

GO ALL!

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS



WORKING HARD: Croatia's captain Zvonimir Boban, watched by a trainer exercises at Vittel on July 6. —AFP photo

Blazevic: Soccer psychologist

VITTEL, France, July 7 (Reuters/Internet): With his gendarme's cap by his side, a cigarette in his hand and spectacles giving him the air of a university professor, there is no mistaking Croatia's coach Miroslav Blazevic.

Always with an opinion, a smile or a scowl, Blazevic has become one of the true characters of the 1998 World Cup.

Back home in Croatia, "Ciro" is riding high, credited as being the man who has masterminded his country's rise to the last four in the World Cup.

He hasn't always been so popular.

Less than a year ago, the demanding Croatian footballing public was calling for his head after poor performances in the qualifying stage meant Croatia had a playoff with Ukraine for a place in France.

He had first come under fire after he fielded a second string side against Portugal in Euro '96. Croatia lost 3-0 and the result meant it had to face Germany in the quarter-finals, a game it subsequently lost.

His darkest hour came in 1995 when he spent two weeks in a French jail while being investigated for fraud at a time when French soccer was wracked with fraud allegations. He was cleared of involvement.

Prior to taking over the reins of the national team in

1994, he had been coach of among others, Croatia Zagreb, Grasshoppers Zurich and France's Nantes after his playing career had been cut short at the age of 26 by a knee injury.

The newly independent Croats had a number of coaches with international experience and sought to team them up with Blazevic.

A temperamental man with a strong personality, Blazevic has been unable to share the responsibility for his side with anyone.

His first two years in charge saw a series of conflicts, with first technical director Tomislav Ivic and then assistant coach Otto Baric leaving.

Blazevic fought on, helped by his close personal friendship with Croatia president Franjo Tudjman, a politician not afraid to make his views on the game known to the soccer authorities.

Now solely in charge, Blazevic has come into his own, producing a final four side from a team that few fancied to make it beyond the second round.

Many put his success down to his motivational skills.

"His secret is that he has an inner communication with the players," says Croatian Football Federation president Branko Miksa, who stood by Blazevic while he was under fire.

"It is like a psychologist, he understands the players' psyche and he has a great knowledge of football. He is able to combine the two to achieve these results," Miksa added.

The team spirit Blazevic has created is also credited as being a key factor in the Croat success.

"We have a number of players here like (Aljosa) Asanovic for example, who have not had a good season with their clubs," says Miksa. "But he has been able to stimulate those players to be part of a team and work as a team."

Blazevic's psychological approach goes beyond the usual pep talks. He admits to being a deeply superstitious man and regularly consults astrological charts prior to games.

One superstition he has maintained since before the second round clash with Romania is to carry with him the gendarme's cap, or "kepi".

"The local gendarme chief gave it to me," said Blazevic, explaining the permanent presence of the kepi which he takes with him wherever he goes.

"He wanted me to keep it with me to bring luck to the policeman who was beaten by the hooligans in Lens."

A gendarme was beaten almost to death by German hooligans in Lens on June 21, a crime that shocked all of France.

'Sukerman' strikes again

PARIS, July 7 (AFP): Davor Suker wasn't exactly an unknown coming into Croatia's first ever World Cup campaign. But following a poor season with Real Madrid, "Sukerman's" star appeared on the wane.

Real moved in swiftly after Suker, then with Sevilla, blasted three goals at Euro '96 when Croatia reached the quarter-finals only to bow to Germany.

But it didn't turn out to be a great career move, despite his first ever championship triumph in 1997. Last season saw him spending much of his time on the bench as Fernando Morientes and Raul stole the limelight.

However Croatian coach Miroslav Blazevic kept faith with the 30-year-old striker and from being Suker-sub with Real. He has blasted four goals at the World Cup to re-emerge in style from Spanish shadows.

Suker was marked out for greatness from an early age when he starred in Yugoslavia's World Youth Cup success in Chile during the 80s, scoring six goals. But it would take a civil war and a change of country before he could make the leap to the senior World Cup stage.

He made Yugoslavia's 1990 squad, despite never having

won a full cap. But he never got off the bench and had to wait till February 1991 before winning his first cap.

Three months later he scored his first goal in a 7-0 European Championship victory over the Faroe Islands after coming on as a substitute.

Yet that was as far as Suker's career for Yugoslavia went. Civil war took over, the Croatians in the squad declined to play, and that meant no 1992 European Championship and no 1994 World Cup.

At club level he had by then left hometown club Osijek for Dinamo Zagreb, where he fitted in immediately, becoming the club's top goalscorer.

France rested and ready

CLAIREFONTAINE, France, July 7 (AFP/Internet): France are well rested and ready to take on Croatia in the World Cup semi-finals, French hero Laurent Blanc said on Monday.

Marseille's Blanc, who scored the golden goal against Paraguay and hit France's final penalty in the shootout against Italy, said they had recuperated well in the last 48 hours.

That earned a move to Sevilla where, after modest totals of six and 13 in his first two seasons, Suker scored 23 times in the 1993-94 season, a tally only bettered by Brazilian Romario, then at Barcelona.

Today, Suker has few identifiable weaknesses.

He has great technique and is not just a goalscorer. His left foot has good touch as well as power and he creates many chances for his teammates. His freekick ability is good too and he is no mean header of the ball.

He insisted during Euro '96: "I am not a Pele or a Maradona, the players I most admired. There is only one each of them."

But there are few players his equal when it comes to finding the back of the net at international level.

Suker missed just one of 10 World Cup qualifiers, scoring five times and overall has netted a hugely impressive 33 goals in 39 appearances for Croatia.

Real appear to think he hasn't had his mind on the job recently — Suker has consistently been linked with a glamorous television presenter.

But his form for Croatia has been pretty consistent too — and semifinal opponents France know it. They would give much for a striker of his pedigree.

Raring to go

CLAIREFONTAINE, France, July 7 (AP): Even in this isolated training camp the message is rustling through the old oak trees. Steadily, surely the whole of France is rallying behind Les Bleus in the final week of the World Cup.

From the lukewarm reaction early on in the tournament to the honking horns, traffic jams, champagne sprays and pandemonium on the Champs Elysees after the quarterfinal win over Italy last Friday, France is catching World Cup fever. Even in small villages people are talking about France's chances with a new fervor.

"They've really changed. The people are a lot more for the team now," said painter Jose Jean-Philippe, who works in the tiny village of Senlis close to the training camp, 40 kilometres (25 miles) outside Paris.

Jean-Philippe devoured a big plate of spaghetti last Friday in honour of the triumph over Italy. He hasn't decided yet what he'll feast on if France beats Croatia in Wednesday's semi-final because he's unsure of Croatia's speciality. "I'll eat something," he said.

In the capital where blasé is chic, fresh winds of soccer excitement are blowing along the boulevards.

"The best thing isn't that the French have got into the semi-finals," said Laurent Samama, a 27-year-old Parisian. "It's that French people are smiling at each other in the streets."

In that Mediterranean soccer hotbed Marseille, Les Bleus are the toast of the town and many are succumbing to the spell.

Roland Fritolli of the "Peron" restaurant is adding a new essential to his 72-year-old establishment.

"I brought it in a television set for the first time. I've never done this before. But after all, it's La France," he said.

And behind the gates of the French training camp, beyond the thick greenery that screens off the team and players, the good vibrations are welcomed.

"The scenes have given me goose bumps," said French captain Didier Deschamps. "We saw their fervor."

"We showed the French we had a great French team," said coach Aimé Jacquet. The scenes

French skipper owes Croat coach

CLAIREFONTAINE, France, July 7 (Reuters/Internet): French captain Didier Deschamps has not forgotten the man who first made him a leader as Croatian coach Miroslav Blazevic.

"It makes me feel a lot younger," Deschamps said on Tuesday, remembering the times when Blazevic, then the Nantes trainer, allowed him to wear the captain's armband for the first time in his professional career.

The pocket-sized midfielder, now the France captain, and the astute coach will meet again when the host nation and Croatia clash on Wednesday at the Stade de France for a place in the World Cup final.

"It was in 1988, Nantes were ambitious and Blazevic was our coach," Deschamps recalled. "Our captain was Loic Amisse but he got injured and Blazevic asked me to take over. I was only 18. I was ever so proud."

During his two years at Nantes, from 1988 to 1990, Blazevic had in his team two teenagers who have matured to become prominent members of the French squad — Deschamps and defender Marcel Desailly.

"What Marcel and I are today has a lot to do with Blazevic," Deschamps said. "We both owe him a great deal."

The two youngsters then left Nantes for Marseille before moving to Italy. Deschamps signing for Juventus and Desailly joining AC Milan.

"Blazevic has not changed," Deschamps said. "He's still the intelligent, charming man I knew in Nantes."

"As a coach, he's very clever. He knows how to put the players in a comfortable situation so that they can give their best. You want to show him how good you are. He taught me a lot, he told me I should believe in myself."

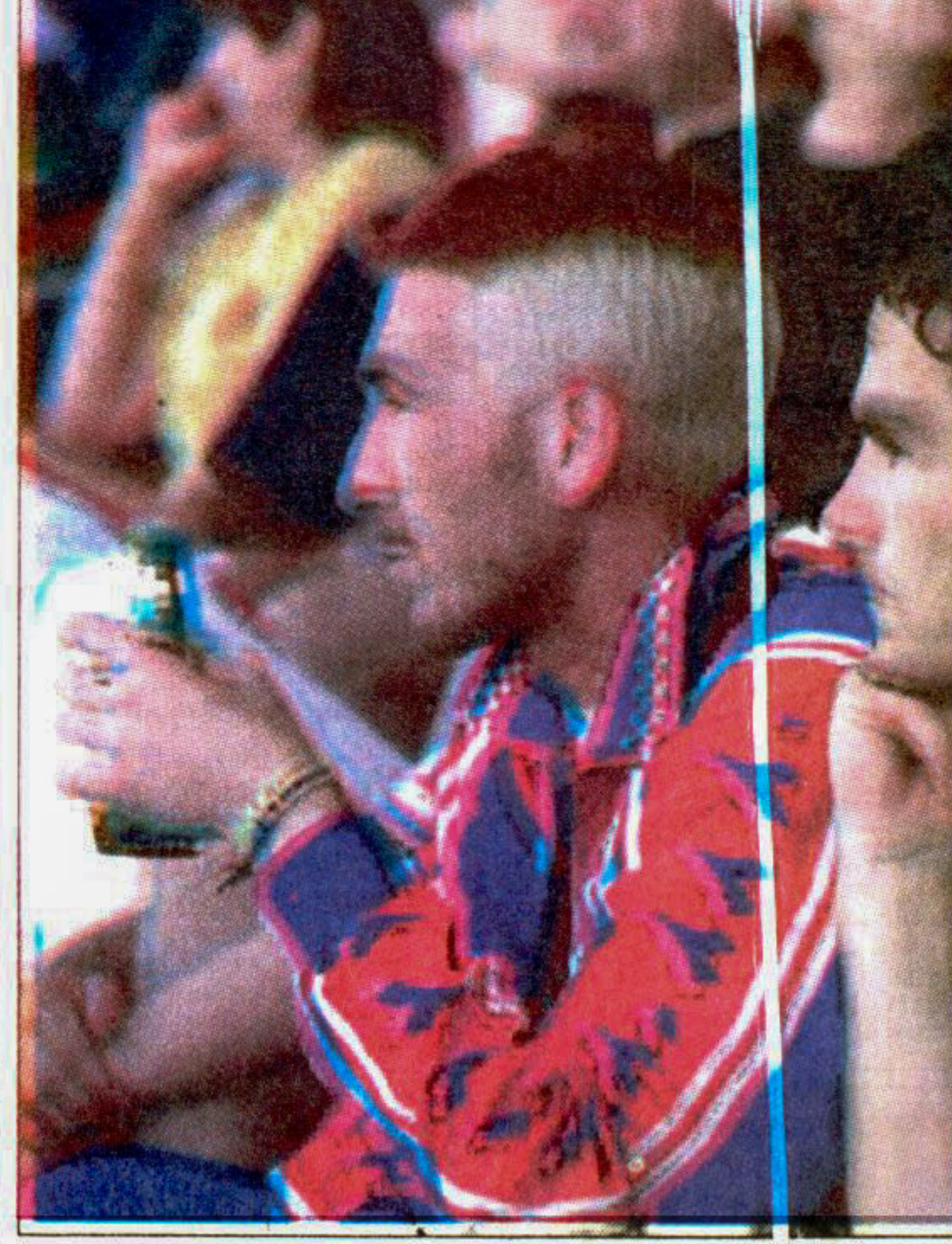
Deschamps and Desailly are not the only ones in the French camp to have memories of Blazevic's stay in France.

Coach Aimé Jacquet, who trained Bordeaux from 1980 to 1989, played against Blazevic's side in the French league.

"We faced each other a few times, but only for a brief period," said Jacquet. "He knows French football very well, he also knows the French mentality and that can only help him in preparing his match against us."

Jacquet said Croatia had improved tremendously under Blazevic's rule.

"I remember watching them at Euro '96," the French coach said.



AVID FOLLOWER: A Croatian fan watches the national team in training at Vittel on July 6. —AFP photo



Christophe Dugarry (R) being assisted by a team physio stretches at Clairefontaine on July 6. —AFP photo

Lucky No. 3 for Petit

CLAIREFONTAINE, France, July 7 (AFP/Internet): France's Emmanuel Petit, who won the English Premiership and FA Cup double with Arsenal this season, has a chance to put three trophies in his sideboard with a World Cup win.

Petit, along with French teammate Patrick Vieira and Ray Parlour, were revelations in midfield as the London club earned their second league and cup double this century.

Petit has carried that form through into the World Cup, where he has also been praised by FIFA for his sportsmanship.

His performance against Italy was superb and, despite his persistent thigh strain, he is set to play alongside Didier Deschamps as a defensive midfielder against Croatia in

Wednesday's semi-final.

The 27-year-old Petit was in limbo at Monaco where he was finding it hard to find form because he was being played out of position.

He started his career at Monaco as a left back, was then put back in central defence, before reverting once more to the left-sided fullback role.

But once he had moved to the London club under fellow Frenchman Arsene Wenger he began to blossom.

"I suffered being used in different positions and it was tough. However now I realise it stood me in good stead. I have now got defensive awareness and positioning which helped me progress tactically."

At Arsenal he is idolised.

"I lost two and a half years

because of all my positional problems. But now I'm in top form," he said.

"Manu," as he is known, has made up for lost time with a vengeance.

The death of his older brother, victim of a stroke on the football field in 1987, has been particularly hard on him.

For some time he was finding it hard to pick up the pieces of his life after the tragedy. "I mourned my brother terribly for two years and I found it difficult to accept his death," Petit said.

Like Deschamps, Petit runs and runs as though he has his tank filled with super-charged fuel. A win on Sunday would mean he could finally have a rest knowing he has won football's greatest prize.

Regarding Thierry Henry

PARIS, July 7 (AFP): The quiet, gangly 13-year-old who trotted unnoticed into Monaco's training ground never dreamed that by the time he reached the end of his teens he would be the hottest property in French football.

But for Thierry Henry a league championship medal at 19 was only the start, with the World Cup finals on home ground just 12 months away.

The 20-year-old resolved to be there, and a superb second season with the Monegasques under the guidance of Jean Tigana meant national coach Aimé Jacquet just couldn't ignore his claim to a squad place.

France, blessed by a wonderfully talented midfield and about the meanest defence in world football, have been searching high and low — with minimal success — for a prolific

striker to fire their World Cup campaign.

But a groundswell of fan opinion had already propelled Henry to within spitting distance of the front of the queue before decidedly non-prolific first choice Christophe Dugarry injured a hamstring and replacement Stephane Guivarch suffered damaged knee ligaments.

Fate had given Henry his chance and he grasped it with both hands, scoring twice against Saudi Arabia after slipping in a last-minute effort in France's opening group win over South Africa.

Jacquet has been at pains not to overuse Henry, particularly since he picked up an ankle strain a week ago. And Henry says he's happy to go along with that.

"Even after my goals in the

earlier matches I don't start against Denmark, but it didn't bother me — I was able to recover my strength after the previous matches," he explained.

But when called upon he has displayed the striker's knack of being in the right place at the right time — just as he did in poaching seven goals in Monaco's run to the European Cup quarter-finals last season.

Henry's development largely mirrors that of clubmate David Trezeguet, just two months younger and who also starred in France's opening group campaign with a brilliant goal which knocked out Manchester United.

Jacquet now has to decide on his strategy to see off Croatia as France target their first final after semifinal defeats in 1958, 1982 and 1986.

Dugarry is fit again and Guivarch has worked hard throughout.

But Henry can point to his record and also remind Jacquet that he only played the latter stages of the goalless encounter against Italy, against whom he had just 25 minutes to make an impression.

On recent evidence, speedy Henry is the best bet to break down the Croats as Guivarch is without a goal in ten outings and Dugarry has scored just three in 26 games. Henry has three in eight.

Despite his fine showings, the Monaco star, coveted by Real Madrid and also several Italian clubs, remains engagingly modest when so many his age are tempted to let fame go to their head.

"I don't have a divine right to a place in the line-up. I am part of a 22-man squad and that's the way it should be. At my age, you give without counting the cost."

In France's march to the semifinals, Henry has so far given as much, if not more, than anybody.

Balkan peace hinges on football?

GENEVA, July 7 (AP/AFP): The UN refugee agency said Tuesday it is preparing to protect its refugee return operations in Bosnia against outbreaks of ethnic violence if Croatia's football team wins the World Cup.

"We have been doing some contingency planning to safeguard some of our return projects in areas which might be targeted by people celebrating an eventual victory," said UNHCR spokeswoman Judith Kumin.

A UNHCR water tanker and two buses used to return refugees were destroyed in the southern, Croat-held town of Stolac on July 2 as Bosnian Croat celebrations of Croatia's 3-0 World Cup victory against Germany turned violent. Kumin

said.

Some 200 Bosnian Croats marched through a street where Bosnian Muslims are rebuilding homes, throwing stones and breaking windows, Kumin said.

Local police were present during the incident but did not intervene in time to prevent the damage, Kumin said.

The Stolac area, located 115 kilometres (72 miles) southwest of the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, is one of the worst hotspots of continued ethnic violence against refugees in Bosnia.

Meanwhile, NATO led peacekeepers in Bosnia will beef up their presence in Mostar for the match between Croatia and France, a spokesman said Monday.

See page 2

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