



WORLD CUP '98 SPECIAL



A MOMENT TO BEHOLD: Croatian players acknowledging the fans applause after the historic triumph over Germany at Lyon on July 4. — AFP photo

Croatia's finest hour

LYON, France, July 5 (AP/Reuters): Croatia waited two years to get revenge against Germany. When it came, it was sweet and stunning and made World Cup history.

A country that didn't exist seven years ago, Croatia vaulted into the elite club of semifinalists with a 3-0 triumph over the once-mighty Germans, the first team to get that far in their World Cup debut.

Set ablaze by patriotism, German put-downs and a lost quarterfinal in the 1996 European Championship, the Croats claimed a triumph for soccer's

small powers.

Not that Croatia came completely out of nowhere. The squad's core, including playmaker Zvonimir Boban of AC Milan, goes back to the Yugoslav team that won the 1987 World Youth Championship.

When Yugoslavia broke up and Croatia gained independence in a 1991 war, most of its talent left for Western Europe. The team surged onto the international stage in the 1996 European Championship, where they were ousted in a rough quarterfinal with Germany, the eventual champions.

Croatia turned the tables on Saturday's World Cup quarterfinal. Aided by the 40th minute expulsion of German defender Christian Woerns after a tangle with their star striker Davor Suker, the Croats got a goal in first-half injury time from Robert Jarni.

The Germans, seeking their fourth world title, never recovered and with an extra man, the Croats were free to run an often sparkling counterattack game after the break.

Croatia's substitutes began celebrating after Goran Vlaovic knocked in goal No. 2 in the

80th minute and Suker added to the German's misery with a classy close-range goal five minutes from the end, the Real Madrid striker's fourth of the tournament.

"For 45 years in Yugoslavia, we never played with the same fire as we are for Croatia," declared defender Igor Stimac, whose sending off in the 1996 game contributed to the Croat loss.

Among those celebrating along with some 7,000 Croatian fans in Gerland Stadium was President Franjo Tudjman.

"We were very motivated, also because our president was here," said Stimac. "I've been dreaming for two years about meeting Germany again."

The Adriatic country of 4 million people was savoring the biggest sports success in their young history.

"The country is exploding with joy tonight," Suker said. "I'm really proud to be a Croat."

Suker said that pre-match comments by German coach Bert Vogts had upset the Croats and spurred them on to victory.

"Bert Vogts spoke at a press conference yesterday about the small size of our country and made a reference to David and Goliath."

"That was unfair but I would like to thank him for those comments because they inspired us and motivated us," said the Real Madrid frontman.

"Remember it is not always the big guys who win," he added.

The German media had also contributed to winding up the Croats, said defender Igor Stimac.

"Their media said many bad things about our mentality and our team," said Stimac.

"For two years I have been dreaming about the Germans," he added referring to Croatia's defeat to Germany in the European championship in 1996.

"It hurt much more when I heard what the German media said about us. I am glad we have shown them now."

Croatian defender Slaven Bilic said his side's win could be put down to German methods.

"We were the Germans tonight," said Bilic. "They usually start poorly and then end well in the last 20 minutes, but tonight they started well and then we were the ones who came good."

Bilic, who played in Germany's Bundesliga for Karlsruhe for three seasons said German football remained an example for him.

"They have never suffered a defeat like this in modern football but for me they are still the idols and the biggest force in football," said Bilic who now plays for Everton in England's premier league.

"We are still not fully aware of what we have done," said Bilic. "This is a dream come

Blazevic knew it beforehand

LYON, July 5 (Reuters): Croatia coach Miroslav Blazevic had said before Saturday's World Cup quarterfinals against Germany that he knew how to beat the mighty European champions.

He revealed the secret of success after Croatia, a side that did not exist nine years ago, stormed into the semifinals of their first World Cup, inflicting on three-time winners Germany their worst defeat in 40 years.

It was just a matter of starting cautiously and then trying to war the ageing German side out, Blazevic said after the 3-0 victory, which was sweet revenge for the 2-1 defeat by the Germans at the 1996 European Championship.

"We did not make the same mistake early in the match. We started like fools when we last played them at the European Championship. This time we started gently," the wily 64-year-old coach said.

"We are younger, quicker, more agile."

The German side had an average age of over 30, Blazevic's line-up was three years younger.

But the soft-spoken Blazevic, a former coach of French side Nantes and a string of Swiss clubs, admitted that the first-half sending off of defender Christian Woerns all but killed off Germany's hopes of clinching victory.

"In a national championship, a team can still win if it loses one of its players, but in the World Cup, it is very difficult if not impossible," said Blazevic, who has been coaching Croatia since early 1994.

"There are no players here who cheat, they all go out for 200 per cent... even Germany could not compensate for that loss," said Blazevic, who earlier said his team could advance to the finals — and even win the Cup.

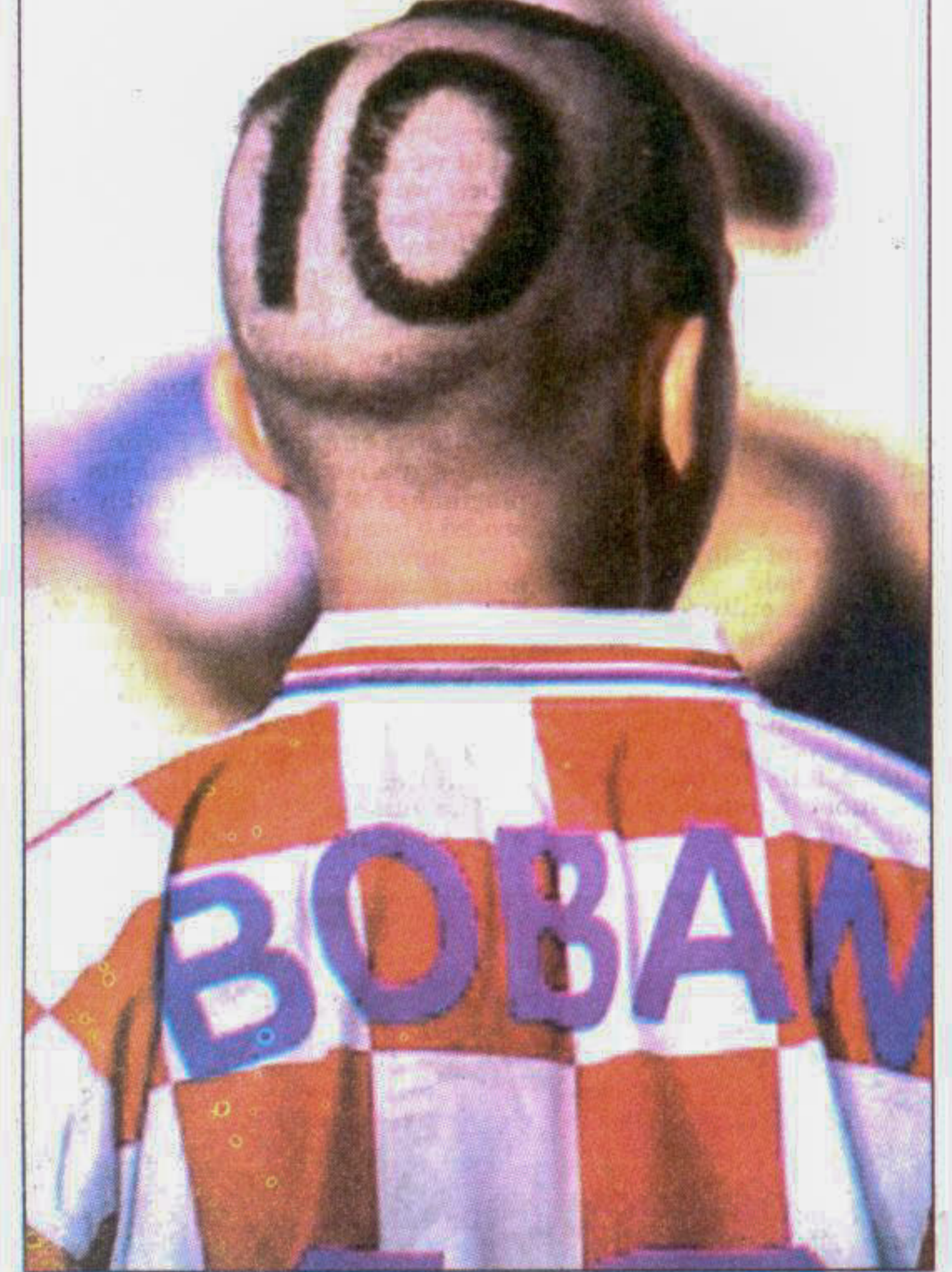
"I am absolutely delighted with this historic result: never has Croatia come so far and done so much."

"Germany showed their typical character, determination and spirit. It's true that after the sending-off it made it difficult for them but that doesn't take anything away from our result."

"We had a hard and tough game but now we have to think very seriously about France. We're proud to have the opportunity to play against France in such a beautiful stadium. I hope

we can put on such a performance there as we did here tonight."

"It should be a magnificent match," said Blazevic, adding he mainly feared the French penetrating strength in midfield and the host nation's playmaker Zinedine Zidane, whom he described as "a genius."



BOBAN CUT! An admirer of Croatian captain Zvonimir Boban at the Gerland Stadium in Lyon on July 4. — AFP photo

Cheating epidemic concerns FIFA

PARIS, July 5 (AFP/Internet): FIFA on Sunday urged World Cup referees to stamp out an epidemic of cheating that World football's governing body says is spreading like wildfire.

FIFA communications director Keith Cooper expressed alarm at the number of players feigning fouls against them in an attempt to fool referees into awarding penalties.

"It is one of those things that escalate," said Cooper. "Once it starts it spreads very quickly, like a wildfire."

He urged tournament referees to take a leaf out of Mexican referee Arturo Brizio Carter's notebook and crack down on the World Cup divers.

"Referees should stamp it out at the beginning," said Cooper. Brizio Carter, who has sent off seven players in six World Cup games, more than any other referee in history, handed out a yellow card to Argentina playmaker Ariel Ortega in Saturday's quarter-final against Holland.

Clearly determined to go for the penalty as he tried to round Jaap Stam in the penalty area, Ortega launched himself into a spectacular dive.

Brizio Carter pulled out the yellow card, then replaced it with the red when Ortega head-butted Dutch goalkeeper Edwin Van Der Sar.

England great Sir Bobby Charlton has expressed alarm at the problem.

"I have never seen so many people dive," said Charlton. "It's a work of art. The moment they get touched by a defender down they go. They practise it."

Said Cooper: "I heard one comment from a coach that surprised me. He told his players if they got a chance, to do it. That is to be totally condemned."

In the win-at-all costs World Cup, any number of coaches could be implicated but England's Glenn Hoddle was seen signalling to striker Michael Owen to take a dive in the penalty area in England's group game against Colombia in Lens nine days ago.

Owen did win a crucial and controversial penalty for England in their next match, a second round tie against Argentina which the South Americans won in a penalty shootout.

With the game only 10 minutes old, Owen burst into the penalty area and took a head-long dive when defender Roberto Ayala moved in to challenge him. TV replays showed the defender made no contact.

"It is cheating," said Cooper. "It is a yellow card offence. The more it gets caught, the better it is going to be."

"The trouble is a lot of players are damned good at it and it is not very easy to distinguish between a genuine foul and a dive."

Diego salutes Diego

MARSEILLE, France, July 5 (AFP/Internet): Diego Maradona, football's most famous cheat, on Saturday saluted his successor as Argentina captain and supreme striker in his own right, Diego Simeone.

Fallen soccer idol Maradona, famous for the "Hand of God" goal against England in 1986, was commenting on the Argentina quarter-final against Holland, which the Dutch won 2-1.

In the 77th minute Dutch defender Arthur Numan was sent off after tackling Simeone.

For Maradona, there was no doubt about the decision. Cunning Simeone had baited the trap and sent hapless Numan packing.

"Oh what a sly one," commented Maradona, live on Argentina TV. "He let him come to him as if he was going to give him a box of chocolates. Then wham!"

"That's the second player he has got sent off."

Simeone had Manchester United midfielder David Beckham sent off in the second round against England.

Simeone won a dubious freekick after he clattered into Beckham, then collapsed when Beckham responded with a flick of the boot to the calf.

Even Simeone's fellow Inter Milan clubmates have criticised his Oscar performance.

"I know Simeone well, and he was playing acting," Italy's number one goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca said of the Beckham incident.

Maradona, full of admiration for his protégé, was less impressed by another accomplished Argentina dramatist, Ariel Ortega.

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Deutsch downfall

LYON, France, July 5 (AP): Captain Juergen Klinsmann walked past the reporters without a word, a look of utter dejection on his pale, tired face.

Some others talked, of bitter disappointment, of injustice.

Incredulous, a shocked German team prepared to pack their bags, a once mighty team knocked out of the World Cup by a plucky Croatian side playing their first finals.

The 3-0 defeat Saturday meant that for the second time in a row, Germany, a three-time champion, failed to get past the World Cup quarterfinals, something that had never happened before.

"We were completely crushed in the dressing room. It's a pity to go out this way. We are all very disappointed," said the 37-year-old German captain, who has played a World Cup record of 25 matches in five World Cup tournaments.

The Germans blamed Norwegian referee Rune Pedersen for their defeat. Pedersen sent off Germany's best defender Christian Woerns in the 40th minute for a foul on Croatian striker Davor Suker. Until then, Germany, the European champion, had controlled the match.

"The red card was a joke," Woerns said. "I am aware of no guilt."

"It was the decisive moment of the game. The team still fought well. In your career, you have the chance to play perhaps only one World Cup, therefore it's especially disappointing," said Woerns, who had been Germany's best defender in the tournament.

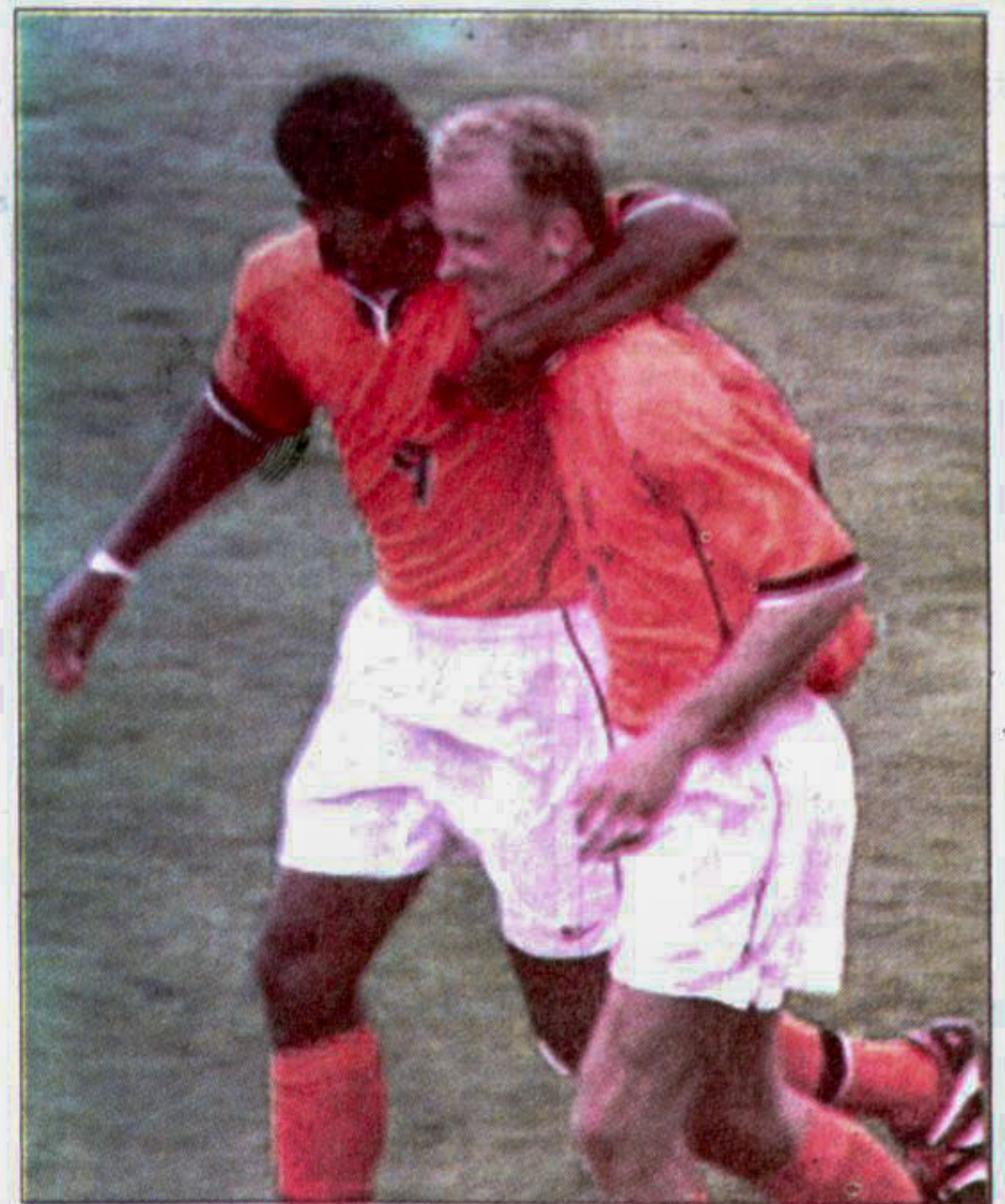
Matthaeus said the team had watched two replays of Woerns' foul in the dressing room. "It wasn't justified."

"Sometimes FIFA puts referees on the field who have only officiated second-rate matches," Matthaeus said.

"I didn't think the sending off was fair," said German defender Juergen Kohler.

"I think you could say that the referee lost us the game. But

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WE DID IT: Patrick Kluyvert (L) congratulating Dennis Bergkamp after his match-winner at Marseille on July 4. — AFP photo

BERGKAMP & THE NEW ORANGE ORDER

MARSEILLE, July 5 (AFP/Internet): The huge windmill which suddenly materialised, perched on a hill just outside Marseille airport on the way to the Stade Velodrome, turned out not to be so out of context after all.

There could scarcely have been any better portent of what was to come as Holland finally exorcised the ghost of their 1978 defeat by Argentina in the final with Saturday's quarter-final victory here over the two-times world champions.

Dutch genius on a football field has not been in short supply ever since a young Johan Cruyff pulled on the Orange shirt and steered Rinus Michels' disciples of Total Football to the 1974 final.

Somehow they lost that one, to bitter rivals Germany, and then found Mario Kempes too hot to handle four years later.

But the inferiority complex disappeared with victory in the 1988 European Championship and Dennis Bergkamp and company now aim to show the world that they can do what even Cruyff's generation couldn't manage — lift the World Cup.

Bergkamp's brilliant strike set a spectacular seal on a 2-1 victory and booked a semi-final with Brazil, who beat Holland in an enthralling quarter-final four years ago in the United States.

Argentina coach Daniel Passarella, ironically skipper of the side which 20 years ago beat Krol, Neeskens, Rensink and company — the names still roll off the tongue — put the defeat down to tiredness after extra-time against England sapped their strength in the last round.

But nobody should doubt that Holland deserved the win.

Their one touch football would delight the likes of Cruyff — yes even the perfectionist Cruyff.

And Bergkamp's two most telling contributions were as good as anything Brazil have produced in this tournament or even in any other.

The finish for his goal was quite breathtaking. But the skill in nodding a perfect through pass for Patrick Kluyvert's opener was simply sublime.

Given that Saturday's match was inevitably bound up with echoes of 1978, the last time the teams played, it was only natural that the Dutch fans regarded the win as belated revenge — 2-1 on the day, 2-1 in World Cup history between the two after a 4-0 Dutch win in 1974.

Bergkamp summed things up when he said afterwards that the Dutch were now on course for the kind of greatness which has to be measured in trophies.

"We knew we were better than them. The team is very confident and we know we can beat Brazil."

"Physically and mentally we're stronger this year, and we've got so much quality," he added. "We didn't play very good against them in 1994."

"In the opening 20 minutes and in the second half I thought we were very good. We pressed forward, and if we can produce more of the same we have a very good chance," he said.

Bergkamp had revealingly put his finger on the usual Dutch problem of disunity in the camp after the superb 5-0 demolition of South Korea, telling reporters that had always let them team down.

"This time the team spirit is very good — that's what cost us two years ago at Euro '96. That's normally our main opponent", he acknowledged.

Defender Jaap Stam, who joins Manchester United as the world's most expensive defender

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NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO TAKE OVER: Germany's retiring captain Juergen Klinsmann (R) consoles striking partner Oliver Bierhoff after their quarterfinal defeat at Lyon. — AFP photo

CROATIA ON A RAMPAGE!

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS

সর্বশ্রেষ্ঠ সত্যকীৰ্ত্তন। প্ৰধান মন্ত্ৰীৰ সন্মত কৰিছে