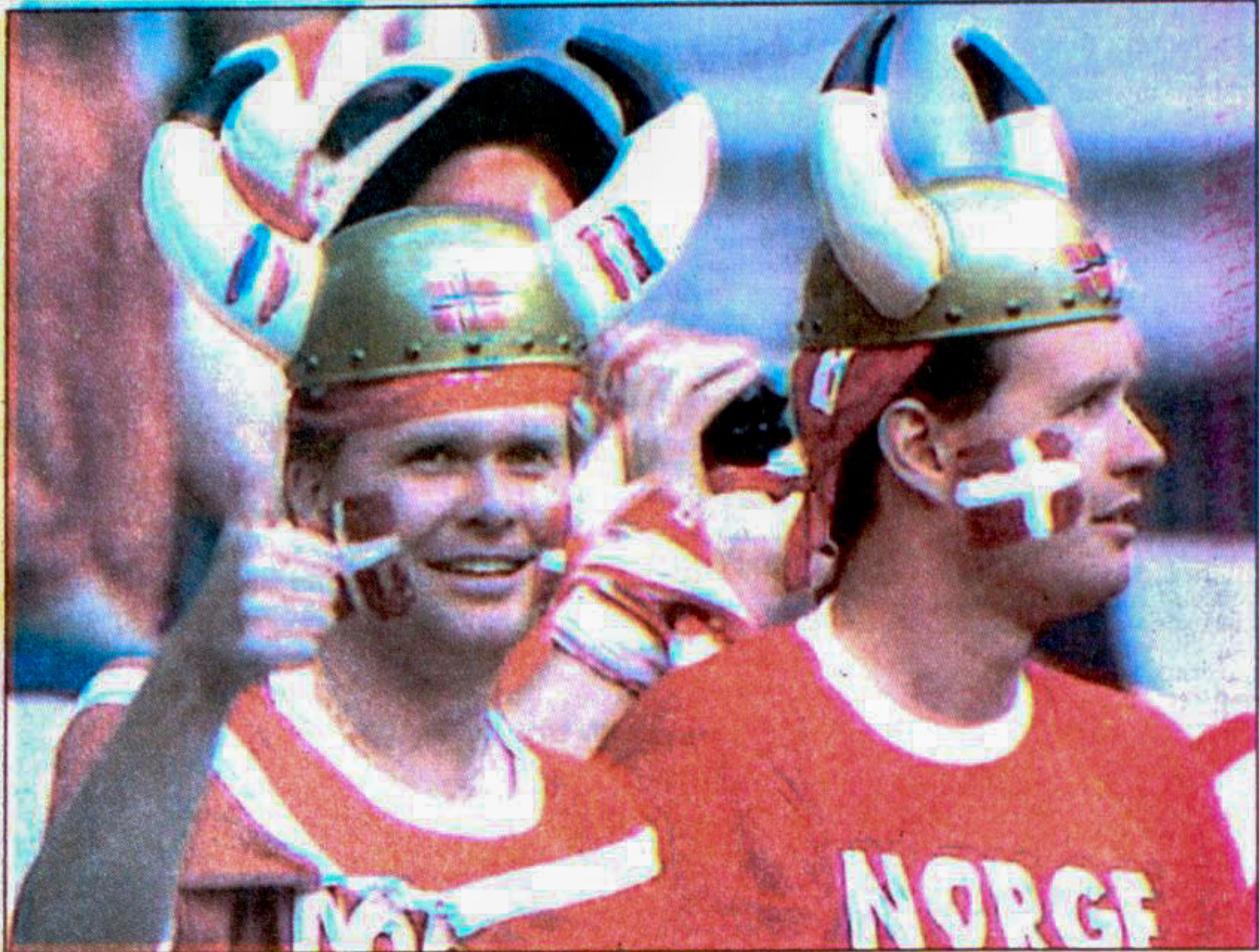


WORLD CUP DEBUTANTE CROATIA

WILL THEY MAKE IT OR BREAK IT?

JOHN PLAYER
GOLD LEAF
LIGHTS

সংবিবন্ধ সতর্কীকরণ : দুঃস্থান বাছুরে জন্য কঠিন



Danish supporters sporting their traditional Viking headwear at the Stade de France on June 28. — AFP photo

Scandinavian samba

PARIS, June 29 (AFP/Internet): Denmark did a passable impression of Brazil in thrashing Nigeria at the Stade de France on Sunday night and the world gets a chance to compare them with the real thing this Friday when the Scandinavians face the world champions.

The Danes' Swedish coach Bo Johansson lauded his team for their 'Brazilian' showing which came out of the blue after a mediocre first round showing, where they qualified with a narrow win over Saudi Arabia, a draw against South Africa -- and a defeat against France.

"We relaxed for this one. We didn't even try to play this way against France," explained Johansson.

"Then we knew we could lose and go to the second round but tonight it was for sure our best performance," he added.

"But this is the famous old Danish way of playing," he laughed, insisting that Denmark have for many years had the talent but it just hasn't come out.

"We have had many good Danish players. They played a couple of fantastic games in Mexico in 1986," where the tiny nation -- population five million -- reached the second round on its World Cup debut before slumping to Spain.

Suddenly the shock European Championship triumph in 1992, when the Danes only entered because Yugoslavia were banned, has been put in context, a stepping stone to more success rather than the total fluke it appeared.

Joking apart, the Brazilian comparison on Sunday's evidence isn't so outrageous although Johansson wasn't too sure where the performance came from.

"It's impossible to explain why we're suddenly good. But it's not really a question of preparation and tactics.

"It's the talent we have. Look at our playmaker Michael Laudrup. He played fantastically. And what about our goalscorer Peter Moller? He's a fantastic player. He's been practising so hard in training -- more than the others. When you're patient you get your reward."

And unlike Nigeria, who in Schmeichel's view were too busy thinking about Brazil in the quarter-finals, they are taking nothing for granted.

"It wouldn't be logical to make us favourites against Brazil," admits Michael Laudrup, while brother Brian agrees that "nobody expects us to win."

But nobody expected them to beat Nigeria either.

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Ince to cool it

PARIS, June 29 (AFP/Internet): England coach Glenn Hoddle has told tough guy midfielder Paul Ince to calm down for the potentially explosive Argentina game.

Temperamental Ince risked a red card in England's last game when he gave the Mexican a verbal tackle from behind.

Ince was furious with Arturo Brizio Carter after he came in for rough treatment from Adolfo Valencia and Hoddle fears that his inspirational anchorman could get into trouble if he lets Argentina light his short fuse on Tuesday in Saint Etienne.

Ince had to go off near the end after Valencia hauled him down from behind -- but before he left the pitch he made his views known to Carter in no uncertain terms.

Sampson steps down

PARIS, June 29: Steve Sampson has resigned as coach of the United States team, reports Reuters.

The United States lost all three matches at the World Cup and Sampson's methods were savaged by some American players.

Alan Rothenberg, the president of the US Soccer Association, said in a statement today "We thank Steve for his tremendous service. His tireless work has helped advance our sport and on balance it was an era of growth. I compliment him on his many achievements with the team."

Super Eagles shot down

LAGOS, June 29 (AFP/Internet): The Nigerian press let fly with its bitter disappointment on Monday, the morning after the Nigerian team's shock 4-1 drubbing by Denmark, blaming overconfidence and the goalkeeper for the loss.

"Eagles crash out of France '98," blared the daily The Champion.

The greatest lesson to learn is that never put all your bet on the Eagles when the chips are down," the paper said.

It blamed the defeat on the Nigerian goalkeeper, Peter Rufai, saying: "Predictably, it was ageing goalkeeper, Peter Rufai, who was the architect of the defeat. The Eagles suffered a score line that did not reflect the pattern of play."

The Post Express newspaper said the Eagles were undone because they under-rated the Danes.

It said for millions of Nigerians "it was a hope raised and hope dashed."

Well-known Nigerian sports writer Tony Neziaya said the loss indicated that the Eagles, who are past winners of the African Cup and Olympic champions, had not yet matured enough to win the World Cup.

Even Pele of Brazil predicted that Nigeria would lift the cup for the first time for Africa. But now that hope has been dashed," he said.

Too close for comfort: Croatia vs Romania

BORDEAUX, France, June 29 (AFP): Super-confident Croatia aim to continue their remarkably successful World Cup debut when they face Romania in a second-round match here on Tuesday, but their run may be derailed by blond ambition.

Romania, whose players have all dyed their hair metallic gold, are gunning for a second successive quarterfinal spot after finishing on top of Group G.

The Romanians dyed their hair after a bet with coach Anghel Iordanescu. While they may look comical, their play so far has been deadly serious.

Both teams are gifted with technique and tactical nous -- they are almost mirror images of each other, which could see them cancelling each other out in a dull midfield stalemate.

Romania rested five starters in their 1-1 draw against Tunisia, but had already sealed their place in the last 16 before that match. The result of the widespread changes was "disorganisation" which displeased Iordanescu.

The Romanian coach, though, is pleased that his side will play Croatia rather than Argentina.

"The way they play suits us better than Argentina," said Iordanescu. "They play a lot like us and are inspired by the Yugoslav style of game."

Romania's strength is that they have several attacking options. Viorel Moldovan, essentially a left-sided player, is their main strike weapon, sometimes in tandem with the mercurial Adrian Ilie, who can pop up where he is least expected.

Playmaker Gheorghe Hagi can be infuriatingly inconsistent, but is always a menace at deadball situations, while Dorinel Munteanu is adept at unleashing dangerous diagonal passes. Defenders Dan Petrescu and Gica Popescu are both threats when they join the attack and it was Chelsea full-back Petrescu who popped up in the penalty area to score Romania's late winner against England.

The Romanian players are not all that well-known, but you don't win matches on reputations," said striker Moldovan.

Croatia lost their third first-round match 1-0 against Argentina and suffered a blow in that match when sweeper Zvonimir Soldo earned a second

yellow card. He will miss Tuesday's match.

"That could cause us a few problems," admitted Croatian skipper Zvonimir Boban. "but no player is indispensable."

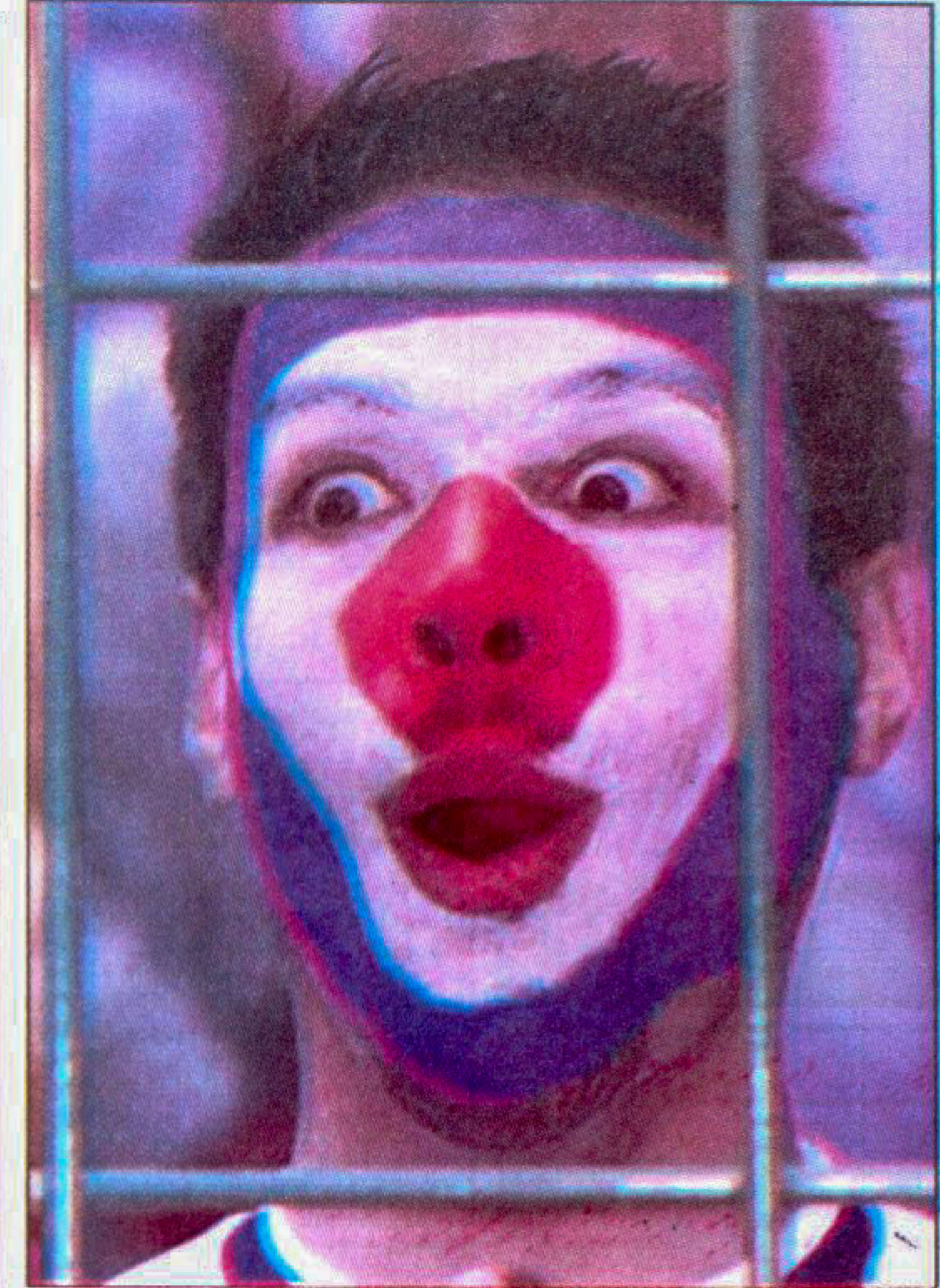
Goran Juric is expected to replace Soldo alongside Igor Stimac in the backline.

Croatia may be playing in the first World Cup finals, but they are a team of considerable experience. Much of their play revolves around the ability of wily striker Davor Suker to hold the ball up in attack.

The Euro '96 quarterfinalists have been written off by many critics, who argue that the core of their team: "Suker, Boban, midfielders Robert Prosinecki and Aljosa Asanovic and wing back Robert Jarni are all veterans.

Prosinecki has looked slow and predictable during this tournament, but may have one last great game left in him.

The Croatians will be looking to finish the match off in regulation time because it appears likely the Romanians will have the youngsters legs if the game goes into extra-time, even allowing for the veteran status of players like Hagi and goalkeeper Bogdan Stelea.



APEMAN OR A CLOWN? A French supporter with weird face-do at the Felix Bollaert stadium on June 28. — AFP photo

Latinos do it better

PARIS, June 29 (AP): Europe's World Cup has acquired a distinct Latin flavour.

Played in France, in the heart of Europe, this was expected to be a World Cup by the Europeans, for the Europeans.

But so far, with the second round set to start Saturday, it's the teams from the other side of the Atlantic that have made it their tournament, placing five of their six berths in the second round.

More convincingly, after Sunday's games, five of the top seven goal scorers are from Latin America.

After the five goals by Italy's Christian Vieri, Argentina's Gabriel Batistuta and Chile's Marcelo Salas had four each while Mexico's Luis Hernandez, and Brazilians Ronaldo and Cesar Sempayo had three each.

Colombia are the only one missing from the Latin American entries, having lost to Romania and England. The United States and Jamaica, the other American teams, also were eliminated in the first round.

Brazil and Argentina, winners of six of the 15 World Cups, were widely expected to reach the round of 16. But ... Chile, Paraguay and Mexico?

None of them were expected to advance, grouped with much tougher European teams in the first round. Chile had the best showing ever among the trio, having reached the semifinals in 1962 when they hosted the championship.

However, all three have advanced, and without a single loss.

Chile drew their three

games, including two in which it led much of the way before giving up late goals. Mexico beat South Korea and then managed 2-2 draws against Belgium and the Netherlands, both after falling behind 2-0 and playing with 10 men. Paraguay was the only unbeaten team in the "Group of Death."

It held favourite Spain and Bulgaria to scoreless draws before defeating Nigeria, the Group D winner, 3-1.

Latest odds

LONDON, June 29: Odds on Denmark winning the World Cup were cut to 33-1 from 150-1 after they thrashed Nigeria 4-1 in a World Cup second round match on Sunday, reports Reuters.

William Hill, bookmakers, said Brazil were 2-1 favourites and France 4-1, from 9-2 before Sunday's 1-0 defeat of Paraguay.

The Netherlands are 11-2, Italy 6-1, Argentina 7-1, Germany 8-1 and England 10-1.

Argentina were the most impressive, defeating all of their three opponents without conceding a goal.

The only qualified Latin American team that lost a game was none other than four-time world champions Brazil, beaten 2-1 by Norway in a meaningless game after they had won Group A.

But South American success "should not come as a surprise. We had a very tough qualifying tournament," Argentina's coach

Daniel Passarella said.

The region's team "play well and have good players and good tactics. The tough qualifying tournament enabled them to reach the World Cup in top form and to do well here."

Argentina led the Latins in the first round, dominating all three of its matches, including a 1-0 victory against a talented Croatia.

Argentina confirmed it big ambitions. Croatian coach Miroslav Blazevic said.

Argentina relied on striker Gabriel Batistuta, who scored four goals, flashes of brilliance by midfielder Ariel Ortega, and a solid defence.

Paraguay also made it to the next stage on the strength of their defence, led by goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert, who conceded just one goal in what many consider the tournament's toughest group.

"We have the best defence in the world," Chilavert said.

The back line includes Francisco Arce and Carlos Gamarra, who play in Brazil, as well as Celso Ayala, key on Argentina's River Plate.

FIFA president Joseph Blatter rated Paraguay as probably the biggest surprise in the tournament.

After saying that no miracle teams should be expected in this World Cup, Blatter admitted "maybe the surprise is Paraguay, although not if you look at the way they played in qualifying."

Paraguay led the South American qualifying before finishing second, one point behind Argentina.

Loud and Proud

VITTEL, France, Jun 29 (AP): A young nation in their first World Cup, Croatia is showcasing not only their soccer but also the nationalist pride that fuelled its war of independence from Yugoslavia a few years ago.

With a coach who lauds his team as the best and team jerseys sporting a red-and-white checkerboard design used by a pro-Nazi regime during World War II, the Croatians are advertising their new identity as well as their government's ambiguous relationship with the past.

"Sure, the World Cup is publicity for our country," said defender Zvonimir Soldo.

That national mission has produced some unusual antics. After a game against Japan, the team filed a protest with FIFA, soccer's governing body, because the translator at the post-match news conference was a Serb.

To top it off, Croatia complained that the band played its national anthem too slowly before the match.

And the official team guide proudly lists matches played by the national team from 1941 to 1945, while Croatia's the Nazi-backed regime was killing tens of thousands of Jews, Serbs, Gypsies and others it considered enemies.

The same guide touts the small southeastern European country of 4 million people as "a gift from heaven" because of the natural beauty of its Adriatic coast.

Beyond the official line, the players and coach Miroslav

Blazevic try to focus on soccer. Croatia plays Romania on Tuesday for a spot in the quarterfinals.

Even Blazevic, a soft-spoken chain smoker who wants his team to win, "the fight" on the soccer field and is considered close to Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, was embarrassed when Croatian diplomats tried to stop the Serb translator.

"It was clumsy," said Blazevic.

Croats and Serbs speak the same language -- known as Serbo-Croatian in the old Yugoslav federation that broke up in war in 1991 -- although with slightly differing regional accents. How, Croats view the Serb accent as an offensive reminder of past domination from Belgrade.

But defender Slaven Bilic, who like most Croatian players earns his money with a foreign club, says the Croatian team is tired of being identified with Balkan extreme nationalism.

"The pride is still there, but now we are proud like, say, English players are proud to be English," said Bilic, who plays for Everton. "Maybe the motivation is actually better, because we can concentrate on football."

Team captain Zvonimir Boban says patriotism peaked with the 1996 European soccer championship. Croatia's first major international tournament since independence.

"We are a good national team," he says.

Bewildered Bora bows out

PARIS, June 29 (Reuters): Few expect Nigeria's coach Bora Milutinovic to be in his ejection seat of a job for much longer after his side crashed 4-1 to Denmark in the World Cup second round.

But the Serb, who had enjoyed only seven months with Nigeria after qualifying for the final with Mexico, was not about to walk the plank.

Would Milutinovic, who has coached no fewer than four nations at World Cup finals, be staying in his job, the reporters asked him.

"My future is my life, my family," he said. "I am a very happy man."

Nigeria have had four coaches in four years, but all have fallen out with the federation. Milutinovic's predecessor Philippe Troussier said that "only a cowboy can manage the Nigerian team."

Would Milutinovic be saying goodbye to Nigeria? "My English is not very

good," he said. "But I never say goodbye."

What were his plans for the future?

"I'm a soccer coach, I really don't know what I'm going to do in the future," he said.

Would he be going back to Lagos with the team -- who would be likely to get a hostile reception and all of whom, it should be said, live and play outside their home country.

"I'm staying to watch the World Cup. My commitment to the federation is finished in July, when the World Cup finishes. It's not Bora who is going to tell you what I'm going to do earlier, I don't know -- the decision is not mine."

Did he expect to be back for his fifth World Cup in succession, in 2002?

"You know," he said. "I don't even know what I'm going to be doing tomorrow morning."

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