

Viva Batigol

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England meet Sweden later on Sunday, but a disappointing Nigeria became the first African team to lose at the finals after Senegal's sensational win over France on Friday and Cameroon's draw with Ireland on Saturday.

Nigeria coach Adegboye Onigbode was nevertheless pleased with his team's efforts.

"I was very much impressed with the performance of my boys. We were able to check the antics of the Argentine team," he said.

"I think Argentina lived up to their reputation, they had very good preparation for this competition and it showed.

Bielsa had to change his plans when defender and captain Roberto Ayala felt a twinge in his thigh during the pre-match warm-up and was replaced by Diego Placente wide on the left.

Walter Samuel moved from left-back to sweeper with Placente moving to his spot and midfielder Veron taking over as skipper in the enforced 11th hour shuffle for the twice-world champions.

But it was Nigeria who had to defend for the first hour as Argentina's famed attacking game kept them on the back foot. When Nigeria did break forward, they either squandered their chances or were denied by some superb goalkeeping from Pablo Cavallero.

The second half was a big improvement on the first, although the clearest scoring chances came before the break.

After a series of half-chances and near-misses Ariel Ortega brought out a superb save from Shorunmu after 29 minutes with the goalkeeper moving swiftly to tip the powerful shot over the bar.

Within two minutes Jay Jay Okocha forced Cavallero into an even more athletic dive with a blistering effort from 18 metres at the other end.

Batistuta almost opened the scoring on 36 minutes when he headed narrowly past the post from Veron's deep corner, but that was the last clear chance of the half.

Gonzalez came on for Claudio Lopez on the left at halftime and Nigeria made their own change two minutes later when injured striker Kanu, who had struggled with a

knock for most of the first half, was replaced by fellow forward Pius Ikedia.

But it was Batistuta who was making all the openings and he narrowly failed to turn in another Veron corner at the far post just after the break before Juan Pablo Sorin put a header wide.

Batistuta then fired a 20-metre free kick over the bar and Sorin's effort on the hour-mark met a similar fate after a slick passing move involving Veron and Ortega, wearing the coveted number 10 shirt made famous by Diego Maradona.

Three minutes later Argentina took the lead when Batistuta rose at the far post to head the ball home off the leg of Nigeria's Efe Sodje after another teasing Veron corner had eluded the uncertain Nigerian defence and his team mate Pochettino.

Batistuta gave way to Crespo on 80 minutes and his rival as Argentina's main striker wasted a good chance to finish off the Nigerians as Shorunmu pulled off another good save.

TEAMS
Argentina: Cavallero, Placente, Sorin, Pochettino, Samuel, Zanetti, Simeone, Veron (Aimar 78), Ortega, Claudio Lopez (Gonzalez 45), Batistuta (Crespo 81).
Nigeria: Shorunmu, Yobo, Babayaro, Okoronkwo, West, Sodje (Christopher 73), Ogbelche, Okocha, Lawal, Kanu (Ikedia 48), Aghahowa.
Referee: Giles Veissiere (France).

CROATIA VS MEXICO

Jozić has points to prove

REUTERS, Niigata

Croatia coach Mirko Jozić will be on a mission to prove two high-profile critics wrong when his side open their World Cup campaign on Monday.

Javier Aguirre, coach of opponents Mexico, has offended Jozić by pouring scorn on his players' capabilities and his prowess as a coach.

But it is the harsh words of predecessor Miroslav Blazevic that are eating away at Jozić as he attempts to repeat Croatia's thrilling World Cup debut at the finals four years ago.

Blazevic, the man who led what was known as the "golden generation" of players to the semi-finals in France, has accused Jozić of "betraying" the nation's love for attractive football.

The team conceded just two goals in their qualifying campaign -- the lowest number of any European nation. Jozić, who will stand down after the finals, accepts only another thrill-filled tournament will earn him a fond farewell but he warns Croatian fans that he is aiming for points first and foremost.

"For me, reaching the second round will be an achievement," he says.

"People always talk about the 'golden generation'...it is true, these players are not as confident. They may have lost some of their lustre, but we have many qualities and I am proud of them."

After taking over from Blazevic during the qualifying campaign, Jozić has had to build a team without the likes of 1998 talisman, Zvonimir Boban.

Yet despite his love for defensive fortitude, he has also indulged Robert Prosinecki, another of the "old guard," by surrounding the ageing playmaker with hard-working team mates who think nothing of sacrificing themselves for "Robbie."

Prosinecki will also bow out after the finals but, at 33, insists he is in prime condition. "My mind is better than four years ago and my body feels good," he said.

Alongside Prosinecki, Robert Jami, 1998 Golden Boot winner Davor Suker and Alen Boksic -- who is set for his World Cup debut at 32 -- Jozić has tried to blend the inexperience of Boris Zivkovic and Niko Kovac.

Trouble is, even Jozić cannot predict how they will gel.

Mexico's forward partnership -- of Cuauhtemoc Blanco and Francisco Palencia -- is also one of proven class.

It was their goals that helped rescue Mexico's qualifying campaign. But with Jesus Arellano and Johan Rodriguez suspended for the match in Niigata, and both winger Rafael Garcia and midfielder Gerardo Torrado battling against injury, Mexico are struggling to convince as a unit.

A heavy responsibility will fall on Alberto Garcia Aspe, the midfielder who was dropped by previous coach Enrique Meza but who has returned to the fold and is set to win his 109th cap.

Media reports linking Aguirre with a return to club management at Spanish side Osasuna have not helped focus Mexican minds on the task in hand, either.

PROBABLE TEAMS

Croatia (Formation 4-3-1-2; Jersey numbers in the beginning): 1-Stipe Pletikosa; 6-Boris Zivkovic, 21-Robert Kovac, 3-Josip Simunic, 17-Robert Jami; 4-Stjepan Tomas, 14-Zvonimir Soldo, 10-Niko Kovac; 8-Robert Prosinecki; 9-Davor Suker, 11-Alen Boksic

Mexico (Formation 3-5-2; Jersey numbers in the beginning): 1-Oscar Perez; 20-Melvin Brown, 5-Manuel Vidrio, 22-Alberto Rodriguez; 8-Alberto Garcia Aspe, 4-Rafael Marquez, 19-Gabriel Caballero, 6-Gerardo Torrado, 3-Rafael Garcia; 17-Francisco Palencia, 10-Cuauhtemoc Blanco
Referee: Jun Lu (China)



Davor Suker, Golden Boot winner at France '98, stretches along with his Croatian teammate Jurica Vranjes during a practice session at the Big Swan Stadium in Niigata, Japan yesterday.

Samba minus Emerson A great escape act

FROM PAGE 13
his homeland with Gremio and then in Germany with Bayer Leverkusen, before his big-money move to Roma for the 2000-2001 season.

He is considered an important influence in the Italian team, providing the platform for the likes of Francesco Totti to show off their skills further forward, and is held in high regard by Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari.

His departure leaves Scolari with a major headache. Emerson added leadership, strength and grit and was the main man in midfield.

It seems likely that Gilberto Silva will now come in to play alongside Juninho in the middle with Cafu and Carlos on the flanks.

Despite the setback, the Brazilian players remained upbeat and confident they can go as far as the final.

"I don't think people here are confident of our success, but we are great," said free-kick specialist Carlos.

"The other teams are all great too so I can't say for sure which team will take first place. But we've won the World Cup several times and we will take it once more."

Star striker Ronaldo, who admits he is still not 100 percent recovered from the knee problems that have hampered his career, was similarly upbeat.

"We are in the best condition and

our skills have improved a lot," said Ronaldo.

"We have done a lot of research on the Turkey team. They have a very strong defence but I can assure you we will win the game against Turkey."

"In fact I strongly believe that we will go on to the final."

Chris Gayle smashed 24 in an over on way to his 67-ball 84 as the West Indies thrashed India by seven wickets in the fourth one-day international at the Queen's Park Oval here on Saturday.

The hosts squared the five-match series 1-1 with this win, having lost the third match by seven wickets at Bridgetown in Barbados on Wednesday.

The left-handed Gayle cracked three sixes and nine fours in his 10th half-century as the West Indies surpassed India's modest total of 123 with 17 balls to spare in a match reduced to 25-overs-a-side due to rain.

Paraguay may have had a penalty of their own in the opening seconds of the match as Santa Cruz went down in the box after tangling with Arendse - but referee Lubos Michel elected to wave play on.

The South Africans, who crashed out in their only previous World Cup showing in 1998 after losing to France and drawing their other two matches, fought back with an early chance as MacBeth Sibaya smacked a shot off target.

The Paraguayans almost went ahead on eight minutes when Arce whipped in a shot that looked destined for the top corner.

But veteran keeper Arendse, surprisingly handed a start for his World Cup debut at the age of 35 by Sono, was equal to the task as he palmed the ball away.

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Forgive and forget

REUTERS, Ulsan

Brazil will put four years of misery, including humiliating defeats on the pitch and a corruption scandal off it, behind them when they take the field on Monday for their opening World Cup match against Turkey.

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari believes the players' minds will be on the future rather than the past as they begin their attempt to win a fifth world crown.

"The players are living the moment," said Scolari, who is Brazil's fourth coach since the end of the 1998 World Cup.

"These four years of difficulties will not make any difference on Monday evening."

Since finishing as runners-up to France in 1998, the four times world champions have gone through one of the worst periods in their history.

An unprecedented run of defeats left them in danger of missing out on the World Cup for the first time, and they suffered a morale-shattering elimination by nine-man Cameroon at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Last year, Brazil were dumped out of the Copa America by Honduras and finished fourth in the Confederations Cup following another embarrassing loss, this time to Australia.

Meanwhile, their top striker

Ronaldo suffered a series of injuries which threatened to wreck his once glittering career.

Off the field, two Congressional inquiries into Brazilian soccer both concluded with devastating reports.

They accused top officials of tax evasion, illegal appropriation of funds and misuse of club and federation money. Among those accused was Ricardo Teixeira, the president of the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) and a member of FIFA's executive committee.

One report accused him of leading the organisation down the road to financial ruin, of mixing personal and CBF business and living in luxury at the CBF's expense. He also donated some of the CBF's money to political campaigns, the report claimed.

The investigations also uncovered a thriving trade in teenagers, who it said were lured to Europe by unscrupulous agents on the promise that they would play for a club, only to be abandoned.

Vanderlei Luxemburgo, one of Scolari's predecessors, was at the centre of the inquiries.

After being fired amid allegations that he had taken commissions on the transfer of players when he was a club coach, Luxemburgo was later found by Congressmen to have amassed a fortune of over \$9 million

in five years.

A commission of inquiry in the Brazilian Senate grilled Luxemburgo for five hours and told him that he is explanations over how he had become so rich had been unsatisfactory.

Having reached rock bottom in 2001, Brazil have slowly been on the up in one year under Scolari's leadership.

Scolari has refused to comment on the off-field troubles, saying only that Teixeira has always provided his staff with everything they have asked for.

Brazil start the World Cup with a seven-match unbeaten record and with Scolari slowly gaining the confidence of a previously sceptical Brazilian media.

"The players are not talking about what happened in the World Cup qualifiers," said Scolari, who guided them through the final stage of qualifying and helped them clinch their place at the tournament in the final game.

"For them, this is the start of the Cup, they want to be champions and they are not dwelling on what happened before," he said. "The Cup starts as normal for Brazil."

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Start differently

FROM PAGE 16
ing his knee in a friendly against Kashima Antlers, will make up an impressive back-up forward on the bench.

The pressure will be on Vieri to deliver the firepower and the powerfully-built striker is convinced that Italy can go all the way. Italy play Croatia and Mexico later in the group.

"I think at least now, at the start, we are very strong and we have great potential. There is a great feeling between us and that is important," said Vieri.

"But there are no easy opponents at a World Cup, there are going to be three battles (in the group). Ecuador are a good team, we need to respect them and be at 100 percent on the field."

Sapporo woes

FROM PAGE 16
phoned up broadcasters in Germany to complain about being unable to watch the finals.

The problem arose because the struggling Kirch group, which owns the World Cup rights, would not sell the digital rights to Germany's main public channels ARD and ZDF, ARD chief Fritz Pleitgen told SID.

"Kirch did not offer to sell us the digital rights although we asked for them many times," Pleitgen said. "We understand the disappointment (of fans) but we tried everything."

FIFA is also investigating why there were around 3,500 empty seats at Friday's opening World Cup match when Senegal produced one of the biggest upsets of the tournament's history by beating France.

Veron alarm for England

FROM PAGE 16
for Batistuta and Claudio Lopez came from defence-splitting passes from Veron.

England captain David Beckham has already warned the damage his club team-mate could do to England's chances of getting through the group stage.

"A player of his ability could destroy any team, let alone us when we come up against him, although we've got the players to combat that," he said.

"All the criticism that 'Seba' has got this season has been so unfair. I feel that and many people at United feel that."

"To say it was a mistake to buy a player like him is ridiculous - he's one of the best midfielders in the world."

Beckham accepts that Veron is likely to be itching to embarrass England.

"We have to overcome that. Of course, you have to watch out for each team's best players and he's definitely one of their best players. None of our players will be taking it easy on him," he insisted.