



EVEN HE IS DELIGHTED: A tiny tot watches Brazil in training at Ozoir la Ferriere on July 9. — AFP photo

Brazil vs Brazil: Now & then

OZOIR-LA-FERRIERE, France, July 10 (AP): Four years ago, Brazil won the World Cup with a low-wattage team that relied on defence, discipline and the inspiration of Romario and Bebeto.

Now they're trying again, this time with a more talented but underachieving group that has produced the most proficient offence and the worst defence of the Cup.

Which was better? Coach Mario Zagallo, who was assistant to Carlos Alberto Parreira in 1994, uses the ultimate yardstick.

"The '94 team. They were world champions," he said. "This one hasn't won anything yet."

By that measure, Brazil's final against France on Sunday is a chance for Ronaldo and company to prove that dazzle and daring can be every bit as efficient as the '94 defensive machine.

In style and philosophy, the teams are vastly different, but many of the names are the same. The backbone of the team is unchanged, with Taffarel, Aldair, Dunga and Bebeto. Ronaldo and Cafu, reserves four years ago, are now starters.

In 1994, Brazilians were desperate to win the title that had eluded them since 1970. Brilliant teams had lost the Cup

through overconfidence in their goal-scoring ability, so Parreira designed tactics to tie opponents in knots. Then he looked for players to fill the roles.

The defensive fortress he came up with had a solid back line and another blockade in the midfield. The sector once ruled by artists like Didi and Gerson now featured Mauro Silva, Dunga, Mazinho and Zinho, a striker so limited by defensive duties that he was dubbed "the floorwaxer," because he just went around in circles.

"Romario and Bebeto handled the playmaking and scoring, and did it well enough to win the Cup. Still, the boring 0-0 final against Italy, decided in a penalty-kick shootout, was worthy of the defence-first mindset.

Ronaldo, then a 17-year-old promise, recalls watching from the bench.

"Our trump card was the security of the defence," he said. "The team was closed in back and marked very well. It was hard for anyone to get free around Mauro Silva, Dunga, Jorginho and Branco."

That all changed when Zagallo took over. With a generation of gifted strikers like Ronaldo, Denilson and Rivaldo,

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WORLD CUP '98 SPECIAL

Bridesmaids in low-key brawl

PARIS, July 10 (Reuters): In a World Cup match neither team want to be playing, Croatia's striker Davor Suker, at least, has something to aim for in the third place play-off against the Netherlands.

Twenty four hours before the main event, the final between hosts France and champions Brazil, the bridesmaids of the 1998 tournament must try to forget their anguish at missing out and put on a show at the Parc des Princes.

If comments after the semi-finals are any indication Croatia, in their first World Cup, are looking forward to the game a great deal more than the Dutch, who are still bleeding after their penalty shoot-out defeat by Brazil.

Croatia are delighted with their display in France and claim their won piece of World Cup history via Suker if they help him find the next one more time and become the finals outright top goal scorer.

Suker is currently level with Italy's Christian Vieri and Argentina's Gabriel Batistuta on five goals. If he scores again, he can realistically only be caught by Brazil's Ronaldo who put in his fourth on Tuesday against the Dutch.

Suker also has a secondary goal — to catch the eye of top coaches. In France he has shown signs of his best form but, after a season in which he realigned his place in the starting line-up, Real Madrid appear willing to part with him.

For Dutch striker Patrick Kluivert, a move also seems in the offing and Saturday gives a chance to impress. The out-of-favour AC Milan striker has seen the World Cup as a way of burying a "terrible" last 12 months.

A red card in the first game was hardly the way to start, but he has scored in the last two matches and could yet salvage a lucrative transfer from the final phase.

As for Saturday's match, the Dutch appear the stronger side and their 2-1 defeat of Argentina, who had beaten Croatia 1-0, also suggests they should win.

However, they appear to have taken their semifinal loss much harder than Croatia did their 2-1 defeat by France and may be thinking more of going home than winning a bloodless match.

Dutch coach Guus Hiddink is doing his best to inspire his men. He believes his squad will be fresh come Saturday and determined to prove they are third best in the world.

The Netherlands are again unlikely to start with left winger Marc Overmars who has not fully recovered from a hamstring injury, while Aron Winter and Michael Reizinger are carrying small knocks.

Croatia seem certain to be without injured captain and midfielder lynchpin Zvonimir Boban who was blamed for giving away the first goal against France. Defender Dario Simic is suspended.



GEARING UP FOR THE KILL: Brazilian booters limber up at Ozoir la Ferriere on July 9. — AFP photo

No fear Hosts loosen up

OZOIR-LA-FERRIERE, France, July 10 (Reuters): Brazil have no fear of France and will not let the chance of winning a fifth World Cup slip away, coach Mario Zagallo, vowed on Thursday, reports AFP.

The holders take on the hosts on Sunday at the Stade de France, but Zagallo, who dismissed ideas of a serious injury to Ronaldo, has no doubts about which way it will go.

"We respect France, but we have no fear," he said. "We have been in five World Cup finals before this on Sunday will be France's first."

"France will have 80,000 behind them, but we will have 160 million people chanting for Brazil on Sunday. We will not let the opportunity of winning the World Cup on another continent go away."

He summed up: "It's in our hands now, it's dream final — a dream cup."

Brazil will be starting as clear favourites, and the players are confident that the experience of being world champions will make the difference against a side making their debut at this level.

Defender Roberto Carlos said "I think that mental strength and physical commitment will be decisive. The important thing is for Brazil to play well."

The Real Madrid star and AS Roma's Aldair will look to improve Brazil's defensive record at these finals, though after conceding seven goals so far.

"We're playing a final and we know can't afford to make any mistakes against a French team like this one," Aldair said. "We've a chance to make history, let's hope we can make it."

"We've seen France play a lot and they are a good side, though we don't know how they're going to play against us. But we're pretty relaxed about things, and we've got a two or three days to prepare for it."

Bebeto was meanwhile delighted with his goal-scoring form at these finals, and reckoned they would stand him in good stead on Sunday.

"The results have come from God, but I've worked hard," he said. "The experience of having played in 1994 will be important for this kind of match."

Star striker Ronaldo cut short his preparations here on Thursday, a minor ankle problem.

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scorer of both French goals against Croatia.

He might just get one, too, with French President Jacques Chirac saying: "It's one of the greatest days in the history of French sports. I want to pay tribute to Thuram who was really extraordinary."

But while millions of French fans across the country were caught up in the frenzy of excitement, France captain Didier Deschamps complained that the atmosphere in the 80,000 capacity Stade de France on Wednesday night was "like a funeral."

"I could see, plenty of smart guys wearing suits and ties who watched us almost silently," he added.

Goalkeeper Fabien Barthez called on French spectators in the Stade de France for the final to loosen up, saying even businessmen could become supporters if they tried hard enough.

"What I want to ask them is please, for the final, don't wear a tie for a change. Come with jeans and France's shirt, paint your face and don't forget your flag. That's the way to have fun," he added.

One fan certainly got the message.

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Guadelajara revisited

PARIS, July 10 (AP): If Sunday's World Cup final is anything like the last time Brazil and France met in the tournament, well, bring it on.

A dozen years ago in the quarterfinals at Guadelajara, Mexico, an entertaining, aggressive France met the usually creative, sometimes brilliant squad from Brazil.

Unlike this year's final, in which the four-time champions Brazilians are favoured, that game was considered a tossup. France featured possibly the best midfielder in the world in Michel Platini — the organiser of France '98. It had such other stalwarts as Luis Hernandez, Jean Tigana, Jean-Pierre Papin and Dominique Rocheteau. The

French could score with anyone.

Brazil featured Careca, Zico, Socrates, Julio Cesar and Junior, all considered among their greatest players.

"It'll be a battle for control of the midfield and we'll have to close up the lanes and block the space," Junior said, echoing the exact task the French will have on Sunday in Stade de France.

"We have the belief we can compete with Brazil," coach Henri Michel said. "We are a strong team, also."

The two strong teams pushed for a goal early and never stopped.

Brazil's Muller hit the goalpost and the crossbar. Ronaldo and Dominique Rocheteau. The

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Croatian motivation for consolation

PARIS, July 10 (AP/Internet): The Croats had a day off to get over their semifinal loss to France and prepare for the consolation prize: the third-place game against the Netherlands.

But how to you motivate a team that has just missed its greatest moment in history at the World Cup? How do you get over a major letdown for a match that is little more than a game to fill a TV slot?

"We really wanted to play the final, but now we have to concentrate and try to be third,"

said striker Davor Suker, whose fifth goal of the tournament gave Croatia a brief 1-0 lead.

"We will be motivated, and I pray that the Dutch won't be. It will be a difficult game, but it's better to finish third than fourth."

France struck back with two goals from defender Lilian Thuram to advance to its first World Cup final.

The Croats felt they let the match slip away. But still, reaching the final four was a magnificent achievement for the small Balkan nation that gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and is in its first World Cup.

"I think we can be really proud of what we achieved in this World Cup," coach Miroslav Blazevic said. "But still I can't get rid of the impression that we could have done more."

The Croats retreated to their new headquarters at Chantilly, north of Paris, after their loss Wednesday night at the Stade de France.

The players, visibly depressed after a defeat they felt could have been easily avoided, pledged to play hard for third place.

"If we had managed to hold onto our lead for five minutes, we would have won," defender Slaven Bilic said. "But now we have to concentrate on the match on Saturday."

Midfielder Mario Stanic expected a tough match against the gifted Dutch team, which lost in a penalty shootout to Brazil in the semifinals.

"We want to finish third in our first World Cup," Stanic said.

Said defender Igor Stimac: "We'll give everything to capture third place."

World Cup All-Stars

PARIS, July 10 (AP/Internet): Goalkeeper Taffarel and midfielders Rivaldo and Cesar Sampaio of Brazil and defenders Lilian Thuram and Marcel Desailly of France head the list of World Cup All-Star in a traditional 4-3-3 formation.

The five players from Sunday's championship game do not include Brazilian striker Ronaldo, who's scored four goals and set up at least two others. But Ronaldo hasn't quite lived up to expectations, and with the final still to come, he would be a borderline selection.

Here's a position-by-position look at the top players: Dutch striker Dennis Bergkamp is more worthy of a place after three standout goals and classy performances on the way to getting his team to the semifinals.

Davor Suker scored five goals during Croatia's unexpected run to the final four in its first appearance at the World Cup. While the performance was a team effort, it couldn't have happened without the Real Madrid striker's nose for the goal.

Michael Owen, only 18, still is being applauded for his astonishing solo goal against Argentina, even though England went home more than a week ago. With his phenomenal pace and confidence attacking defences, Owen showed he has a huge future in the game.

A two-time FIFA player-of-the-year, Brazil's Ronaldo has nothing to prove. But even his coach and colleagues have noticed he hasn't been quite as effective as usual at the World Cup.

"He's still not the Ronaldo we all want to see," coach Mario Zagallo said, even after his star striker scored twice in the 4-1 second-round win over Chile.

"He has a lot more to give, and I'm sure we'll see it in the games we have left."

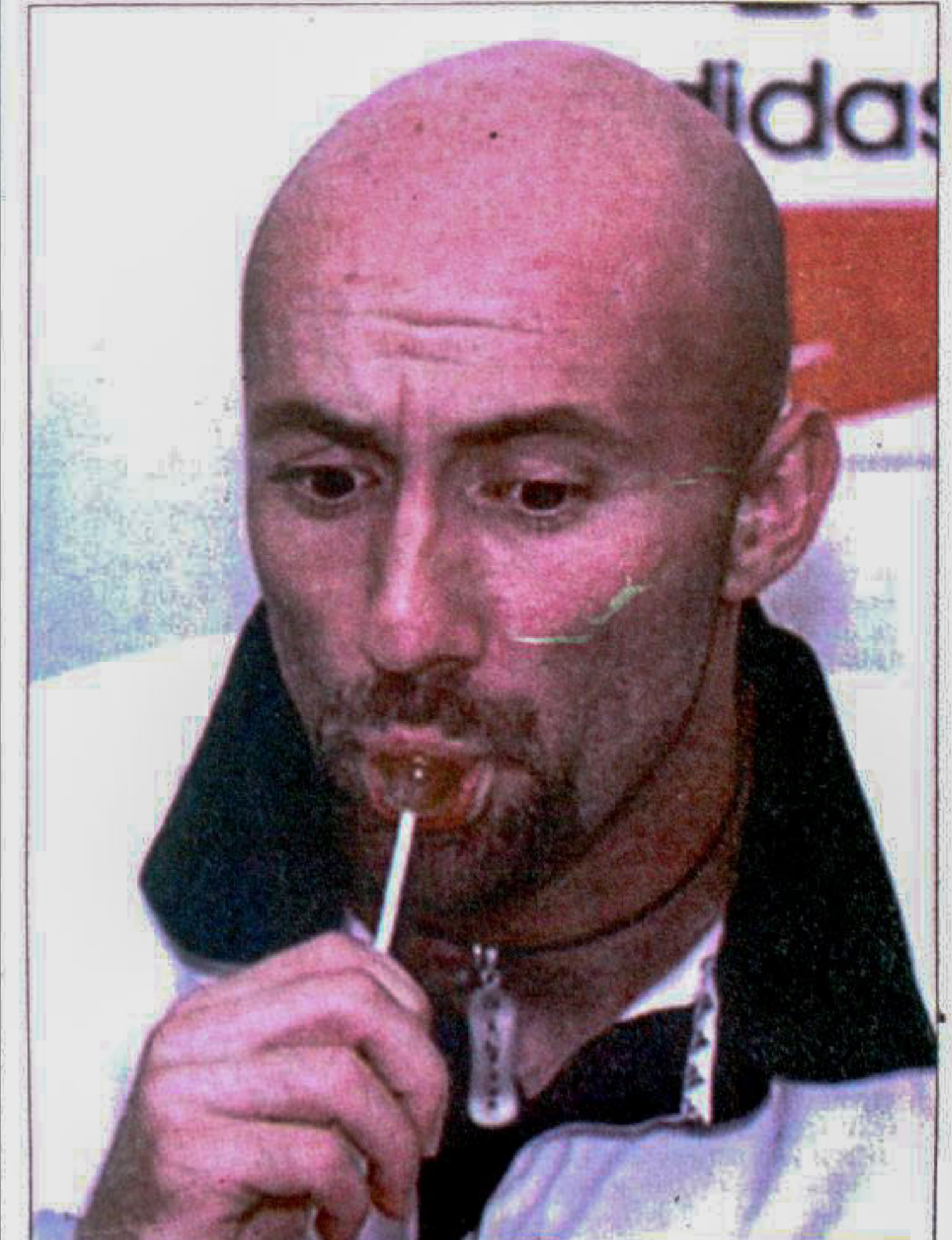
Brazil's Rivaldo has been one of the most effective attacking midfielders. The Barcelona star has scored three times and unlocked defences with his surging runs to open up chances for his teammates.

Sampaio came into the World Cup as something of a 30-year-old journeyman player from Japan's J-League. He combined solid midfield performances with three goals to make a big impact for the Brazilians, especially in the early stages.

Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids excelled with his tireless performances and tenacious tackling.

The Juventus star also fired

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KOJACK! French goalkeeper Fabien Barthez licking a lollipop during a press conference on July 9. — AFP photo



SUPERSTAR OVERNIGHT: Pressmen surround French defender Lilian Thuram at Clairefontaine on July 9. — AFP photo

FRANCE SETS SIGHTS ON FIRST WORLD TITLE!

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS

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