

A June 26 photograph of Moroccan Referee Said Belqola who will be officiating tonight's final between Brazil and France at Stade de France, Saint Denis. —AFP photo



# Continents collide

PARIS, July 11 (AP): It's the dream final. Brazil and France, soccer's royalty and their gallant hosts, duel on Sunday in the City of Lights for the glory of the biggest, longest and most-watched World Cup in history.

After 31 days and 63 games, the record field of 32 countries has been whittled to these two. The perennial champions and a first-time finalist. The No. 1 offence and the top defence. The hometown team and everybody else's favourite.

It's every bit the drama and pageantry the world expects from the French, and a billion-something people around the planet are expected to tune in to watch the last Cup of the century.

Brazilian coach Mario Zagallo, who has won four World Cups as a player, coach or assistant, knows what this game means.

"This is the biggest sporting event of the century," he said. "We are representing the Americas, and we cannot let this chance escape from our hands."

If the Brazilians feel they belong here, the French have never gotten past the semifinals. It's all a little heavy.

"We have to realise our adventure is not over yet," said coach Aime Jacquet.

Jacquet's trump card is a stingy defence that has given up just two goals, in six games, the best in the Cup. But Laurent Blanc, a bulwark of the back line, won't be there.

The Olympique Marseille defender was expelled and drew a two-game suspension for pushing Croatia's Slaven Bilic in the face in the semifinal. Chelsea's Frank Leboeuf will start alongside Marcel Desailly and get the task of stopping Ronaldo, Bebeto and company.

"We have an anti-Ronaldo plan ready. It's called Marcel Desailly," said French captain Didier Deschamps.

Jacquet also must find a solution for his punchless attack. A French striker hasn't found the net since the first round — defenders Blanc and Lilian Thuram did all the scoring as France squeaked by Paraguay, Italy and Croatia.

The key is playmaker Zinedine Zidane. The Juventus attacker had a so-so game against Croatia and must shine against Brazil, unlocking the defence for Inter Milan striker Yuri Djorkaeff, or if that fails, for himself.

For "Zi Zou," as the French affectionately call him, the underdog role suits France fine.

"Brazil is the favourite. The whole world sees the Brazilians winning against us. So much the better," he said.

Of course, the Brazilians see themselves winning, too. But they also have something to prove.

Despite scoring 14 goals and showing flashes of greatness, Brazil hasn't been the overwhelming force everyone expected. They often played just

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## Platini ponders pageantry

PARIS, July 11 (AP): He played with passion, and a decade later Michel Platini used the same fiery presence to organise the World Cup. On Saturday, that emotion spilled over as he recalled golden moments and a departed friend.

As 60 million French citizens eagerly awaited Sunday's championship match against Brazil, their greatest soccer hero said he was happy to be one of them for bringing off the world's biggest single sports event in a joyful atmosphere.

Then Platini cried, not for the passing of his youth or the end of a job that has consumed him for six years. His tears were for Fernand Sastre, the father of this very French World Cup, who died on the eve of play after a long battle with cancer.

"I'm very proud," Platini said, "and Fernand is looking at us from above, and probably very proud as well."

As co-presidents of France '98, Platini and Sastre secured government financial guarantees that helped bring the tournament here, then organised an event that came off in true French form — cutting-edge technology, stylish appearance, a little arrogance around the edge.

At a news conference to mark the winding down of the biggest World Cup yet, Platini and officials from French and international soccer bodies acknowledged again that the event had been marred by ticket scandals and street violence in Marseille and Lens.

French prosecutors are investigating several cases of brokers and tour operators defrauding visiting fans, who were left without game tickets far from home. In Lens, a policeman remains in a coma after German neo-Nazis bashed his head in with an iron bar after the Germany-Yugoslavia match.

No problems were reported in or around the stadiums, though, and the games produced exciting soccer before enthusiastic sellout crowds, with no major glitches.

"I've had a very easy task," said Lennart Johansson, head of FIFA's World Cup organising panel. "Almost everything went perfectly well."

"I'm very proud to be a Frenchman. I think France can achieve great things."

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UNITED: Brazilian players practicing in a circle at Ozoir la Ferriere on July 10. —AFP photo

## Is God Brazilian?

BRASILIA, July 11 (Reuters/Internet): Brazil's self-styled No. 1 soccer fan will rejoice through dawn's early light on Sunday, write a note to the saints asking for victory in the World Cup final over France and quietly leave it on the altar.

Marilza Guimaraes da Silva, her toenails painted a prideful green and yellow, will then sip tea in her green and yellow apartment to calm her nerves until just before kick off.

Then she will light candles and kneel before her green and yellow television set to whisper a prayer.

"Holiest Mother of God, go to the Brazilian team in their pre-match meeting and go to the soccer pitches of France..." she will mutter before settling down to the game. She will have rosary beads in one hand and a pump to measure her blood pressure in the other.

"The doctor wants me to stay in (the) hospital but I would die if I didn't see the game," said Guimaraes, 47, a nurse from Brasilia.

For Guimaraes and many millions of Brazilians, soccer transcends sport. It is a fundamental part of life which has given the nation something to feel good about through decades of economic chaos and growing poverty.

Brazil's heroes are nearly all soccer players like Pele, Romario and now Ronaldo, al-

though race car champion Ayrton Senna and a few singers are also held in high esteem.

"In rich countries, people treat the game as just that, a game. For the Brazilians, soccer is fundamental to our self-esteem," said anthropologist Roberto da Matta.

He said the sight of Brazilians outwitting supposedly more advanced Europeans on a soccer field awoke a deep but often dormant sense of patriotism in South America's biggest nation.

"We're always last in everything and not least in terms of wealth distribution. But not in football. We rule the way when it comes to soccer," da Matta said.

Brazil's success in this World Cup in France has produced a tidal wave of good feeling in Brazil.

It was cited by pollsters as a factor behind strong growth in the popularity of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso ahead of October's elections.

Cardoso, a university professor by training with no personal interest in the sport, seemed to be milking World Cup fervour when he declared God to be on Brazil's side after the tense quarterfinal victory over Denmark.

The national team's ride to the championship game also has been a bonanza for Brazil's

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## Jacquet canonised

CLAIREFONTAINE, France, July 11 (AP): Even ahead of the final, France already canonized him Saint Aime. Looking at what Aime Jacquet has gone through over the past months, some might just call him a martyr who has converted masses of disbelievers.

When he took the helm four years ago, the future looked bleak. Now he has one game ahead of him to win France's first World Cup, with a team that has stuck together and stood by him, known better for its cohesion than individual stars.

"Now, we have the energy that can move mountains," said Jacquet and the only mountain left is Brazil in Sunday's final at Saint-Denis.

Whatever happens, the 57-year-old bows out after the final, drained by unceasing criticism and the enormity of the task of turning a bunch of losers into World Cup finalists.

First, the goal was to reach the final four, then it was to reach the final, and when the final whistle went after the 2-1 come from behind win against Croatia, he could not even celebrate. He just stood there, dazed.

"I was knocked out, standing up," he said. When he realised the achievement, with France throwing the biggest party in decades, he broke down crying.

Outside France, Jacquet basically was a no-name coming

into the World Cup finals. French coaching was identified with Arsene Wenger, who turned England's Arsenal around and into this season's league and cup double winner.

Jacquet was bookish, boorish, talked a convoluted, lousy game and could not produce flair for *Les Bleus* in his first years as coach. He looks wary and exudes no aura. He became a soft target for critics and it has taken a long time to prove them wrong.

And in as unpredictable and irrational a game as soccer, he relied on a technical four-year masterplan that, in retrospect brought him right into the championship game.

After all, he was the coach who decided against using greats Eric Cantona and David Ginola, when both were at their prime, a brave move when he was already criticised for producing dull soccer.

But team unity prevailed, and the flashy forwards didn't fit in.

First he harnessed the team into the stringent defensive straightjacket that yielded a 1996 semifinal loss at the European Championship and loads of media criticism.

And during the last two years without a competitive game on the schedule, his experimenting often dumfounded observers and rarely produced

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## Operatic hattrick

PARIS, July 11: The celebrated Three Tenors kicked off festivities for the 1998 World Cup final with a concert at the foot of France's Eiffel Tower on Friday, but the expected crowds failed to materialise, reports Reuters.

For Jose Carreras, Placido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti it was a hattrick of World Cup performances, following hugely successful concerts in Rome in 1990 and Los Angeles in 1994.

But the balmy summer nights in Italy and the United States were a distant memory on a chilly, windswept Parisian evening with both big-name stars and the general public staying away.

Organisers had billed the French spectacular as the biggest concert of all time with the two-hour, 45 minute show broadcast live to more than 75 countries before an estimated global television audience of some two billion people.

In addition, around 800,000 people were expected to turn up in the massive Champs de Mars park to see the famed trio in the flesh, in the end, police estimated only some 80,000 made it.

Even the VIP stand, where top tickets cost up to 6,500 francs (1,600 dollars) apiece, was dotted with empty seats and many people slunk away before the end to escape the cold.

"If it had been a beautiful day there would have been a lot

more people," said one official from the interior ministry.

But if the poor turnout disappointed the Tenors, they did not show it as they returned to the red carpeted stage for a series of encores before an empty auditorium.

Accompanied by the orchestra of Paris, the trio sang their now-standard mix of arias and popular tunes against the dramatic backdrop of the illuminated tower.

Swooping Verdi classics for soccer anthems, 'The Tenors' brought the audience to its feet with their rich rendition of 'you'll never walk alone' its quality infinitely superior to the sound familiar on the terraces of Liverpool Soccer Club.

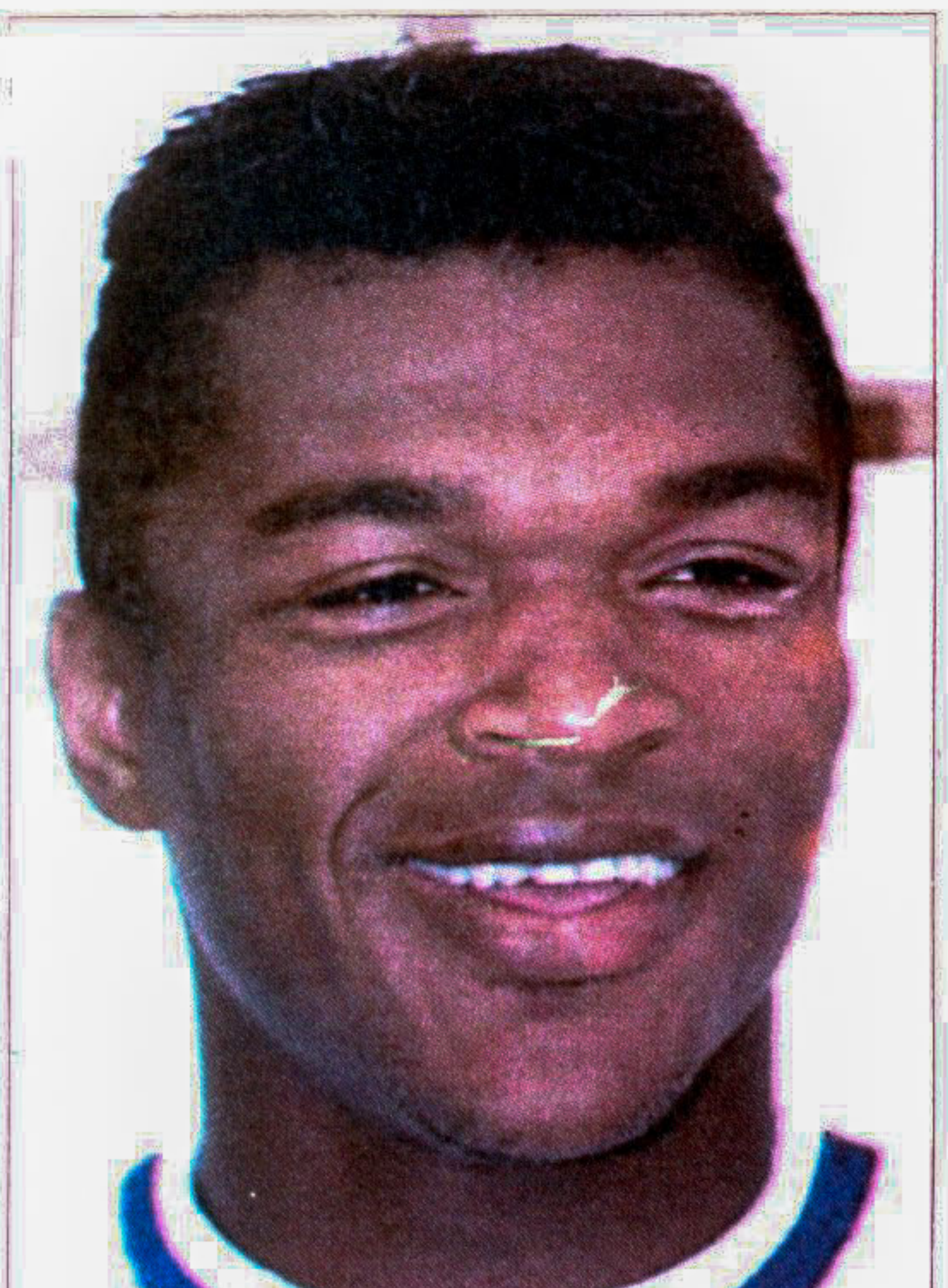
Football is a common passion for the three men, whose lofty singing has since 1990 been married with images of the game's moments of high skill and intense emotion.

The 1990 recording of the Rome concert is the biggest selling classical concert album of all time, while the 1994 concert was seen by a television audience of 1.3 billion people in more than 100 countries.

The trio's soccer knowledge was revealed earlier this year when they told a joint news conference well ahead of the World Cup that they expected Brazil and France to triumph. Those two teams meet in Sunday's final.

Pavarotti, an Italian and Carreras, a Spaniard, were

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HOSTS' PILLAR AT THE BACK: Marcel Desailly, the uncompromising French defender talking to reporters at the July 9 press conference. —AFP photo



WORLD CUP SPECIAL OPERA: A vast crowd listen to one of opera's greats Luciano Pavarotti singing live at the feet of Eiffel Tower on July 10. Italian Pavarotti along with two other big names in opera Spaniards Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras were performing free as they have done during Italia '90 and USA '94. —AFP photo

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