

Blatter for shorter WC

BERNE, Switzerland, July 7 (AP/AF): The length of soccer's World Cup needs to be cut, new FIFA president Sepp Blatter said in an interview published Tuesday.

Chirac & Jospin

When France ousted Paraguay with a 114th minute golden goal, a stressed-out Jospin was first on the television screens with a comment. Chirac, on a visit to Mozambique, sent a message saying: "I am the happiest of men."

At last week's quarter-finals, when France knocked out Italy on penalties after a goalless match, the two leaders, seen as rivals for the 2002 presidential race, sat nervously either side of Platini.

Since then, Jospin has stolen a beat on Chirac with a weekend interview in which he compared France's upswing in football fortunes with the country's improving economic climate since he took office a year ago.

Saying the nation was better now than 12 months ago, he added: "It seems to me that there is a striking coincidence here with the French team's sporting and national ability to overcome their limits and move ahead."

Leaping onto the football bandwagon, one of his ministers likened him to national hero, midfielder Zinedine Zidane, and a journalist compared him to coach Aime Jacquet.

"I am a team leader," Jospin responded. "A coach and a player, a mix of Jacquet and Zidane."

So with Jospin currently in the lead, perhaps Chirac will don the national colours.

Raring to go

of a suddenly soccer-mad capital draped in blue did much more than any newspaper article could to bolster morale.

For Jacquet, the French are feasting in spite of the press. He has long claimed there was a media campaign against him, instituted by the widely read L'Equipe newspaper, and every victory is a bit more of sweet revenge.

"The public was surprised because it was disinformation," Jacquet said Tuesday. "They wanted to make the public believe there was no French team, there was no tactical plan, that there even wasn't a coach."

The players have complained too. "It didn't go down well," said captain Didier Deschamps, adding "a rift was created" between the team and the public that is only now starting to heal.

An advertisement in L'Equipe suggested the changing mood.

Saturating a public opinion survey, the Adidas ad said: "35 per cent of the French don't care one bit about the World Cup, 30 per cent... 24 per cent... 12 per cent..."

Jean-Philippe, the painter who helped renovate the French training quarters here two years ago, remembers Jacquet as a much more pleasant man than some media made him out to be. Now he feels the public is turning to the coach's side.

Balkan peace

"We will increase area security within the SFOR mandate," said Major Richard Saint Louis of the multinational stabilisation force, which has more than 30,000 troops from 38 countries enforcing the peace in Bosnia.

Violence following Croatia's victory also flared in other parts of Bosnia. In the divided city of Mostar, a 25-year-old Muslim woman was killed and a man was seriously wounded on the Muslim side when they were hit by bullets fired in celebration from the Croat side, Bosnian radio reported.

While an investigation is underway, the top international official in Mostar Uir Martin Garrod, urged local authorities in the city — still divided between Muslims and Croats more than 2-1/2 years after the Bosnian war ended — to do their utmost to avoid a repeat of the weekend violence.

Garrod held all those who took part in the shooting responsible for what happened.

Spain's contingent to SFOR is responsible for day to day patrols in the Mostar area, which lies within the south-eastern part of Bosnia that is under French SFOR command.



(L-R) Frank Leboeuf, Christophe Dugarry and Robert Pires of France going through a zigzag routine during practice at Clairefontaine on July 4. —AFP photo

Thirty-eight masters

PARIS, July 7: Reflecting their disastrous performances at the World Cup, no African or Asian players made it to the 38-strong "second selection" of the All-Star Team of World Cup '98, announced Tuesday by Mastercard, one of the sponsors, reports AP.

The three Africans included among the 61 original "finalists" announced during the quarterfinal stage, Nigeria's Sunday Oluiseh and Jay-Jay Okecha and Morocco's Moustafa El Hadji, were dropped when it was trimmed to 38 before the semifinals.

So was Japan's Hidetoshi Nakata, Japan and Morocco were eliminated in the first round along with South Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Cameroon, Morocco and Tunisia and Nigeria was ousted in round-of-16, beaten 4-1 by Denmark.

By the time the quarterfinals arrived, the World Cup was down to two South American teams and six from Europe. The only player among the 37 that is not from Europe or South America was Mexican forward Luis Hernandez.

As expected, semifinalists Brazil, Netherlands, France and Croatia has the most players in the squad.

The six Brazilians, who faced the Dutch Tuesday in Marseille, were defenders Cafu, Junior Balano and Roberto Carlos, midfielders Dunga and Rivaldo and striker Ronaldo.

The six Dutch players were goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar, Frank de Boer and his twin brother Ronald, Phillip Cocu, Dennis Bergkamp and Marc Overmars.

Five French players, goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, defenders Marcel Desailly and Lilian Thuram, and forwards Thierry Henry and Zinedine Zidane, made it to the 37 and the four Croats were defenders Dario Simic and Robert Jarni, midfielder Aljosa Asanovic and striker Davor Suker.

FIFA's technical study group — an 11 member panel headed by Jurg Nepper, head of the world body's technical department — will pare the list to 16 following the semifinals and announce the team July 10, two days before the final.

Mastercard will donate 50,000 dollars to FIFA's official

charity, SOS Children's Villages, on behalf of the players selected.

Goalkeepers: Jose-Luis Chilavert (PAR), Gianluca Pagliuca (ITA), Edwin van der Sar (NED), Fabien Barthez (FRA).

Sweepers/Central Defenders: Roberto Ayala (ARG), Carlos Gamarra (PAR), Marcel Desailly (FRA), Dario Simic (CRO), Frank de Boer (NED), Junior Balano (BRA).

Wing-backs: Roberto Carlos (BRA), Cafu (BRA), Lilian Thuram (FRA), Robert Jarni (CRO).

Midfielders: Dunga (BRA), Rivaldo (BRA), Michael Laudrup (DEN), Thierry Henry (FRA), Zinedine Zidane (FRA), Ariel Ortega (ARG), Ronald de Boer (NED), Marc Overmars (NED), Paul Ince (ENG), Phillip Cocu (NED), Aljosa Asanovic (CRO), Fernando Hierro (SPA).

Strikers: Luis Hernandez (MEX), Adrian Ilie (ROM), Gabriel Batistuta (ARG), Christian Vieri (ITA), Oliver Bierhoff (GER), Marcelo Salas (CHI), Michael Owen (ENG), Tore Andre Flo (NOR), Ronaldo (BRA), Brian Laudrup (DEN), Davor Suker (CRO), Dennis Bergkamp (NED).

Pele's forecast

PARIS, July 7 (AFP): Brazilian legend Pele predicts a Brazil-France World Cup final for Sunday.

"The last final of this century will be France-Brazil," he told French television Monday. "I'm confident in Brazil because they have the individual players who can make the difference even if Ronaldo has yet to play at his best, even if Holland are a better-organised side," he said of Tuesday's semifinal.

He admitted Croatia had been a surprise but believed France would reach their first final after reaching four semifinals.

"They are making about five goal chances a game and their players are in form. They must be favourites but the favourite's role is hard to live with. They will have a lot of pressure on them," he said.

He added he had been impressed by defenders Marcel Desailly and Lilian Thuram and striker David Trezeguet.

He said he had not been surprised by Germany's elimination. "They didn't have a good team," he said.

Argentines back home

BUENOS AIRES, July 7: More than 500 cheering fans welcomed home their football heroes as Argentina's disappointed national team touched down Monday at this city's international airport, reports AFP.

"We are always with you," the champion is not always the best and "Thanks for everything" were just some of the signs waved by fans to welcome the players.

Argentina was eliminated from the World Cup of soccer by losing 2-1 to the Netherlands on Saturday.

The mystic chain smoker, who seeks comfort in his astrologer, told the players before the match against Germany that they were going to win the World Cup.

They destroyed the three-times world champions 3-0 and Blazevic, who has been at the helm for four years, revealed: "I told the players, if you win this match you will be world champions, now we have got to go on and do that."

Blazevic is a personal friend of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, and the two share a passion for football and nationalist politics. Tudjman appointed him president of Croatia in 1992 when Croatia won independence two years before he took over the reins of the national side.

His career has taken him to success with a string of clubs outside his national borders but it was his misfortune to be in France during a match-fixing scandal involving European champions Marseille.

Blazevic, then coach of Nantes, was implicated, and spent two weeks in prison before being released without charges being brought against him.

Back home in Croatia nobody believed that a man known for his deep passion for sport could be a cheat. Impulsive, yes, he was banned for a time by Europe's football authorities.

"I made up my mind after the match. Now I want to concentrate on my club football with Chelsea and my family," he added.

Brian's elder brother Michael Laudrup had already announced he was retiring from international football.

Brian Laudrup was capped 82 times by Denmark.

Braces for battle

extra time as, unlike the French, they have not featured in any in this tournament. They might be caught on the wrong foot if the semifinal is decided in a tie-breaker as only the French have the nerve-kicking experience against the mighty Italians; the Croats have in Suker a missed penalty against Vitez.

In view of their inner strengths and despite their apparent shortcomings, Blazevic has warned the French. "You will make a big mistake if you underestimate us." On the eve of the match, no French who knows his football from boules would dare to do that.

France go into tomorrow's Croat game with an advantage or two, home bred they may be. France has enjoyed an extra day of rest having encountered Italy on July 3 at St Denis. They also played Saudi Arabia at the same venue. Provided the militaristic strategy, a passion with Blazevic, can be overcome tomorrow on the same grass, the French are destined have the extra ground experience that neither Brazil or Holland will have in the final. Whereas the Croats have never felt the grass at St Denis, the Brazilians and the Dutch have each had a group match at the futuristic stadium.

The French will enjoy distinct home advantage. With the midfield under control their defence should be solid in care of Marcel Desailly and company. But, in a World Cup you need to win matches and a goal-shy offence as exemplified by pushed-up Djorkaiff in the quarterfinal against Italy. The French forwards have to be more aggressive and adventurous as well develop the presently-lacking left-foot understanding. Zidane should be well marked by the Croats because the new Michel Platini has a repertoire of delicate touches and a sharp finish.

Parisians have described the Stade de France as "hellish" and "a desert" because its barren surroundings are in high contrast with the romantic alleyways and neighbourhood restaurants of the former national stadium, their beloved Parc de Princes. A journalist said it "resembles a UFO, a ghastly monument to the third millennium, a steel and glass monstrosity...". Come tomorrow night, all will be forgiven if France emerge the winners: Stade de France will appear heavenly, an oasis of football and no less.

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THE TACTICIANS

PARIS, July 7 (AFP): Profile of the coaches in the Croatia v France World Cup semifinal:

MIROSLAV BLAZEVIC (Croatia)

Perhaps serving time in prison should become obligatory for all apprentice coaches if it confers the assurance and self-belief that Croatian coach Miroslav Blazevic evidently enjoys.

Blazevic has managed to impart to his players a belief in their destiny that would defy logic in any other nation under five million population which has never played in the World Cup before.

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Brian bows out too

COPENHAGEN, July 7 (AFP/Internet): Denmark's Brian Laudrup has decided to take a bow from international football at the age of 29.

"I've got a footballing hangover. It's time for a younger player to take my place," said the Chelsea winger who scored twice in France '98, including the equaliser in last week's 3-2 quarter-final defeat to Brazil.

"I'm saying goodbye after Denmark's greatest match," he added, ranking their brilliant game against Brazil ahead of Denmark's 1992 European Championship triumph over Germany.

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Nakata Italy bound

ROME, July 7 (AFP/Internet): Japan's World Cup midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata has signed up with Italian side Perugia for next season, the Corriere della Sera newspaper reported Tuesday.

Nakata, the Asian footballer of the year, signed four-year contract worth six billion lire (3.5 million dollars) with the newly-promoted Italian side, the paper said.

Perugia officials said they could not confirm that a deal had been clinched saying that they were still talking to the player about the terms of a contract.

The 21-year-old Nakata, with his orange-dyed hair, was the outstanding Japanese player in the World Cup in France. He currently plays with Bellmare Hiratsuka in Japan.

Argentina appoints interim coach

BUENOS AIRES, July 7 (AFP/Internet): Jose Pekerman was appointed interim coach of Argentina on Tuesday following the departure of Daniel Passarella and is favourite to get the post permanently.

Argentina Football Association president Julio Grondonna said a replacement for Passarella would be announced later this year.

"If Argentina plays between now and then Pekerman will act as caretaker coach while awaiting the official decision," he added.

Pekerman is a popular choice because of his success as coach of Argentina's Under-20 side who have won two World Cup championships playing exciting attacking football.

thorties in 1994 for insulting the referee after Auxerre beat Croatia Zagreb in a UEFA Cup match.

The bespectacled 63-year-old is a keen follower of astrology and perhaps he already knows more than he can prudently say about the outcome of this tournament. His own future is clear as crystal.

"I will be coach of this team as long as I live. It is written in the stars," he insists.

Football has been his life. Jacquet played for Lyon and St Etienne in the French league during the 1960s and early 70s and won two caps for France as a midfielder. He was a modest performer rather than an exceptional player.

His playing days over, his interest in football as an intellectual, rather than physical challenge grew.

He coached at Lyon, Bordeaux and Montpellier before being appointed as France coach in January 1994.

Much maligned Aime Jacquet may go down in history as France's most successful coach. He may also be recognised as a true prophet.

Four years ago when he took over after France's failure to qualify for USA '94, he said he would lead France to World Cup glory on home soil four years on and then retire.

That retirement date looms much closer — but so does his potential vindication.

Jacquet has been a whipping boy of the French media despite an impressive record. He was attacked savagely after France failed to reach the final of Euro '96 and his critics have been snapping at his heels ever since.

My sporting life is not over, and it will be on July 13," Jacquet said more than a month before the World Cup finals kicked off.

"It will be perfect as I will have taken a lap of honour with the French team could yet trigger the end of Jacquet's dream.

Perhaps his greatest failing — if it can be blamed on one man — is his inability to solve the riddle of France's front-line strikers. Most of the goals are coming from midfield and even defence and Thierry Henry of Monaco is the only attacker who has scored more than one goal.

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The way Sir Bobby sees it

PARIS, July 7: (AFP) Brazilian superstar Ronaldo has only two matches left to prove if he really is the greatest thing since Pele, warned England legend Sir Bobby Charlton here on Monday.

"Before the World Cup I would have said he was potentially the only one who was going to push himself into superstardom," said Sir Bobby.

He has got the history that he can play, but unless you do it at the World Cup level then you have not proved it.

"He has got the opportunity over the next one or maybe two games, but he has to do it then."

Sir Bobby picks England striker Michael Owen above Ronaldo for his team of France '98, alongside Holland's Dennis Bergkamp.

England's record goalscorer includes three Dutch players and three Brazilians in his World Cup XI — but only Owen from the England line up.

Sir Bobby, in Paris to campaign for England to be given the World Cup in 2006, has already predicted that Owen will break his scoring record, and believes Argentina's Juan Veron has been the outstanding midfield talent of the tournament.

"I have never seen anybody that wants the ball as much as Veron," said Sir Bobby. "It doesn't matter where he is on the field or if he is being marked. He also has very clever distribution."

Sir Bobby believes France will win the World Cup — and they will beat Holland in the final.

He says France's defensive strength will take them past Croatia in the semi-finals and they will be roared on by their home crowd to the ultimate prize.

Sir Bobby also has a sneaky feeling Holland will get past Brazil to take their place in the Stade de France on Sunday.

"There are a lot of ifs and buts," he said. "However, I think France are the only ones who look as though they are definitely going to get there."

"I also have a sneaking feeling that Holland will beat Brazil, especially if Brazil make the same mistakes that they made against Denmark."

"Everybody tells me that Brazil can step up a gear — but they may be at full throttle already."

Sir Bobby added: "France

Complaint against Croatia

PARIS, July 7: An anti-racism group demanded Tuesday that Croatia's World Cup soccer team change its shirt, saying the colours evoke the country's pro-Nazi regime during World War II, reports AP.

Croatia, in their first-ever World Cup and playing host nation France in a semifinal on Wednesday, use shirts with a red-and-white checkerboard design.

The colours "gravely undermine the duty of remembering and endanger (Croatia's) young democracy," said a statement by the European Centre of Research and Action on Racism and Anti-Semitism.

Chantal Boubblil, the spokeswoman, said the centre planned to lodge a complaint with FIFA, soccer's world governing body.

She said Croatia's semifinal on Wednesday in Stade de France was the perfect opportunity to press their case.

"We want the team to change its shirt. We must try," she said. "This is an ideal time to raise world awareness."

Darko Tironi, spokesman for the Croatian team, dismissed the statement as "a silly complaint."

"Croatia has used these colours since the 7th century," he said. "We won't put an end to 1,300 years of history just because we're in the semifinal."

Croatia's Nazi-backed regime killed tens of thousands of Jews, Serbs, gypsies and others it considered enemies.

World Cup XI

Carlos Roa (Arg.) - Schimichel has been outstanding too, but I think Roa has been the best.

Lilian Thurman (Fra.) - excellent World Cup and good going forward too

Marcel Desailly (Fra.) - has not put a foot wrong. I have been watching him, and he has yet to make a mistake.

Junior Balano (Bra.) - I have never seen anyone jump as high as him.

Roberto Carlos (Bra.) - such speed, you would like to play alongside him.

Edgar Davids (Hol.) - skillful and covers a lot of ground.

Juan Veron (Arg.) - outstanding, the best midfielder in the tournament.

Ronald de Boer (Hol.) - has made a lot of chances and scored too.

Rivaldo (Bra.) - superb left foot and has scored important goals.

Michael Owen (Eng.) - incredible talent, Argentina were terrified of him.

Dennis Bergkamp (Hol.) - Blotted his copybook but got away with it and has gone from strength to strength.



A June 29 picture of Spanish referee Jose Maria Garcia Aranda who will officiate in the second semifinal between France and Croatia tonight. —AFP photo