

THE HUNT FOR GLORY IS ON!

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS



MEXICAN BAMBINOS: Two little Mexican fans waits for the second round game against Germany to start at Stade de la Mosson in Montpellier on June 29. — AFP photo

Italy vs France: Friends turned foes

SENLIS, France, June 30 (Reuters/AP): France and Italy will have no secrets to share when they meet in the quarter-finals of the World Cup, Italian captain Paolo Maldini said on Monday.

Half the French squad have played in Serie A. Seven players are currently with Italian clubs and four others used to be.

France's starting line-up for their second round clash against Paraguay included Inter Milan's Youri Djorkaeff, Parma's Lilian Thuram, Juventus' Didier Deschamps and AC Milan's Marcel Desailly.

The substitutes included AS Roma defender Vincent Candela and Sampdoria midfielder Alain Boghossian.

Juventus midfielder Zinedine Zidane will be back from suspension to face Italy at the Stade de France on Friday while others have past experience of Italy to draw on.

France's hero against Paraguay, Laurent Blanc, used to play at Napoli. Patrick Vieira and Christophe Dugarry are both former AC Milan players while Christian Karembeu joined Real Madrid from Sampdoria.

Italy's superstar Alessandro Del Piero and Zidane produced sparkling play and goals as teammates with league champions Juventus, this year.

In Friday's quarterfinals they may sorely miss each other's help.

Zidane, told a French television network that he considered the young Italian forward one of the most imaginative players in the tournament and

a serious threat to France's hopes to reach the semifinals.

Del Piero, seeking his first World Cup goal against the French, said at Italy's training camp on Monday that he considered Zidane France's key player.

"He is a great player, and I hope he does not prove it against Italy," the 23-year-old forward said.

"With Zidane supporting me I had some great seasons with La Juve. I will miss him in the next match, but he too may feel my absence," Del Piero said.

Del Piero tallied 21 goals in league matches and became the Champions League top scorer ever with 10 goals this year. Zidane added seven goals and lots of assists. They form one of the most impressive duos in the Italian league.

Looking forward to Friday's match Del Piero said, "It will be the toughest match for Italy, against the home team."

"They have individual talents and an excellent teamwork. We will play at our best to win. We start with equal chances," Del Piero said.

"It'll be a match without secrets," Maldini told a news conference. "We know their players well, they know us and neither side will have anything to hide."

"France looked very strong in their first two matches. I didn't see their match against Denmark and I thought they looked a little slower yesterday against Paraguay."

"But they're a very solid side with a strong defence. They'll also have Zidane back to face us

and he's fundamental to the way they play."

Maldini said Italy had no fear of facing the French in front of 80,000 fans in Paris's showpiece stadium.

"We know we'll be surrounded by French supporters but we don't mind," he said. "Playing at home should be an advantage for them but it could also turn against them at difficult stages of the match."

"The fans don't score goals," he added. "We've played hundreds of matches in front of hostile crowds."

Italy were loudly whistled by Norwegian fans and locals during their uninspiring 1-0 defeat of Norway in the second round in Marseille. The fans were annoyed Italy effectively closed down the match once they had taken an early lead.

Maldini picked out Monaco's Thierry Henry as France's most dangerous forward player.

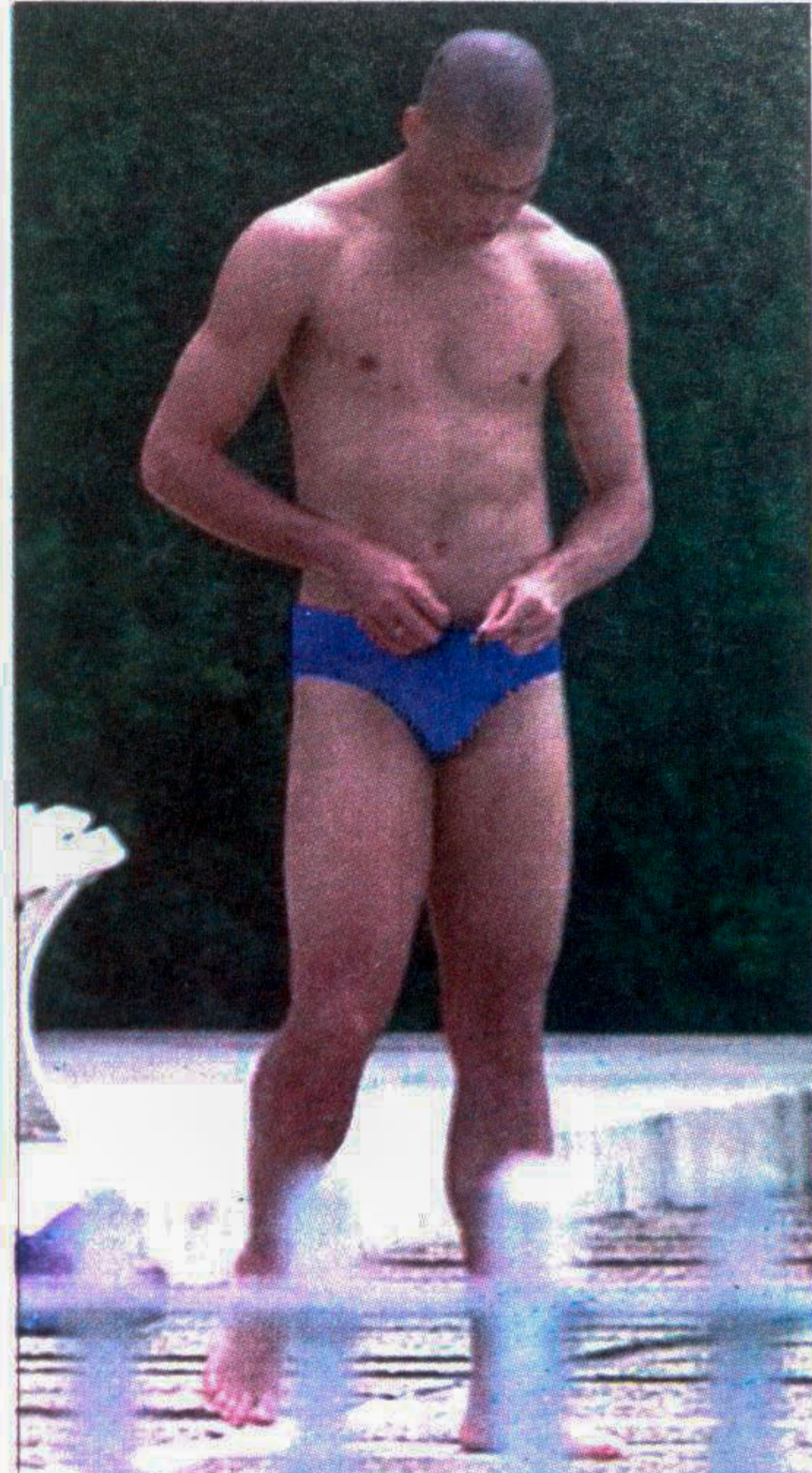
"Once he gets some space he's unstoppable," he said.

Del Piero, who was just recovered from a thigh strain meanwhile was busy denying allegations about his questionable form and rejecting criticism about the scoring chances missed in against Norway.

"It's true that I missed some easy chances, but not because I'm unfit, I'm physically okay and ready to play a full match," Del Piero said.

Originally considered Italy's best player and one of the would-be World Cup stars, Del Piero has been overshadowed so far by striker Christian Vieri, who tallied five goals in four matches, and by Roberto Baggio, his would-be substitute.

"It has not been Del Piero's World Cup. I hope it can be Vieri's or Italy's World Cup. What really counts for me is that the team goes on in the tournament," he said.



TARZAN! Brazil's Ronaldo prepares for a swim at the pool of Chateau de Grande Romaine in Lesigny on June 29. — AFP photo

Underdogs bark but don't bite

PARIS, Jun 30 (AP): Denmark are proving to be the upset champions of world soccer.

Gaining a backdoor entrance to the 1992 European Championship when Yugoslavia was kicked out, the Danes went home with the title, beating top favourites Germany in the final.

After ousting 1996 Olympic gold medalists Nigeria from World Cup '98 by a surprising 4-1 score, they now face defending titlists and four-time world champions Brazil for a place in the semifinals.

Another upset? Why not.

"Everybody expects Brazil to win," said Danish striker Brian Laudrup. "We might be able to do it again. You never know, I think we showed the whole football world that we can play attractive football as well."

Brazil-Denmark takes place Friday at Nantes the same day that hosts France take on three-time winners Italy at the Stade de France.

Reigning European champions Germany and the Netherlands have also made it to the last eight and will play Saturday, but they wouldn't know their opponents until later Tuesday.

The Germans, who came from behind to beat Mexico 2-1 on Monday, will play either Romania or Croatia at Lyon. The Dutch will face England or Argentina at Marseille.

Romania and Croatia met at Bordeaux Tuesday and England faced Argentina at Saint-Etienne.

While the France-Italy quarterfinal could go either way — the French with home advantage and the Italians with a wealth of World Cup experience — the Danes aren't expected to beat the mighty Brazilians.

But that's their strongest weapon, and they like it that way.

They exposed Nigeria's weakest point — the defence — and were 2-0 up before the Olympic champions' feared strikeforce had barely touched the ball.

Brazil's only weakness happens to be their defence, too. Norway proved that in a come-from-behind 2-1 victory in Group A and the Norwegians are no longer in the competition, beaten 1-0 by Italy in round two.

The Italians look more assured as the championship goes on, while the French struggled to put out the modest Paraguayans.

The hosts needed an extra time goal by defender Laurent Blanc — the first sudden death "Golden Goal" in the history of the World Cup — to beat the South Americans with a penalty shootout only six minutes away.

Despite scoring nine goals in three Group C games, the

French showed against Paraguay they need a scorer of the quality of Italy's Christian Vieri or Alessandro Del Piero.

The tireless Youri Djorkaeff set up chance after chance but David Trezeguet, Bernard Diomede and Thierry Henry couldn't finish the job.

Italy, with Vieri leading the scorers' list with five goals in four games, have strength throughout the team. Del Piero is back to full fitness to partner Vieri, plus the Italians have Roberto Baggio in reserve.

The Germans are nowhere near their best form, but have shown once against they refuse to be beaten. During the Group F games, they hit back from 2-0 down to secure a 2-2 tie with Yugoslavia and overturned Mexico's 1-0 lead with late goals from Jurgen Klinsmann and Oliver Bierhoff to win 2-1 and reach the last eight.

Berti Vogts' team also appears to have the easiest route to the semifinal. Romania have never reached the World Cup semifinals while Croatia are making their debut.

The prospect of facing either England or Argentina looks far tougher for the Dutch, a World Cup losing finalists in 1974 and '98. The Netherlands edged Yugoslavia 2-1 on Monday thanks to an injury-time winner by Edgar Davids.

England reached the semifinals the last time they qualified in 1990 and have spent 32 frustrating years trying to emulate the team that won the title in 1966. Under Glenn Hoddle, England now play with more imagination and have top quality matchwinners in Alan Shearer, David Beckham and 18-year-old Michael Owen.

Argentina, a two-time winners who beat the Dutch in the 1978 final, are striving to step out of the shadows of South American rivals Brazil.

By any means necessary

ST ETIENNE, June 30 (AFP/Internet): Cheating was on the minds of Argentina and England before their World Cup second round clash here Tuesday.

Argentina coach Daniel Passarella has refused to order his players not to cheat and England's Paul Scholes says he would cheat if it meant staying in the World Cup.

"You all break rules to win and if the ref misses it, fine," said Scholes.

"My team is made up of individuals. All the players have to decide such things for themselves," said Passarella, the 1978 World Cup winning skipper who was injured in Mexico when Diego Maradona and his Hand of God sent England out of the tournament in 1986.

Scholes added: "Would I do the same thing in that position? Yeah, I suppose I would. If it meant staying in the World Cup or going home then I would definitely go for it. If you get

caught out, it's handball, a freekick against you and then possibly a booking."

"But if you get away with it? Then you're in the last eight of the World Cup."

Passarella said Tuesday's game had all the hallmarks of being a great match.

"England have a team of dynamic personalities with a lot of good young players, especially in attack," he added.

"For me the game is a classical international, especially at this stage of the tournament."

While his squad appeared relaxed and confident in training, Passarella evidently has a regard for Glenn Hoddle, both as a player and a coach.

"As a player he was very talented and used a lot of wisdom on the field," said the former defender. "He is a very interesting person."

"And as a coach he has changed England's traditional game. His team is very technical."

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Ronaldo misses Romario

OZOIR-LA-FERREIRE, France, June 30 (AFP): Despite plundering two goals in the 4-1 demolition of Chile at the Parc des Princes on Saturday to fire Brazil into the quarter-finals Ronaldo is missing erstwhile strike partner Romario.

Coach Mario Zagallo felt Ronaldo, who struck the woodwork twice, could do better. And assistant Zico has also criticized the Inter Milan hitman, nicknamed The Phenomenon.

Given the astronomical expectations heaped upon his shoulders, three goals in four games -- one a penalty -- is nothing special for the world footballer-of-the-year.

But above all it is Romario's absence from the squad that is not helping.

"When the team helps me I can help them," Ronaldo said cryptically after the Chile game, when Brazil legend Pele observed that he was not getting enough support in attack.

And at Brazil's training headquarters Ronaldo lifted the lid on his thoughts about what might have proved a solution -- but which now constitutes a missed opportunity.

"For me Romario is a great footballer. And I really miss not having him alongside me," Ronaldo confessed.

With his five goals four years ago in the United States, the 32-year-old Romario made a huge contribution to Brazil's record fourth World Cup triumph.

But having travelled to France with the squad he was dropped after failing to recover from a calf muscle injury sustained on May 6 in Brazil's training camp in Rio de Janeiro. Midfielder Emerson replaced him but has yet to play.

Doctors back in Brazil later suggested Romario would have been fit from the quarter-finals onwards but Zagallo wasn't prepared to take the risk.

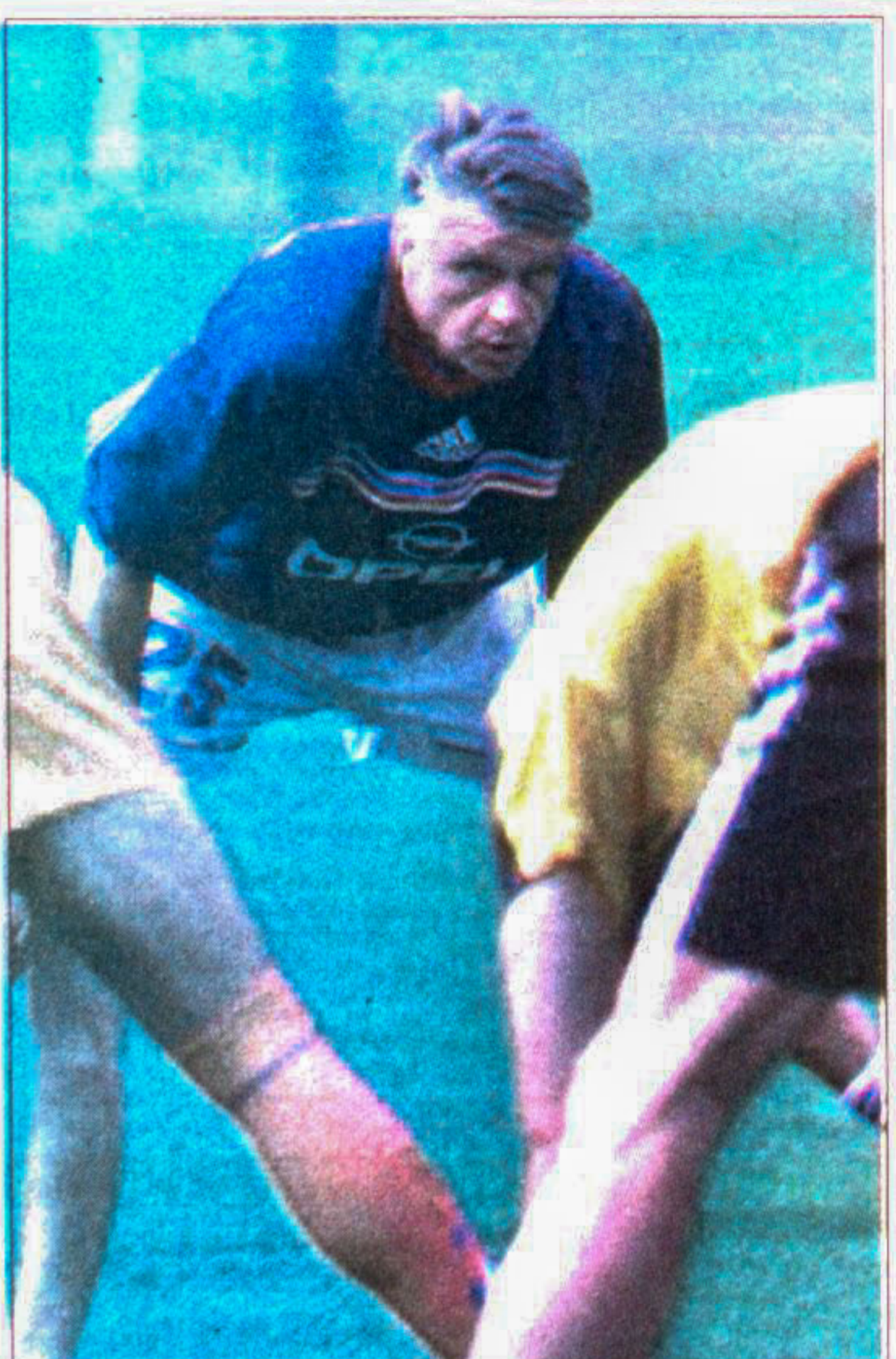
Yet his absence has clearly affected Ronaldo, who has failed to find the same understanding with either Bebeto or Denilson and who had struck up a close friendship with the veteran 11 years his senior.

Instead of starring on the pitch, Romario has been reduced to working as a commentator for Brazilian television.

"I came to France full of hope and expectation, surrounded by friends and then I had to travel home with a heavy heart. It's a sad business for me," he said.

Ronaldo undoubtedly has plenty of other friends in the squad.

But possibly one too few to allow his full talent to shine through.



THE COACH HAS TO STAY IN SHAPE TOO: Aime Jacquet, the French coach stretching with the players during practice at Clairefontaine on June 29. — AFP photo

Azzuri enter the wolves' den

SENLIS, France, June 30 (AFP/Internet): Italy are going into the wolves' den when they take on France for a place in the semi-finals, coach Cesare Maldini claimed on Tuesday.

The two sides meet on Friday and the 66-year-old coach did not mince his words over the grim fate awaiting his men at the Stade de France.

"We're playing against one of the favourites for the competition ... and we're going into the wolves' den," he said.

Maldini tipped France as a tournament favourite and envied coach Aime Jacquet for having the likes of creative midfielders Zinedine Zidane and Youri Djorkaeff.

France, who will have Zidane back from a two-match suspension, may have struggled to beat Paraguay with Laurent Blanc's "Golden Goal". But it gave Maldini no grounds for optimism.

"We saw their game against Paraguay, but then every team with the exception of Denmark have struggled to get through, he said.

"Germany had a very hard

time beating Mexico, which only goes to show that all the teams here are very well-prepared. Zidane is a very important player for them and his absence didn't help things."

"But Zidane is only one champion amongst others in their team."

Stressing the attacking strength of Jacquet's side, he said: "They have Henry, Djorkaeff, Trezeguet, Guiv'arch, Zidane etc. Every coach has to manage with the men he has available. You can't have everything in life."

"We have to focus on our formation, and only afterwards try to understand what they other team might be doing."

"France are not new to us," he went on. "So many of their players are in Italian clubs and we've seen so many of their games that I hope that we know everything there is to know about them."

That familiarity will not breed any contempt in the Italian coach, who has long been an admirer of Inter Milan ace Djorkaeff, and who doesn't

think the French will be worn out by their marathon win over the South Americans.

"We've got very good players, but we don't have a player like Djorkaeff," he admitted.

"Someone who moves a great deal between attack and defence, someone who can take people on and beat them, and then come back to cover."

"France used up a lot of energy to beat Paraguay, but the motivation and the strength soon comes back. I heard what Zidane and Deschamps have been saying and they sounded optimistic."

Despite the brickbats which Maldini has suffered over the past week, the Italy coach is convinced there will be plenty of entertaining football ahead.

"The best matches are still to come in this tournament," he said. "But we have to give everything we have. Looking back over our campaign, I think we've played very well so far."

"We were criticised a bit more than we should have been against Norway, but I still think it was a good game and that we did what we had to do."



The Italian squad limber-up at their Senlise base on June 29. — AFP photo

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