

FEVER PITCH EXCITEMENT!

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS

Argentina top sinner's list

PARIS, July 1 (AFP/Internet): The 29 fouls Argentina committed against England in Tuesday's emotion-packed match makes them the dirtiest side at France 98.

They have now given away 86 free-kicks in four games to reach the quarter-finals.

However, they are also the most sinned against, winning 86 free-kicks, four more than England.

Germany's 23 free-kicks conceded against Mexico in their second round match put them second behind Argentina with a total of 72 free-kicks, ahead of France and Italy with 69 each.

Holland are 10th with 64 free-kicks against, and Croatia 16th with 56 against.

The cleanest of the quarter-finalists are Brazil and Denmark. Both countries have given away only 51 free-kicks in four matches, although Denmark's position in the FIFA fairplay league is hampered by their two red cards against South Africa.

The meanest defender of the eight remaining countries is Argentina's Nelson Vivas, who has conceded 18 free-kicks in four matches.

Argentina playmaker Ariel Ortega, fouled 23 times, and England's Alan Shearer, who won 21 free-kicks, were the most sinned-against players after the first 56 matches.

Leading scorers Christian Vieri and Gabriel Batistuta have a remarkable strike rate.

Vieri's five goals come from 10 shots on goal, one fewer than Batistuta who had 10 more shots all-told - 24.

Brazil and France have scored 10 goals each but the South Americans needed only 24 shots on goal compared with France's 61.

Holland's nine goals come from 44 shots on target while Argentina needed 38 shots on goal for their nine. Germany have scored eight times from 25 attempts on target while Italy's eight come from 33 efforts on target.



MERCURIAL ARIEL: Ariel Ortega (R), a constant menace for the English defence, battles with Paul Ince at Saint Etienne on June 30. —AFP photo

Tiny Croatia walking tall

BORDEAUX, France, July 1 (AFP/Internet): They wore T-shirts proclaiming them "Proud to be Croatian" and smiles a mile wide.

Croatia, a tiny country with a population of just four million, joined the big guns of international football when they beat Romania 1-0 here on Tuesday to seal a spot in the quarter-finals of the World Cup at their first attempt.

The jubilation was unabashed, but these confident Croats believe they can go even further at France 98, even though their next assignment is a meeting with three-time champions Germany in Lyon on Saturday.

"This is a dream come true for us," said wing back Robert Jarni. "It is a great performance for a small country like ours to be in the last eight of the World Cup alongside all the great football nations."

"I said before the game that we'd win, and we did. It is great to surprise people with a result like this."

"We mustn't forget it is not that long ago there was a war back home. How far can Croatia go? Why not to the final?" Defender Igor Stimac echoed the jubilation and issued a warning to the Germans.

"We are a small nation and no one expected us to be in the quarter-finals, but we aren't finished yet," he said. "Germany have something like six million registered football players and we have only four million people, but we are delighted to play them again."

Just look at the last eight -- World Cup winners and European champions and little Croatia. It is a wonderful feeling, even more so because we played as a real team today."

The Germans knocked Croatia out of the 1996 European championships in England, winning 2-1 in a match marked by several contentious refereeing decisions and Stimac seizes an opportunity for revenge.

"They beat us at Euro 96 with the help of the referee and we've been waiting for this chance for two years," Stimac said. "We are more experienced now and I believe we have more quality in our team than the Germans."

Coach Miroslav Blazevic said his team had thoroughly deserved their win over Romania, which came via a Davor Suker penalty.

England's heart bleeds

LONDON, July 1 (AP/AFP): One fan took it out on the TV set, and several hundred others in dozens of towns and cities across England took to the streets, smashing shop windows and fighting after England's World Cup soccer dream collapsed.

Newspapers hailed England's team as heroes, battling with one player-short most of the time to hold Argentina to a draw -- only to lose Tuesday night in St Etienne, France, in a nail-biting 4-3 penalty shootout.

Police reported 45 arrests, mainly in southern England towns, as shocked fans poured out of pubs.

England coach Glen Hoddle commented that "it's a football match at the end of the day -- it's not a matter of life and death." But that's not how many saw England's World Cup defeat on penalties for the third time in eight years.

In the country with the worst record for soccer hooliganism and a stunning record for fervor, the English know a disaster when they see one.

A Sky TV phone-in was flooded with callers, many blaming David Beckham, an 8-million-pound (13.3 dollars) a year star with a Spice Girl for a fiancee. He got sent off for a retaliatory kick at an Argentine player who fouled him.

"Beckham has let the team, the fans out there and everyone watching at home down," said Ian Hawkins, 37. "He should never play for England again."

Hawkins was among hundreds of dejected fans, many still wearing their England replica shirts, who arrived at London's Waterloo station Wednesday morning, streaming off the English Channel tunnel train from France.

In Poole, on the south England coast, a 29-year-old man smashed the TV set in his pub, The Tatnum, after England missed the final penalty. Dorset police said six people were arrested in separate incidents in the county.

In Peterborough, near Cambridge, police armed with riot shields used tear gas to break up a crowd of about 100 fans fighting and shouting in the town's Cathedral Square. A policeman was hit in the face during the fracas, the most serious of 20 incidents in the town.

Police reported scattered disturbances in several other southern counties, but said most fans were well behaved.

The story of England's defeat was splashed over national newspapers. "Heroes," said the Express. "So Cruel," declared the mass-circulation Sun, while the Mirror announced, "10 Heroic Lions, One Stupid Boy."

"Outch," said the Daily Star, playing on the notorious Sun headline, "Gotcha" when Britain sank an Argentine warship when the countries went to war for real over the Falkland Islands colony in 1982. England won that one.

Many papers, the Times, the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail, agreed that England had "gone down fighting."

But the Sun and the Daily Mail also described Beckham's actions as a "Moment of madness." Others described Beckham's "Stupid mistake" and "Piece of petulance."

The Sun wrote that Beckham "deserved to be sent off for (ridiculous stupidity)... an absolutely ridiculous realisation on Simone when he had won the free kick. He should be ashamed."

The Mail wrote that with Beckham on the pitch, England manager Glenn Hoddle's team "Must have had a great chance of winning. As he walked from the pitch Beckham appeared on the verge of tears, knowing the price England could pay."

All agreed that striker Michael Owens goal that sent England 2-1 ahead in the first half was one of the "Goals of the tournament."

And after Beckham's sending off, the Mail wrote that his teammates "Staged one of the most courageous rearguard actions in the tournament's history."

But of England's loss to penalties no paper could avoid comparison with England's exit from the World Cup in 1990 and Euro '96, which were also both to penalty shoot-outs.

"England undone by penalty clause" wrote the Times. "England's penalty heartbreak" wrote the Telegraph. "Penalties sink England again" wrote the Guardian.

The upbeat note continued with an announcement by British Airways that it was sending a Concorde supersonic jet to bring the team home.

An estimated 28 million people watched the match on TV, causing one of the biggest power surges ever recorded -- 2,100 megawatts, said the national grid, which operates the power lines.



INSTANT HERO: Argentine keeper Carlos Roa is over the moon after saving England's David Batty's penalty at the Geoffroy Guichard Stadium on June 30. —AFP photo

Is Ronaldo fat?

OZOIR-LA-FERRIERE, France, July 1 (Reuters): A buzz of frenzied excitement hung over Brazil's World Cup training session on Tuesday after a team doctor Lidio Toledo commented that striker Ronaldo could be overweight by up to two kilos.

Toledo made the remarks casually to Brazilian journalists on Monday at the team hotel, unaware that he was about to spark what could almost be described as a national crisis.

One newspaper published a photograph of the striker helping himself to a huge slab of meat during a barbecue which followed training on Monday.

It also invited readers of its internet page to take part in a survey: "Do you think Ronaldo is overweight?"

By Tuesday afternoon the subject had the Brazilian media in a hysterical state, aggravated when Ronaldo began training separately from his teammates, running round the field instead of taking part in exercises with a ball like everyone else.

But Toledo calmed frayed nerves afterwards when he declared that Ronaldo had been weighed in the morning and found to be an ideal 83 kilos. "He's at his ideal weight," declared a relieved Toledo, who had warned on Monday that Ronaldo faced a diet if he were found to be too heavy.

Ronaldo himself confirmed that there was no excess flab to dent Brazil's hopes of keeping the title.

"For two years, I have been this weight and this height," he said. "I have played one Spanish and one Italian championship at this weight and nothing has changed since."

To add to the confusion, the official team sheet provided by the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) gave his weight at a mere 77 kilos. But Toledo said this figure dated from the 1994 World Cup, when Ronaldo was only 17.

Toledo said that Ronaldo had also been suffering pains in his knee but it was a normal problem and nothing to worry about. "He is in perfect health," said Toledo.

Ronaldo has scored three goals at the World Cup and provided some flashes of genius but despite this has not yet reached the dizzy heights that had been expected of him.

Brazil face Denmark in their quarterfinal in Nantes on Friday.

Hagi has had his day

BORDEAUX, France, July 1 (AFP): If he's as good as his word, Gheorghe Hagi has played his final match for Romania.

It was a sad exit for the man once dubbed "the Maradona of the Carpathians" as Romania slumped to a 1-0 loss to Croatia on Tuesday and missed out on a second successive appearance in the quarterfinals of the World Cup.

Hagi, now 32, was a largely anonymous figure throughout the game -- a shadow of his past self -- and was substituted early in the second half.

"We could have won if we'd played the way we played in the first round," a downcast Hagi said. "I lacked a spring in our step today and I think he heat affected us a great deal. We needed to play at a faster pace and we couldn't."

Hagi said he had been troubled by stomach muscle problems before the match but offered no excuses.

"Only the team can be to blame for the loss," he said.

Hagi, who said before the tournament that he planned to quit, will bow out with a record number of Romanian caps -- 14 -- and 32 international goals. He appeared in three World Cup finals tournaments and enjoyed a stellar club career with Farul Constansta, Sportul Studenesc, Steaua Cuharest, Real Madrid, Brescia, Barcelona and Galatasaray.

He believes the Romanian squad still has a great future despite his own waning star and fading left foot.

"I am not worried about the future of this team," he said.

"There are plenty of talented young players coming through like striker Adrian Ilie."

The former midfield maestro and dead ball specialist said he will meet with Romania Football Federation officials over the next few days to discuss his exit from the national team, but did leave the door slightly ajar to continue playing.

With one breath he said he had played his final match but then added: "I haven't decided definitely yet. I still have a lot to think about," that's Hagi for you. Enigmatic to the end.

Hair we go!

PARIS, July 1 (AFP/Internet): Hairstyles may be superficial and cosmetic but let's face it, they have an impact on whether World Cup players get noticed or not.

The whole Romanian squad bleached their hair after their victory over England for their last group game against Tunisia on Friday to leave one newspaper commenting: "Life's a bleach and then you dye."

Chile's Javier Morales even dyed his hair red for their second round match against Brazil and it was the 29-year-old player's last moment of World Cup fame as they were eliminated 4-1.

Nigeria's Taribo West has been noticeable with his dyed green dreadlocks which complement the green Nigerian kit. No problem for television viewers to pick him out from the rest.

Colombian Carlos Valderrama has dyed his mass of curly locks strawberry blond hair for years which has helped make him such a high-profile figure.

His performances at this World Cup did not match 1990 when Colombia made it through to the second round, but he was still one of the most easily recognisable players because of his hairdo.

And France's David Trezeguet got team-mate Thierry Henry to shave his head for him for the Paraguay second round game and join other World Cup 'baldies' including Ronaldo of Brazil, Argentina's Juan Veron and his own French goalkeeper Fabien Barthez.

One French supporter quipped: "When I saw Trezeguet, I thought Frank Leboeuf was back." Of course Chelsea's Leboeuf has no hair on his head either.

Edgar Davids hit the winner for Holland against Yugoslavia in injury time with long dreadlocks bunched into a heavy ponytail which looks as though it ought to slow him down.

Holland's European Cup champion with Real Madrid Clarence Seedorf has both sides of his head shaved but dreadlocks going down the back of his head to make him very noticeable too.

One had to mention the ponytail of Frenchman Emmanuel Petit, who went off injured against Paraguay and was replaced by Alain Boghossian.

He has been noticeable in England as he had a marvellous end of the season on left-sided midfield as Arsenal earned their second English league and FA Cup double this century.

Perhaps the most famous ponytail in football was that of Roberto Baggio, the man who skied the ball over the bar in a penalty shootout to propel the World Cup trophy into the arms of Brazil skipper Dunga.

However Baggio, who warmed up on the sidelines during Italy's 1-0 second round win over Norway but did not get on, does not have it anymore.

Argentina's Claudio Caniggia, who scored Argentina's winner over Brazil in the 1990 World Cup second round, had flowing long blond hair to make him stand out.

Hairstyles change and pass at the snip of the scissors or the adding of dye and it could be said they are "Hair today and gone tomorrow," but they do catch the eye of the watching public.

Football's elite on top again

PARIS, July 1 (Reuters): The World Cup may have enlarged to 32 nations with ever more teams from soccer's Third World but the 1998 tournament has shown once again that the main European and South American countries still remain supreme.

Six European teams have joined Brazil and Argentina in a quarterfinal line-up which has an almost wearisome familiarity.

Apart from Denmark and Croatia, who have reached the last eight for the first time, the six others are all back in well-trodden territory.

Germany have reached the last eight for the fifth successive competition. Brazil are there for the 11th time in 13 tournaments and Argentina, coming through a heart-stopping penalty shootout with England, have made it for the sixth time in the last eight World Cups for which they have qualified.

Italy have reached this stage for the sixth time since 1970 while the Dutch are there for the fourth time.

World Cup hosts France are also no strangers to the last eight having made it through in each of their last three tournaments in 1982, 1986 and now 1998.

The expansion of the World Cup allowed Africa to enlarge its quota from three to five nations. Asia from two to four and Central and North America

from two to three.

Yet though soccer's Third World increased its representation from seven to 12 teams, only two -- Nigeria and Mexico -- made it through to the second round the none appear in the quarterfinals.

There is little sign that the gap is closing. In 1994, four of the seven nations from outside Europe and South America -- Nigeria, Mexico, The United States and Saudi Arabia -- made it into the second round in what was then seen as a promise of greater things to come, even if all four vanished without reaching the last eight.

There is a remarkable consistency in the teams who battle through to the later stages of the tournament.

Only 10 teams have ever reached the World Cup final and only two of them -- Sweden in 1958 and England in 1966 -- have reached it just once.

Germany's captain Juergen Klinsmann, playing in his Third World Cup finals, recently summed up the reasons for his country's recipe for success.

"We have a system that we know works and there is no reason to change it," he says.

"Our build-up, our diet and our preparation is always much the same and we come to the World Cup expecting to do well and we usually do. You cannot guarantee you are going to win

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