



PHOTO: AFP

'THANK YOU. SORRY WE LET YOU DOWN': Japanese players thank the home fans after their exit from the World Cup at Miyagi yesterday.

Never mind, Nippon

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan sighed in dismay after its dream of an advance to the World Cup quarter-finals ended in defeat and bitter disappointment.

Turkey's 1-0 victory on Tuesday was an anti-climatic finish to a drama which had riveted the nation as the blue-clad squad made a historic advance to the soccer tournament's knock-out phase with wins over Russia and Tunisia and a thrilling draw with Belgium.

"I'm disappointed," said 21-year-old student Kohei Aramaki. "There were some good chances but... I am just disappointed. We can see that Japan is getting stronger, but I wanted them to win at least one

more," he added.

The performance had cheered a country more accustomed to economic gloom and political scandal and had erased the memory of the team's dismal World Cup debut four years ago, when they came home after three losses and just one goal.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had words of comfort for the downcast team.

"It's a shame, but they did very well. They bought excitement to so many people," he told reporters in the evening.

"I would like to thank the manager Troussier and the players," he added, referring to coach Philippe Troussier, who is due to stand down after the tournament.

Waves of fans wearing the blue team colours cheered, boomed, and fell silent as they watched at the stadium in northern Japan while the tinted-haired team struggle in vain to defeat a determined Turkey.

Many stayed on when the match had ended, chanting -- as they had for victories -- "Troussier Ni-ppon, Troussier Ni-ppon", as team members waved back and some players sobbed.

Outside the stadium, crowds of umbrella-toting fans chanted "Otsukare Nippon, Otsukare Nippon," -- a phrase expressing

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Fuming Azzurri

REUTERS, Rome

Dismay, disbelief, anger and tears - Italy took their World Cup defeat against South Korea like a slap around the face on Tuesday and blamed the Ecuadorian referee for their shock exit.

"Death to the referee," chanted hundreds of Italian supporters gathered in central Rome to watch the game on a giant television screen.

After trailing for much of the game, South Korea drew level with just two minutes to go before the final whistle.

In extra time Italy had a man sent off and a goal disallowed for offside - both decisions denounced by Italian television commentators - before South Korea scored the winning golden goal.

"Frankly, that was complete robbery," Bruno Pizzul, Italy's most famous commentator told state television RAI immediately after the game.

Franco Frattini, Italy's minister for public offices, said: "The referee was a disgrace, absolutely scandalous. I've never seen a game like it. It seemed as if they just sat around a table and decided to throw us out."

People watching the game across the country in squares, bars and offices, hugged and consoled each other in stunned silence.

Many cried openly, tears streaming down their cheeks in the boiling summer sun as the Italian players trailed off the field in Taejeon, Korea.

"I expected a victory, the pain is enormous. There is no justice in this world, especially with these referees," said 26-year old Rosalba Petrone, sitting with friends in Rome's gigantic Piazza del Popolo.

Italy, which has won three World Cups, suffered a number of hotly-contested refereeing decisions in their three first-round games earlier this month, with four goals disallowed -- three of them unfairly, according to the local press.

But Tuesday's refereeing by Ecuador's Byron Moreno provoked fury from the corridors of power to the sun-filled streets.

Italy ground to a halt for the game, the streets emptied and crowds gathered around huge screens set up in city centre squares, or else huddled around television sets in bars and offices. Cries of disbelief poured from open windows.

"Don't betray us," the main sports newspaper Gazzetta dello Sport yelled in a front page headline on Tuesday beneath a photo of the Italian squad.

But, for once, no-one was blaming the players when the final whistle blew.

"I can say nothing. It was the World Cup and it's all over," Maurizio Romana, wearing an Italian flag around his waist like a sarong, said in front of Milan's imposing Cathedral.

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PHOTO: AFP

YOU CAN'T LOSE WITH A FAN LIKE THIS! A South Korean baby at the entrance of Daejeon's World Cup Stadium yesterday.

Arena on his arena

REUTERS, Seoul

United States coach Bruce Arena says the secret to America's unprecedented World Cup success this time is finding the right blend of coach control and player initiative.

"There's got to be the right understanding between the coach and the manager and the players," said Arena, thrust into the limelight with his team's advance to a quarter-final against Germany after a 2-0 defeat of Mexico.

"I think we've struck the right balance," he told reporters. Asked about his coaching style, Arena said: "I'm not very dictatorial. I do have some ideas."

"I think as we get into this level, there's a lot of pre-planning in how we're going to go out and play a game," he said.

"We don't have a great margin for error here, so our guys have got to be pretty sure about what their responsibilities are," said Arena.

Arena, who comes across as easy-going with a media pack growing with every U.S. win, said he is always available but does not try to be a friend to his 23 players.

"I'm not one of the boys, but I'm not staying at the Ritz Carlton while

they're here at the J.W Merriot," he said.

The Merriot in Seoul is the U.S. team's base for the World Cup. U.S. games have been in four different cities in South Korea so far, and they face Germany in industrial Ulsan on Friday.

"We're together all the time and for the most part, we get along well," he said.

Goalkeeper Brad Friedel, one of the team's senior players and having the tournament of his life, said Arena "took on a very big job after 1998, both on and off the field."

A demoralised U.S. side finished with as bad a record as any of the 32 teams in the 1998 World Cup, losing all their matches. Arena, a former collegiate goalkeeper, took over the team at the end of 1998.

"He lets the team play. He's not a dictator," Friedel said.

Having far exceeded his modest goal of rebuilding U.S. soccer from its lows of four years ago, Arena still shrugs off questions about his future after the World Cup as "putting the cart before the horse."

"I'm not spending time worrying about my future," he said. "I'm worrying about Germany."



PHOTO: AFP

IF ONLY THERE WERE NO MORE MATCHES! Brazil superstars (L-R) Roberto Carlos, Cafu and Ronaldo relaxing in a 'jacuzzi' at the Grand Hamamatsu Hotel yesterday.

Rs save star blushes

REUTERS, Yokohama

In a World Cup that has gorged on shock results rather than individual brilliance, Ronaldo and Rivaldo are the only players who have fully lived up to their rave pre-tournament ratings.

Batistuta has gone home with Argentina, Beckham has only just regained full fitness, Owen's talent has flickered without shining brightly and Totti is still to make an indelible mark.

But you can always rely on the Brazilians at a World Cup.

With at least a goal each in the first four matches, Rivaldo and Ronaldo have demonstrated that while teamwork and tactics can take a side so far, a splash of genius always comes in handy.

Ronaldo's ball control, vision and ability to withstand tackles in the area are unrivalled among modern strikers.

But three years of injury problems, following his seizure before the

1998 World Cup final against France, had led to serious doubts he would ever repeat the goalscoring feats that won him the World Player of the Year award in 1996 and 1997.

"I hope we have 'rescued' Ronaldo in time," said Pele when the striker made his international return earlier this year.

It is now clear Ronaldo is close to his best again but, while the toothy grin is still there, he appears more focused and determined to prove he is the best of the best.

Before the finals began the 25-year-old told fans to bet on him becoming the top scorer. His increasing frustration during the 2-0 defeat of Belgium on Friday, as he failed to find the target, showed how much this individual prize means to him.

Ronaldo has five goals, the same number as Germany's Miroslav Klose, ahead of Friday's quarter-final against England after finally scoring against Mexico in the 87th minute.

He now is five away from Gerd

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CUP CORNER

AFP, London

England are hoping to gain a small psychological lift by forcing Brazil to swap their famous yellow shirts for blue ones in Friday's World Cup quarter-final showdown, it was reported here Tuesday.

The Daily Telegraph reported that as part of what "appeared to be a carefully planned campaign to prepare the players psychologically" England would insist on Brazil playing in blue in Shizuoka.

England, as the designated 'home team', have the right to choose which colour shirts to play.

The Telegraph said there was a feeling in the England camp that Brazil

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NO MATCHES TODAY

QUARTERFINALS START FROM JUNE 21



PHOTO: AFP

OUCH! Teammates slap on the back of Spain captain Fernando Hierro during a light-hearted moment in practice at Ulsan yesterday.