



PHOTO: AFP

ZERO GRAVITY FOOTBALL: An airborne Brian McBride (bottom) of the United States scores past the diving Portuguese keeper Vitor Baia at Suwon yesterday.

FRANCE VS URUGUAY

Champs' fingers firmly crossed

REUTERS/AP, Seoul

French hopes of retaining their world crown could dissolve on Thursday when they take on Uruguay in a Group A match neither side can afford to lose.

Since they stumbled 1-0 to Senegal in one of the biggest shocks in the tournament's history, the champions have been licking both their physical and psychological wounds.

Uruguay, who were the last of the 32 finalists to qualify, also lost their first game, 2-1 to Denmark, and will be desperate to avoid an early return home to Montevideo.

Many question marks still hang over France but one has almost become an obsession -- the condition of injured playmaker Zinedine Zidane.

Coach Roger Lemerre said Wednesday he had not yet decided whether to start Zidane in Thursday's crunch game.

"There has been no decision," Lemerre told a news conference. "It depends on the player and how his injury feels.

"If he really wants to play, he will overcome his injury," Lemerre added.

The inspirational midfielder missed the opening match with a torn thigh muscle and is doubtful to face the Uruguayans.

The world's most expensive player has since adopted an aloof stance, increasing speculation about his fitness.

Zidane has declined to appear publicly since joining his teammates in the Japanese coastal city of Ibusuki two weeks ago.

But he was quoted in Spanish sports daily Marca earlier this week saying he would not take any risks and would not try an untimely comeback.

"We can't afford another slip," coach Roger Lemerre said. "Even a draw will not be acceptable. We have two matches to play and we must win both of them."

"But it's for sure France don't perform at the same level when Zidane is absent," he said, admitting

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PHOTO: AFP

YOU NEVER KNOW, I MIGHT HAVE TO PLAY IN ZIDANE'S PLACE! French coach Roger Lemerre makes a point during practice at Busan yesterday.

CAMEROON VS SAUDI ARABIA

Saudis for supper?

REUTERS, Saitama

Five days after their 8-0 World Cup drubbing by Germany, Saudi Arabia play Cameroon, another powerful side offering a strong physical challenge.

The African champions' German coach Winfried Schaefer will be licking his lips at the prospect of three easy points at Saitama Stadium on Thursday in the second group E game for both teams.

Cameroon, quarter-finalists in 1990, need a victory after being held 1-1 by Ireland and there will be no excuses if their athletic team do not dispose of the Saudis comfortably.

Schaefer expects Saudi Arabia to

come out fighting.

"You cannot judge the Saudis on that game. We'll still have to be really careful," he said. "We will have to pressure early on in the game, like

the Germans did."

Midfielder Lauren, who has targeted a place in the semi-finals,

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PROBABLE TEAMS

Cameroon (Formation 4-4-2; Jersey numbers in the beginning): 1-Alioum Boukar; 2-Bill Tchato, 5-Raymond Kalla, 4-Rigobert Song, 8-Geremi; 12-Lauren, 17-Marc-Vivien Foe, 20-Salomon Olembe, 3-Pierre Wome; 9-Samuel Eto'o, 10-Patrick Mboma.

Saudi Arabia (Formation 4-4-2; Jersey numbers in the beginning): 1-Mohammed Al-Deayea; 6-Fouzi Al-Shehri, 13-Hussein Sulimani, 4-Abdullah Sulaiman, 12-Ahmed Dokhi; 19-Omar Al-Ghamdi, 8-Mohammed Noor, 18-Nawaf Al-Temyat, 10-Mohammad Al-Shalhoub; 15-Abdullah Jumaan, 20-AI-Hassan Al-Yami.

Referee: Terje Hauge (Norway)

Helping hand for Canadian mum

REUTERS, Kashima

The mother of a Canadian baby denied access to a World Cup match because he did not have a ticket will go to Wednesday's Germany-Ireland match after a kind-hearted Japanese volunteer offered to baby-sit.

Nathalie Mathews from Vancouver said eight-month-old Stephan had been barred from entering Sapporo stadium for Germany's 8-0 demolition of Saudi Arabia on Saturday despite assurances from soccer's governing body that he would be admitted.

Facing a similar situation in Kashima on Wednesday, she said the only way she and her husband could attend the match together was to entrust Stephan to a volunteer helping out with ticketing.

"Even now they won't make an exception," Mathews said. "We've

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PROBABLE TEAMS

France: (Formation 4-4-2; Jersey numbers in the beginning): 16-Fabien Barthez; 15-Lilian Thuram, 8-Marcel Desailly, 18-Frank Leboeuf, 3-Bixente Lizarazu; 4-Patrick Vieira, 17-Emmanuel Petit, 7-Claude Makelele, 22-Johan Micoud; 12-Thierry Henry, 20-David Trezeguet.

Uruguay (Formation 4-3-1-2; Jersey numbers in the beginning): 1-Fabian Carini; 2-Gustavo Mendez, 14-Gonzalo Sorondo, 4-Paolo Montero, 6-Dario Rodriguez; 8-Gustavo Varela, 5-Pablo Garcia, 7-Gianni Guigou; 20-Alvaro Recoba; 13-Sebastian Abreu, 9-Dario Silva.

Referee: Felipe Ramos Rizo (Mexico)

Sweden's 007

REUTERS, Kobe

"My name is Lyth, Thomas Lyth" does not have quite the same ring as James Bond's greeting but a mild-mannered Swede is one of the 007s of the World Cup.

Most teams in South Korea and Japan have assigned coaches to gather information on their group

opponents but few are as open about it as Lyth, whose job has been to watch Nigeria.

"Going to their training camp was really spying," he said.

"Everyone in the city was watching for me. When I told them I was Swedish they tried to stop me."

Lyth has been trying to see how cohesive the Nigerians are, if there are any patterns to their attack and what they do on set pieces.

After an opening 1-1 draw with England in group F, Sweden play their next match on Friday against Nigeria, who lost 1-0 to Argentina in their first game.

"I would go at 7 a.m. (1000 GMT) and if there were a lot of police officers around, then I would know they were training at that time," he said.

"No police meant they were training in the afternoon," said Lyth, who has also attended Nigeria's friendlies since the two countries were drawn together last December.

"I was impressed with the coach (Adegboye Onigbinde). I don't think he even raised his voice after the Argentina game," said Lyth, who added that the key to beating Nigeria would be closing down forward Nwankwo Kanu.

Sweden's open approach at the World Cup has been remarkably different from most other teams, where regimented news conferences reveal little with players hidden away and translators unavailable.

"That is the way things are done in Sweden," joint team manager Lars Lagerback said earlier this week.

"You can walk into any government office back in Sweden and see how things are done. It is an open society," he said.

That openness extended to a news conference, which was attended by almost all the players who nearly outnumbered the journalists.

Some, such as goalkeeper Magnus Hedman who plays for English first division club Coventry City, greeted non-Swedish media with "No worries, mate."

Sweden also had former World Cup defender Roland Andersson to spy on England, while the federation used Goran Goransson to gather information ahead of the Argentina match on June 12.

Russia roar after breather

AFP, Kobe

After slumbering through the opening period Russia stepped through the gears to beat Tunisia 2-0 here on

Wednesday to take early command of World Cup Group H.

Both sides, playing their first match of the tournament, were looking for a win to take them above

group rivals Japan and Belgium, who drew 2-2 on Tuesday.

And it was the Russians who found a way through with two quickfire second-half goals from Egor Titov and Valery Karpin.

Russia's last appearance in the second phase was 1986 but this win means that another three points at the expense of co-hosts Japan on Sunday in Yokohama will end that poor run.

The first half comprised 45 minutes of the duller football served up at the tournament so far.

But a vastly-improved Russian performance in the second half ensured that this year's event has yet to produce a goalless draw after 15 matches, equalling the record set at USA 94.

Titov finally broke the deadlock on the hour when Tunisian goalkeeper Ali Boumnijel, in a mad moment, threw the ball straight to substitute Dmitri Sychev, who chested the ball down for Titov to drive home.

Titov had come the closest for the Russians with a low drive in the dying seconds of the half.

But the 26-year-old Spartak Moscow midfielder deserved his stroke of luck as he netted his fifth international goal.

Sychev, on for the ineffective Vladimir Beschastnykh, won a penalty four minutes later after colliding with Radhi Jaidi and Karpin sent Boumnijel the wrong way with the kick.

The double blow caused Tunisian heads to drop and their frustration grew only greater when Ziad Jaziri, whose overhead kick just after Karpin's goal failed to trouble Russian keeper Ruslan Nigmatullin, picked up a yellow card for diving in the area with 15 minutes left.

Ironically the North Africans

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PHOTO: AFP

MIG 31! A Russian player leaps atop teammates who are celebrating Egor Titov's goal against Tunisia at Kobe yesterday.

CUP CORNER

AFP, Seoul

The official 2002 World Cup website received 165 million 'page impressions' in the first four days of the finals, which is half the number recorded for the entire Sydney Olympics, FIFA said on Wednesday.

The site, www.FIFAworldcup.com, registered 79 million 'clicks' on Tuesday alone, the day of tournament co-host South Korea's victory against Poland.

The figure for the official website of the 2000 Olympics over the three

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TODAY'S MATCHES

Denmark vs Senegal Venue: Daegu Time: 12:30 pm	Cameroon vs Saudi Arabia Venue: Saitama Time: 3:00 pm	France vs Uruguay Venue: Busan Time: 5:30 pm
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Let off lightly

AFP, Seoul

Brazilian star Rivaldo on Wednesday escaped a ban for his self-confessed faked injury which got a Turkish World Cup opponent sent off but insisted he had no regrets.

FIFA's disciplinary committee said it would only fine Rivaldo 11,500 Swiss francs (7,350 dollars) for the first major case of what it calls "simulation" in the Group C match on Monday which Brazil won 2-1.

The Brazilian said he had no worries about his action and that football's international governing body would never be able to clamp down on soccer's cheats.

The case caused a major World Cup controversy.

But a FIFA statement said only: "The FIFA disciplinary committee today announced that they had imposed a total fine of 11,500 Swiss francs on Rivaldo (Bra) for an incident in the June 3 match between Brazil and Turkey."

It said there was a basic fine of 10,000 Swiss francs with 1,500 Swiss francs in expenses.

The fine is less than half a day's wages for the Barcelona star whose

contract with the Spanish club alone is worth six million dollars a year.

FIFA spokesman Keith Cooper said no further comment on the punishment would be made on the case until a regular briefing on Thursday.

But a top FIFA official said, on condition of anonymity, that Rivaldo's simulation had been the subject of "tremendous pressure" from all sides involved.

Rivaldo admitted after the match that he had deliberately exaggerated an injury, collapsing to the ground holding his face after Turkish defender Hakan Unsal had kicked the ball at his legs, in a bid to get Unsal sent off.

But at training in Ulsan on Wednesday, Rivaldo said: "I'm calm about the punishment."

"I don't want to talk much about it to avoid creating more headlines. This is something from the past. I'm now looking ahead."

"These things happen in football and if I spend time thinking about what happened it's not going to help anyone."

Asked if he regretted the inci

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PHOTO: AFP

NO BIG DEAL! Brazil superstar Rivaldo in a relaxed mood during gym training at Ulsan yesterday after he was fined by the FIFA disciplinary committee for play-acting.