



HELPING OUT: Brazil's Junior Baiano and Cafu doing some stretching at Ozoir-la-Ferrière on July 1. —AFP photo

Brilliant Brazilians face feisty Danes

NANTES, France, July 2 (AFP/Internet): It's all been so easy for Brazil as they close in on a record fifth World Cup title — but that could change when they face feisty Denmark in the quarterfinals.

The brilliant Brazilians have cruised past Scotland and Morocco, lost to Norway when it didn't matter and then thrashed Chile 4-1 to seal their place in the last eight.

Not once have the Brazilians had to produce for a full 90 minutes. They are aware, though, that anything less than total effort could be fatal against the tough, determined former European champions from Denmark.

They've already raised eyebrows by getting this far. After scraping through the first round with just four points, Denmark reared up and thrashed favourites Nigeria 4-1.

Suddenly everyone remembered how Denmark had sneaked up on the field in the 1992 European Championship. Called in as a last-minute replacement for Yugoslavia, the Danes knocked off the elite of European soccer to win the title. Can lightning strike three times?

"We might be able to do it

again. You never know," said Laudrup. "I think we showed the whole football world that we can play attractive football as well."

The Danes seem unperturbed by the size of the task that will confront them in the La Beauvoisine Stadium and have vowed to attack in the same way that they did in their memorable second-round destruction of Nigeria.

"For us this is just a wonderful bonus and we have nothing to lose," said veteran midfielder Michael Laudrup.

"Even if we lose, playing against Brazil in a World Cup quarterfinal would be a wonderful way to end," added the 34-year-old, whose glittering international career will end when Denmark exit the tournament.

Laudrup's brother, forward Brian, said the Danes prefer to be playing Brazil and their superstar striker Ronaldo than any other team.

"It may sound strange, but of all the quarterfinalists we would have wanted Brazil," he said.

"Firstly, there will be no shame if we lose because Brazil are the best in the world and everyone expects them to win.

"They are the favourites and the defending champions which means that all the pressure will be on them — not us. We like being in the position of underdogs."

"Secondly, Brazil will come out and attack which suits us fine because our great strength is hitting teams on the counter-attack."

"It should be a really open game — they will attack and we will attack. Every football fan loves Brazil. They have so many attacking players and you only have to look at their bench to realise their strength in depth."

"Even their reserve team would figure strongly at the World Cup. But if we play anything like we did against Nigeria then I think we are in with a chance."

The Danes boasted that they played like Brazilians against Nigeria. Now they find themselves confronted by the real

thing.

They will be hoping for repeat performances of the attacking pyrotechnics that first Peter Moller and then substitute Ebbe Sand — who are vying for the same striking spot on Friday night — were able to produce against the Olympic champions.

The key to the 1992 European champions' game, though, is that they close teams down effectively and do not allow them the time and space to be creative. They then counter swiftly.

The Danes also have the bonus of the world's best goalkeeper, Peter Schmeichel, if the defence to get things wrong.

Remembering that the Danes lost 3-0 to Bosnia in a qualifying match last year, they have made huge strides over the past 12 months under Swedish coach Bo Johansson.

See page 14

Del Piero's fear of the crunch

PARIS, July 2 (AFP) : Italy are convinced they can win the World Cup for them. But after firing blanks in all three matches so far, is Alessandro Del Piero a choker?

The Juventus ace scored more than 30 goals last season between the Serie A and the European Champions League, where he was the top scorer in the competition.

Italy coach Cesare Maldini hailed him six months ago as the star of the World Cup finals and his club coach this week said there was no doubting his protégé's star status.

But the fact remains is that the 23-year-old has made three appearances at France '98 since recovering from a thigh injury, once as a substitute and twice from the start, and he has yet to break his duck.

Against Norway, he managed to create three scoring chances, all of them a one-on-one with the goalkeeper, and he either saw his best efforts saved or fly wide of the target.

What's worrying the Italy camp is that he fared no better the last time the pressure was on, when he turned out for Juventus against Real Madrid in the European Cup final on May 20.

Juventus were playing their second consecutive final, but Del Piero's form dried up just when his team needed it most. He did score in the 1997 final against Borussia Dortmund, but the circumstances were completely different.

In Munich, he came on as a late substitute, free of all the pressure and expectation which appears to have been his undoing in the last two months.

Del Piero is convinced he can come good, even though as

he readily admits: "It's not been Del Piero's World Cup ... Let's hope it's Italy's."

Part of the problem could be that the 23-year-old often takes a more difficult route, when an easier one is available.

But defending his game, he said "the way I play is all about taking risks, and I'm happy to take them — sometimes they go well and I saw a fantastic goal, sometimes they don't and I make a complete fool of myself."

"But that's the way I am."

Sadly for Italy, Del Piero has been closer to the latter rather than the former whenever he has pulled on a national shirt.

Aside from an inspired performance against Brazil in last year's Tournoi de France, during which he scored two goals in a thrilling 3-3 draw, the Jewel of Juventus has never really sparkled for Italy.

On Friday, comes the moment of truth against Italy's biggest obstacle so far on their road back to a World Cup final, the hosts France and a hostile stadium that is bound to whistle every perceived offence by the Italians.

"We are not going to be influenced by the crowd," said Del Piero. "France have a great team, everyone knows that. But we'll be concentrating on the players and not the people who are behind them."

And in a tournament which has already seen the drama of sudden death victory, Del Piero claimed: "I'm dreaming of scoring a golden goal."

On Friday, he might get the chance. But before that, he will have had every opportunity on the world stage to silence his critics, and to finally prove that he's no choker.



LITHE LAUDRUPS: Brian Laudrup (L) juggles with the ball while brother Michael strolls during Denmark's July 1 practice session at Toulon. —AFP photo

Treats of the tournament

PARIS, July 1 (AFP): Eight nations made it to the World Cup second round and each added their own gift to World Cup culture before being excluded at the first knockout hurdle.

Eight nations — Brazil, Denmark, Holland, Argentina, France, Italy, Germany and Croatia — will be fighting for semifinal places on Friday and Saturday.

Meanwhile, Chile, Nigeria, Yugoslavia, England, Norway, Paraguay, Mexico and Romania, lasted the highs of qualification but the lows of packing their bags and going home.

Chile gifted the World Cup the Za-Sa twins of Ivan Zamorano and Marcelo Salas of Chile, one of the most high-profile attacking partnerships at the World Cup.

Nigeria gave us an extraordinary first half hour against Bulgaria when they ran rings round their opponents. Midfielder Jay-Jay Okocha strikers Viktor Ikpeba and Daniel Amokachi formed a talented attacking trio which teased and tantalised Bulgaria's aging back line with ease.

At least Nigeria, rumoured to have earned 30,000 dollars a man in win bonuses from the first round, go home richer though the national federation is now said to be strapped for cash.

Yugoslavia gave us the ever-green talent of 33-year-old Dragan Stokjovic who scored the second goal against Germany, who late came back from two down to equalise at 2-2. Stokjovic had also played against Germany in the 1990 finals in the second round game in Milan.

England brought the world the excitement of 18-year-old

Michael Owen, the second youngest player of all 32 World Cup rosters.

Owen scored when brought on against Romania for the last 17 minutes, and his goal against Argentina as one of the goals of the tournament so far.

David Beckham scored the only really spectacular goal from a free-kick as his gift to the World Cup.

Norway's gift was their "success is hard work" philosophy of coach Egil Olsen.

Olsen has dossiers on almost every player at the World Cup and studies videos for hours to discover weaknesses of opposing teams. But he knows that Norway cannot play like Brazil.

But Norway can now boast of beating four-time champions Brazil twice in less than a year.

Jose-Luis Chilavert's courageous defiance at the cruel twist of destiny meaning he was the first World Cup "keeper to let through a Golden Goal, is an overriding image Paraguay.

With teammates too distressed even to stand up, Chilavert went round consoling them and urged them to remember they were still heroes.

Mexico gave the world "El Matador" or striker Luis Hernandez who put them 1-0 up before Juergen Klinsmann and Oliver Bierhoff booked a quarterfinal berth and Mexico's tickets home with two late goals.

And the Romanian Bleach Boys will still be in the minds of those who saw them. The whole squad could be said to have fought and "died" for their country after each player had their hair coloured yellow for their last group game against Tunisia.

Ronaldo vs Schmeichel: Battle of the best

NANTES, France, July 2 (AFP/Internet): The world's best striker will face the world's best goalkeeper when Brazil and Denmark clash in Friday's quarter-final in Nantes.

In what promises to be one of the most fascinating private battles of France 98, Brazil's Ronaldo will pitch his mesmerising all-round talent against the imposing figure of Peter Schmeichel.

Both are widely considered to be the best in the world in their positions and the outcome of the match could well depend on who wins their head-to-head.

Anyone who doubts whether goalkeepers can win matches should recall Schmeichel's performance against Germany in the 1992 European Championships when he produced a string of outstanding saves to keep out the then world champions.

It was that performance which established Schmeichel's reputation as one of the most commanding goalkeepers in international football.

Schmeichel made his professional debut for Danish club Hvidovre in 1984, before joining the country's leading club Brøndby in 1987, going on to help them to four titles.

He joined Manchester United for a mere 555,000 (850,000 dollars) in 1991 after catching the eye of manager Alex Ferguson and has been the bedrock of the Old Trafford club's domination of English football ever since.

He cuts a physically daunting figure for opposition forwards, measuring 1.91m and 96 kilos, and he is said to terrify

his own defenders with his booming verbal broadsides.

"Schmeichel is a world-class player who always gives Denmark a chance in matches," says former Denmark striker Preben Elkjaer. "Seeing the imposing figure of Schmeichel in front of you is the last thing a striker wants."

But the giant Dane, who broke Morten Olsen's record 102 caps for Denmark in the group match against South Africa, faces one of the greatest challenges of his glittering career: Ronaldo.

The 1998 world player-of-the-year had scored just one goal in three games at France 98 before his brace in Brazil's 4-1 second round win over Chile.

He was denied a hat-trick when he twice hit the woodwork, but he did enough to suggest that he is starting to hit peak form at just the right time.

"Those goals tasted sweet but they just whetted my appetite for more," said the world's most expensive player.

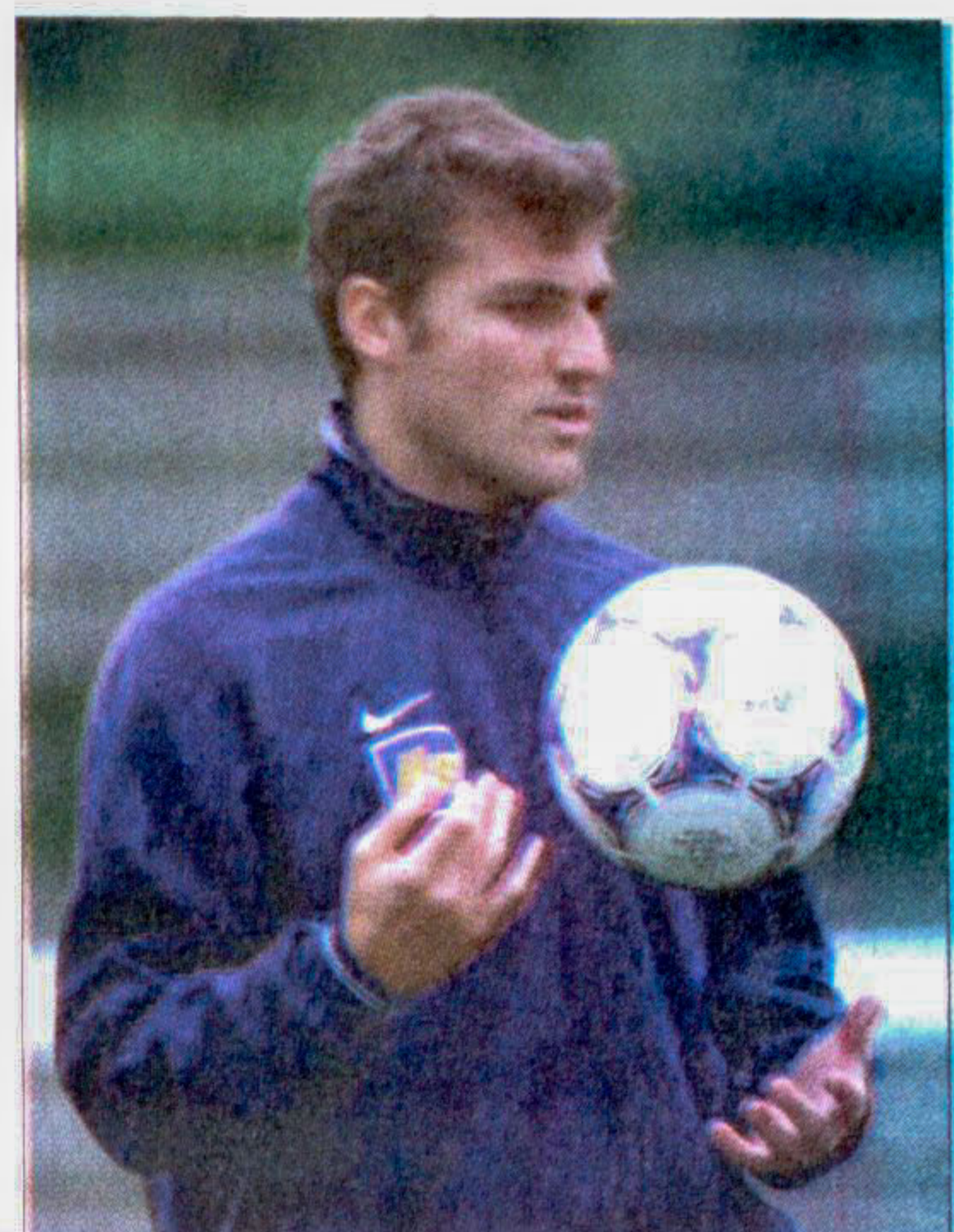
Brazil legend Pele had said after the group games that Ronaldo was not getting enough support, but that changed against Chile, suggesting Schmeichel could be in for a busy night against the world champions.

"When the team helps me I can help them," warned Ronaldo ominously.

Full-back Roberto Carlos believes Ronaldo's double strike may lead to a glut of goals from the Inter Milan ace.

"Those goals will have broken the spell that was hanging over him," the Real Madrid

See page 14



THINKING OF THE GOLDEN BOOT? Christian Vieri, joint top scorer in the World Cup, apparently has his mind fixed on something different during training at Senlis. —AFP photo

Aggressor vs Artist: Vieri vs Zidane

SAINT-DENIS, France, July 2 (AP): In a battle of neighbouring soccer giants, the World Cup quarterfinals open Friday with Italy vs France and a showdown between top scorer Christian Vieri and star playmaker Zinedine Zidane.

The teams are expected to balance out in tactics and stamina, leaving it up to individual skills like those possessed by Italy's Vieri and France's Zidane to break open rock-solid defences.

The winners earn a place in next week's semifinals here at Stade de France against the Germany-Croatia winners. The losers go home.

France are worried that an ankle injury to top striker, Thierry Henry, could blunt the attack. Henry has three goals so far. A decision on his availability will be made just before game time at 4:30 pm (1430 GMT).

Italy went through to the final four years ago in the United States only to lose to Brazil. France last made the quarterfinals in 1986.

In their Mexican run that lasted into the semifinals, France, led by Michel Platini, coolly disposed of Italy 2-0 in the second round. That was their last World Cup meeting.

Zidane is now France's new Platini. Fresh from a two-game suspension, he's ready to challenge the Italians with his darting runs and defence-splitting passes.

"We must control Zidane," said Italian coach Cesare Maldini. Most likely Dino Baggio or Gianluca Pessotto will try to man-mark Zidane as close as his shadow in the afternoon sun.

Vieri, who has scored five goals so far, will not get indi-

vidual attention. He will have the whole French defence to contend with.

In four matches French defenders, led by Marcel Desailly and Laurent Blanc, have conceded one goal — a penalty.

"We've played against Ronaldo. We've played against many of the greatest. They don't get special treatment," said Blanc.

Vieri remains confident. "I am convinced we can get through," he said, adding "I want to take advantage of this magic moment."

But he also hinted that Italians may not be their usual formidable self. "It would be no shame losing against France."

Sharing leadership of the offence with Vieri will be Alessandro Del Piero, the playmaker who is desperately trying to make his mark on the World Cup.

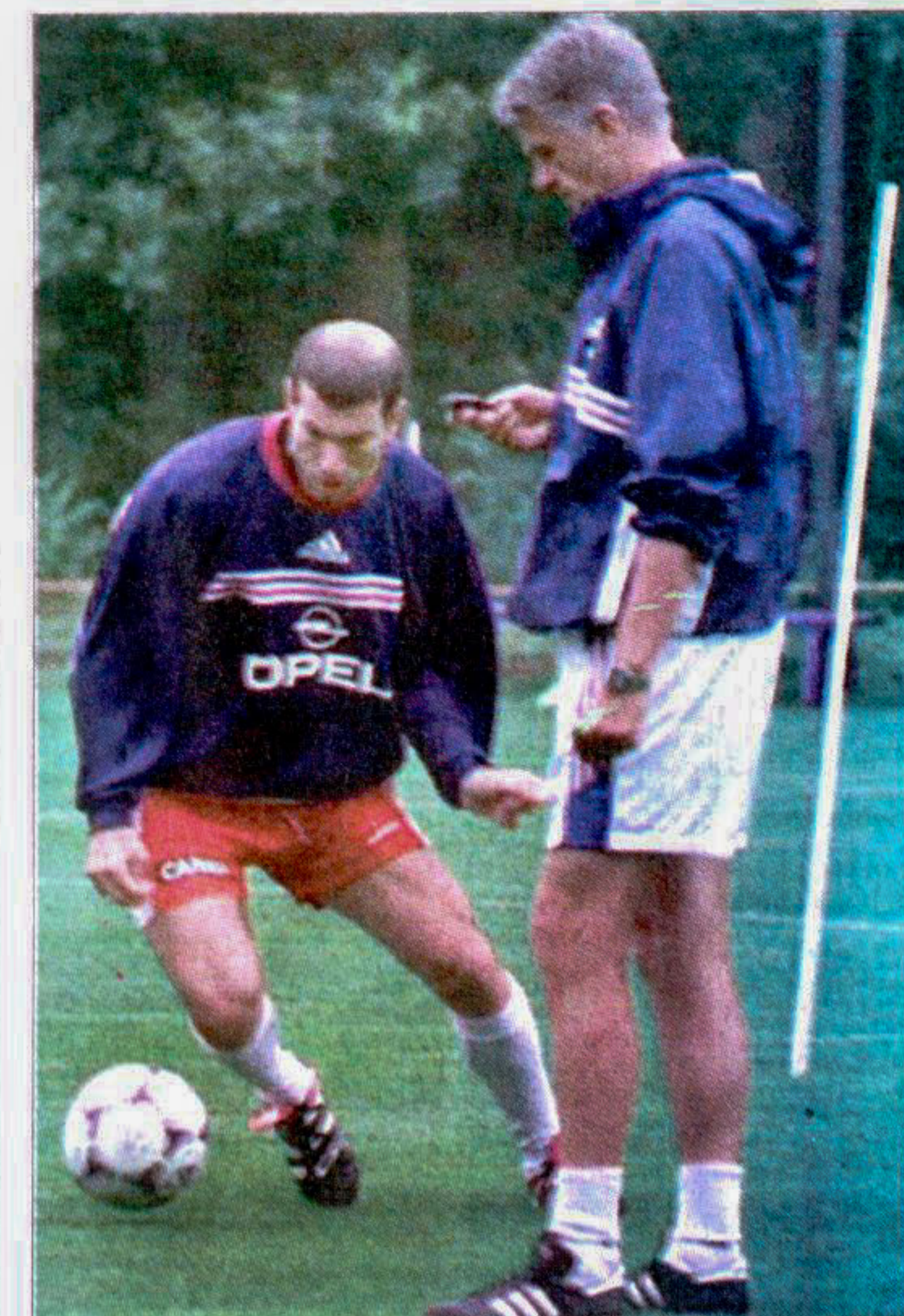
Over the past decade, France have seen a lot of Gallic talent flocking to the riches and fortunes of the Serie A. Over half of the French players Friday will have played or are still playing in Italy.

Zidane and captain Didier Deschamps play for Juventus in Turin. Desailly is just at end of a long stint with AC Milan and Youri Djorkaeff will clash often with his Inter Milan teammate Giuseppe Bergomi.

"There is a very good mix now and everybody will know one another on the pitch," said French coach Aime Jacquet.

France long had an inferiority complex about Italy but valuable lessons have been learned.

It will be the 31st match between the two teams, with Italy leading with 17 wins, seven draws and six losses.



CLASS PUT TO TEST: French coach Aime Jacquet (R) takes the timing while ace playmaker Zinedine Zidane sprints with the ball during practice at Clairefontaine on July 1. —AFP photo

BOYS FROM BRAZIL
TAKE ON
DIE-HARD DANES!

JOHN PLAYER
GOLD LEAF
LIGHTS

