

Enough is enough

LONDON, July 14 (AFP/Internet): English fans intent on vilifying disgraced England star David Beckham in the new season have been told to lay off by the Manchester United midfielder.

Many supporters blame Beckham for England's World Cup exit following his dismissal against Argentina for a petulant kick at Diego Simeone and plan to target him with abuse next season.

West Ham fans intend to taunt him with 10,000 red cards when United play their first away game of the season at Upton Park on August 22.

Hooligans have targeted his parents at their home in London, while an effigy of the midfielder has also been strung up outside a pub in the capital.

Meanwhile, David Beckham's father warned Tuesday that his son may be hounded out of English football by fans determined to taunt him over his World Cup dismissal.

Beckham's father, Ted, believes his son could transfer to a club on the continent if he is subjected to sustained abuse from rival fans.

"He's made one mistake and been absolutely slaughtered for it," said Beckham senior.

"All he wants to do is play football. He'll go back to training but after that, I don't know. It's too early to say whether he'll stay in England or go abroad."

"It's what David decides. But whatever he does, I'll support him."

His dad added: "I spoke to David on Sunday night and he hardly mentioned football. He's feeling very low. He knows he has got to come back and face up to it some time -- and he's got training to think of."

"But he's very apprehensive. I'm just glad David's been out of

the country. He hasn't seen half of what's gone on and I won't let him."

"I'm no longer proud to be British after what they've done to my son -- all through a game of football."

"He's made a mistake. We all know he made a mistake but he's certainly paying for it now. I'm disgusted with what has gone on. I've had enough," he told The Sun.

Ian Todd, chairman of the National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs, feels enough is enough.

"He feels the protests are going too far and that it is time to end the hate campaign."

"Genuine supporters will disassociate themselves completely from this sort of buzz reaction and activity," he said.

"It's time to let bygones be bygones. The game is over and we should all be looking forward to the next one. But sadly some people, who have violence in their veins, cannot do that."

"Organised supporters would in no way condone what is happening or encourage people to do this kind of thing. The whole thing is just despicable and there is no excuse for vilifying a player like this."

Todd is not opposed to West Ham's red card protest if it were carried out in a light-hearted way, but he feels it will be hijacked by fans intent on attacking Beckham.

"I understand there is going to be a red card protest at West Ham at the beginning of the season, which bounds on the edge of a good natured protest," he said.

"But I'm sure there will be people within that who feel a little bit more strongly and will make their feelings known."

United fans' spokesman Andy Walsh, says the Old Trafford club will rally round their

star. He said: "I don't think David Beckham will be forced abroad because of the love and support he will be given by Manchester United."

"If he gets the support and protection I expect him to get at the club I think that is unlikely."

Walsh believes Beckham has become the fall guy because of anti-United fans' "obsession" with the Old Trafford club.

He added: "David Beckham has been a hate figure throughout the UK over the course of the last few years anyway. But these are people who are jealous of his enormous talent and lifestyle."

"A lot of it is to do with the fact that he plays for what I believe is the best club in the world."

"A lot of these people who are criticising David Beckham and Manchester United, unfortunately for them, are more obsessed with Manchester United than they are with their own team."

Walsh also had a message, via Radio 5 Live, to fans who may be planning to give Beckham a frosty Premiership reception next season.

He said: "Get a life. Go and support your own team instead of having a pop at one of ours -- one of the biggest talents this country has ever produced."

The Professional Footballers Association said it would be "extremely spiteful" if Beckham were forced to play abroad.

Brendan Batson, PFA deputy chief executive, feels Beckham's departure would be a huge loss to the domestic game.

"Most right-minded supporters and football lovers do not want to see a player as talented as him to go."



French World Cup heroes (L-R) Thierry Henry, Robert Pires, coach Aime Jacquet, Marcel Desailly and Bixente Lizarazu watch the partying fans from the upper deck of the bus that was taking them through Champs-Elysees on July 13.

Football the guinea pig

PARIS, July 14 (Reuters/Internet): For the second World Cup in a row, FIFA chose its showpiece tournament to experiment with the laws of the game and for the second time it backfired.

Attempts to crack down on tackles from behind merely led to more diving and, in the most distasteful aspect of France '98, players feigning injury in an attempt to get opponents sent off.

The game's ruling body seems determined to protect strikers at all costs, but its efforts have forced defenders to change tactics and led to a blizzard of red cards that, at times, threatened to turn crucial games into French farces.

"What do you expect us to do -- stand and watch as strikers collect the ball, turn and shoot?" asked Croatia's Slaven Bilic, accused of getting France's Laurent Blanc sent off through over-reacting to a challenge.

"We're barely allowed to tackle any more so we have to stop them in other ways. That means marking more closely and holding. That's why there's been such an increase in shirt-pulling."

Tackling is a fundamental part of the game and a defender's skill in timing his tackle just as important to the team as a defence-splitting pass or a shot on the run.

But FIFA were desperate to improve the game's entertainment value after a dire World Cup in 1990. They tried to persuade referees in 1994 to crack down on violent tackles and, this time, wrote it into the rule book shortly before the finals.

Referees in previous finals were often reluctant to send players off, however awful or persistent their fouls. Now they

produce the red card for what are often merely mistimed tackles.

"I prefer football to be a man's game," says Johan Cruyff, who took more than his fair share of rough treatment.

"People forget the tackle from behind has always been illegal. The FIFA clampdown has just made players cheat to get others sent off."

It would be disastrous if young players began copying the antics of World Cup players seen spinning through the air after a tackle as if they had been fired from a cannon.

Davor Suker may have collected the Golden Boot as the tournament's top scorer but the Croatia striker could just as easily been given an Academy Award in recognition of his peerless acting.

Suker seemed to hit the ground and be in excruciating pain after virtually every challenge, regardless of whether he had been touched. But once an attacking situation developed, surely only Lazarus has made a more miraculous recovery.

FIFA paid lip service to punishing the cheats who blighted the tournament but none were sent off and only a handful cautioned.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who has said he wants to see the sliding tackle outlawed, said this week he was happy with referees who have tried to protect players trying to score rather than those trying to destroy.

But constant pressure to reward attackers while making defenders impotent will change the very nature of the game.

Soccer didn't become the world's most popular sport merely because people like seeing goals scored.

The opposite is true, as it is the difficulty of scoring that puts such value on a goal and causes such delicious tension when sides are level with time running out.

Rugby union has steam-rollered its own laws to try to improve the game's appeal and the result is 100-point matches where a try is about as hard to score as two points in basketball.

Some fear FIFA will move to ban tackling altogether, close marking, anything that isn't passing forward or shooting. Why bother with goalkeepers, the very essence of negativity?

Get rid of them and the goals will flow like water -- maybe even TV executives in the United States would finally buy in.

produce the red card for what are often merely mistimed tackles.

"I prefer football to be a man's game," says Johan Cruyff, who took more than his fair share of rough treatment.

"People forget the tackle from behind has always been illegal. The FIFA clampdown has just made players cheat to get others sent off."

It would be disastrous if young players began copying the antics of World Cup players seen spinning through the air after a tackle as if they had been fired from a cannon.

Davor Suker may have collected the Golden Boot as the tournament's top scorer but the Croatia striker could just as easily been given an Academy Award in recognition of his peerless acting.

Suker seemed to hit the ground and be in excruciating pain after virtually every challenge, regardless of whether he had been touched. But once an attacking situation developed, surely only Lazarus has made a more miraculous recovery.

FIFA paid lip service to punishing the cheats who blighted the tournament but none were sent off and only a handful cautioned.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who has said he wants to see the sliding tackle outlawed, said this week he was happy with referees who have tried to protect players trying to score rather than those trying to destroy.

But constant pressure to reward attackers while making defenders impotent will change the very nature of the game.

Soccer didn't become the world's most popular sport merely because people like seeing goals scored.

The opposite is true, as it is the difficulty of scoring that puts such value on a goal and causes such delicious tension when sides are level with time running out.

Rugby union has steam-rollered its own laws to try to improve the game's appeal and the result is 100-point matches where a try is about as hard to score as two points in basketball.

Some fear FIFA will move to ban tackling altogether, close marking, anything that isn't passing forward or shooting. Why bother with goalkeepers, the very essence of negativity?

Get rid of them and the goals will flow like water -- maybe even TV executives in the United States would finally buy in.

Hacked by Hype

LONDON, July 14 (Reuters): Crushing commercial pressures may prevent Ronaldo fulfilling his potential as the heir-apparent to fellow Brazilian Pele, the greatest footballer of his generation.

Pele scored 12 goals in the 1958 World Cup as a precocious 17-year-old. He featured in three more Cups and after retiring from international soccer in 1971 went on to play in the North American Soccer League for three seasons.

Still the best-known name in the world's most popular sport, Pele has repeatedly stressed the need for sportsmen to take care of their bodies.

His longevity is a tribute to the care he took of himself but also reflects an era when the playing demands were less onerous.

Although only 21, Ronaldo is the world players-of-the-year and was expected to dominate the 1998 World Cup.

Suffering throughout the tournament from a knee injury after a strenuous season with Inter Milan culminating in victory in the UEFA Cup final, Ronaldo showed intermittent flashes of brilliance as Brazil progressed to Sunday's final against France.

Brazilian supporters, supported by most neutrals, remained supremely confident that both Ronaldo and their team would peak on the big day. But instead Ronaldo's life began to fall apart shortly before the final major sporting occasion of the 20th century.

Ronaldo later told the Brazilian television station Globo he had suffered a convulsive fit only hours before the match.

The first signs in the stadium that anything was amiss came when a team sheet was issued without Ronaldo's name.

A revised sheet included the striker but it was clear that all was not as it should be in the Brazilian camp when the team failed to appear for the pre-match warmup.

Ronaldo's listless display mirrored that of his team and the post-mortems had begun among the Brazilian supporters before the final whistle had

blown. While France celebrated, Brazil mourned and the conspiracy theorists went into overdrive.

Shoe firm Nike, who sponsor the Brazilian team and had launched an advertising campaign based on Ronaldo, denied they had put pressure on Brazil to play an obviously unfit player.

There were unsubstantiated stories of a disagreement in the dressing room before the match and further unconfirmed reports that Brazilian Football Federation Ricardo Teixeira had insisted Ronaldo should play.

At the heart of the storm Ronaldo will now almost certainly need yet another knee operation, which will hardly please Inter who paid a small fortune to praise him away from Barcelona.

Unlike Pele, who played 17 years for his club Santos, Ronaldo performs weekly in arguably the world's toughest league and will be the target for foreign defenders in the European Cup.

Further reports denied by Brazil, said Ronaldo was given pain-killing injections before each World Cup match, running unhappy parallels with Diego Maradona.

Maradona's world began to unravel when he required a constant diet of painkillers after being mercilessly hacked down by defenders desperate to stop him at any cost.

Fit, partially fit or patently unfit, Ronaldo is under constant pressure to play and justify the investments of country, club and sponsors.

Injury restricted Pele to two games and one goal in each of the 1962 and 1966 World Cups but he was still able to crown his career with the 1970 championships, possibly the finest international XI to take the field.

Ronaldo should have another chance on another continent in four years to do himself justice on a World Cup stage.

Already, though, the pressures of modern day football threaten to literally cripple him and in the aftermath of a memorable tournament his career is at the crossroads.

Champagne overflows

PARIS, July 14 (AFP): France's first-ever World Cup win was hailed around the planet Monday to the sound of champagne corks popping and the sight of congratulatory banner headlines.

Paris was the epicenter of the triumphant revelry which ripped out to French expatriates and soccer fans everywhere, from Australia to the United States and the farthest flung corners of the globe.

Even in Brazil, where a dumbstruck population saw its national side thrashed 3-0, there was grudging admiration of the French team.

There was also headshaking at the disappointing performance of Brazil's players, who had been the favourites throughout the French-hosted 32-nation tournament.

Across football mad Europe, laurels were slung at France, many of them underlining the contribution of Zinedine Zidane, an Algerian-born player who scored the two first-half goals.

It was a win that "lit the heart," Britain's Times newspaper said of the game, played out in Paris before an estimated 1.7 billion television viewers.

Italy's press switched loyalties from Brazil to France. Zidane "in 20 minutes became the most famous person in the history of French sport," burred the top selling Corriere Della Sera.

Francophile Romania was no exception. "France -- you deserve it. Zidane is the last emperor," headlined the Prospert newspaper. "The French roster has plucked the Brazilian parakeets," the Evenimentul Zilei said.

For Belgium's La Dernière Heure, "The world is blue," a reference to the colour worn by the French team.

Germany's most read newspaper, Bild, borrowed its neighbour's language to say "Vive la France," it added: "There are victories that last for eternity. France has realised its dream."

The Greek press was no less flattering in its tribute. "After

France's King Louis, after Napoleon and General De Gaulle, there now exists in the history of France the name of Zinedine Zidane," trumpeted the Ekxoussia newspaper.

Algeria's press was quick to reclaim Zidane as its own slapping pictures of him on most of the front pages and putting the entire credit for the victory on his shoulders.

Fans in New Caledonia, one of France's most distant territories, erupted with joy at the sight of the Cup held aloft, the exhilaration fuelled by the performance of their own "local hero" -- Kanak player Christian Karembeu.

In Australia, French diplomatic missions were swamped with congratulatory messages, prompting French ambassador Dominique Girard to say Australia is friends again after its outrage over France's nuclear testing in the Pacific three years ago.

Thousands of French people

danced, whooped and shed tears of joy after watching the final at early morning parties in their homes or in hotels and pubs which had opened especially for the match.

Similar exuberance was seen in US cities, where thousands of cheering expatriate French filled the streets. In New York, 1,000 spectators waving French flags jammed 60th street to celebrate the surprise victory.

That was in contrast to many sections of Manhattan, where residents seemed to ignore the game that had the rest of the planet transfixed.

In Washington, a ragged parade of shouting fans drove up and down almost empty city streets a few blocks from the White House.

Over the Canadian border, in French-speaking Montreal, however, there was no holding back. Locals put their cultural heritage before national boundaries, joining French expatriates in chanting "on a gagne, on a gagne." (We won, we won).

In the Middle East, the mood was no less euphoric.

"The crow of the cockerel silences the Brazilian samba," the United Arab Emirates newspaper Al-Itihad splashed. "Bye-bye Brazil. France rules the world," read the Kuwaiti daily Al-Qabas headline.

The ruling party Al-Baas newspaper in Syria said: "France has carved its name in gold and neutralised the Brazilian magic."

In Africa, Tunisia's La Presse newspaper headlined "France: Master of the world," a sentiment echoed the Kenya Times which said: "After years of World Cup failure... France are new kings of soccer."

France lapped up all the honours. While foreign stars Jack Nicholson, Johnny Depp and U2's Bono plunged into the post match partying in a Paris nightclub, France's newspaper editors were busy extrapolating the win into something far bigger.

Forgetful punter

LONDON, July 14 (AFP/Internet): British bookmakers William Hill said Tuesday they are searching for a man who failed to collect 57,000 pounds (about 100,000 dollars) worth of winnings following France's World Cup triumph.

The lucky punter placed a 16 pound accumulator bet in a Hills shop in Surbiton, Surrey, on July 4 last year involving five winning selections culminating with France lifting the Jules Rimet trophy.

Hills spokesman Graham Sharpe said: "He has 57,537 pounds to pick up, but he has yet to turn up to collect."

He added: "We have no idea who he is -- he hasn't been seen in the shop since placing the bet over a year ago. Perhaps we are looking for a Frenchman with amnesia or, at the very least, a large hangover."

"If it was my bet I'd have been hammering at the betting shop door first thing on Monday morning."



NOT NEEDED ANYMORE: A sports shop attendant takes out a life-size cardboard Ronaldo for disposal on July 13 at Hamburg, Germany.

Multiracial reaction

PARIS, July 14 (AP/Internet): While the rest of the nation celebrated, the anti-immigrant National Front offered subdued congratulations Monday to the victorious -- and multiracial -- French soccer team.

France's team includes immigrants and the children of immigrants, the kinds of people the Front has long advocated expelling from France.

"The National Front is delighted this symbolic victory has brought the French people hope and joy, and made it recover its patriotic reflexes, its national anthem and its flag," the Front said.

It singled out Zinedine Zidane, the son of Algerian immigrants in Marseille, who scored two goals in Sunday's 3-0 victory over Brazil.

But in an interview with the daily Liberation, National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen characterised the World Cup as a "detail in the history of the war that nations pursue on playing fields."

"Detail of history" is how Le Pen has referred to the Holocaust.

Liberation also quoted Le Pen as saying the National Front "always has recognised that French citizens can be of different races and religions as long as they had in common love of the country and the will to serve it."

as the French team." The National Front regularly wins about 15 percent in French elections with its anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner and racist rhetoric.

Some French commentators expressed hope Monday that the multiracial French team would help unite the nation.

"Deep integration requires that each person go beyond his origins, his memories, his reluctance, his fears," the conservative daily Le Figaro said. "We have the proof that thanks to the World Cup, this is possible."

Paris mulling Olympic bid

PARIS, July 14 (AFP/Internet): Paris is to consider a bid to stage the Olympic Games following the success of the French World Cup, mayor Jean Tiberi said here Tuesday.

"We are going to study the possibility of an Olympic candidacy," Tiberi said at the annual Bastille Day garden party at the Elysee Palace. "We were so encouraged by the World Cup."

But he said that many factors would have to come together before an official approach could be made to the International Olympic Committee.

Sydney next stages the summer Olympic Games in 2000, with Athens getting the nod for 2004.

For the 2008 games, five cities are in the running -- Osaka, Toronto, Istanbul, Seville and Buenos Aires.



The French postal service has introduced this new postage stamp a day after the national team's World Cup victory.