. They went onto beat West Germany in the final.

Argentina meet England in the second round of this year's World Cup in St Etienne on Thursday.

Really?

LONDON, June 29: Diego Maradona has reportedly apologised for his infamous "Hand of God" goal scored against England in the World Cup 12 years ago, according to British tabloid newspaper the News of the World, reports Reuters.

It quotes Maradona as saying: "I realise that goal should not have stood and I am sorry for what happened."

"I did not want to offend anyone when I scored that goal. When I saw the ball go towards (goalkeeper) Peter Shilton it was like being a kid again -- I was having a laugh."

"But I had good fortune that God allowed the goal to stand. It should have been disallowed."

Maradona has acknowledged before he regretted the way the goal was scored.

When asked about it by students in a talk he gave at Oxford University in 1995 he conceded: "I would have done it against any team. I always try to do what is best for my team." In 1996 he admitted having a "few regrets" about the goal.

It came when Maradona punched a high cross over Shilton's head to put Argentina 1-0 ahead in the 51st minute of their World Cup quarter-final in Mexico in 1986.

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Dauids drives Dutch unity

MONACO, France, June 29 (AFP): No player better sums up the mood of renewed purpose and camaraderie in the Holland squad than midfielder Edgar Davids.

The 25-year-old midfielder, once described by former Ajax coach Louis van Gaal as "my little pitbull" established a reputation for trouble-making -- second to no-one even in the famously divisive world of Dutch football.

"He could start a row in an empty dressing room," one former teammate said of the combative Juventus star.

Dauids' international career seemed to be over barely after it had started when he was sensationally kicked out of Holland's Euro '96 squad as the simmering tensions in the Dutch camp boiled over into open hostility.

The dreadlocked former Ajax ace accused coach Guus Hiddink of favouring while players over those from the Dutch West Indies or Surinam -- and was promptly told to pack his bags and head for the airport check-in.

He was transferred to Italian giant AC Milan for the 1996-97 season but the move proved to be a disaster as he failed to fit into the team's plans or endear himself to several of his colleagues.

Dauids was sold on to archrivals Juventus -- and since then he has re-established himself as one of the best midfielders in Serie A after a sparkling season for the Italian champions.

Hiddink could no longer ignore the case for Dauids' reinstatement to the national squad while his teammates Patrick Kluyvert, Clarence Seedorf, Michael Reiziger and Aron Winter all backed his recall.

Dauids did not play in Holland's first Group E game against Belgium, but the poor form of his best friend Seedorf in the 0-0 draw prompted Hiddink to recall him -- with spectacular results.

Dauids, whose reading list includes Spinoza and Buddhism philosophy, was a revelation against the Asians in Marseille where he bossed the midfield with an authority which the Dutch had lacked against the Belgians.

His lackling was ferocious but he showed there was more to his game than the ability to spoil and disrupt the opposition with some shrewd passing and vision of what was going around him.

He won widespread praise for his performance, drawing comparisons with 1970s Holland and Ajax hero Johann Neeskens.

Another Holland legend, Johann Cruyff, voiced his own approval, welcoming Dauids willingness to pass the ball when once he would have tried to embark on solo runs.

Dauids retained his place for Holland's final group match -- the 2-2 draw against Mexico --

and he seem a certain starter for the second round clash against Yugoslavia.

And his triumphant return to the orange shirt coincides with an apparent resolution of past divisions in the Holland camp as a whole -- an image reinforced by the effusive hug Dauids gave Phillip Cocu, one of his former adversaries, after his fellow midfielder scored against South Korea.

Dauids, whose sporting hero is the maverick NBA basketball player Dennis Rodman, arrived at France '98 insisting that he and his teammates, must put an end to the posturing and infighting which had bedeviled Holland for most of the 1990s.

"Everybody must subordinate himself to the collective cause of the team," he grandly declared.

Neeskens, who is now a member of the Dutch coaching staff, has been heartened by the new spirit of solidarity as exemplified by Dauids.