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READY TO RIDE IN THE SUNSET: French's talisman Zinedine Zidane (L) hops with forwards David Trezeguet and Franck Ribery during a training session in the Weserbergland stadium in Hameln.

Questionable French attack

INTERNET, undated

While coach Raymond Domenech was able to resolve a number of burning issues during France's warm-up games, questions over his striking options were brought into sharp focus by Djibril Cisse's withdrawal from the squad with a broken leg.

Given three warm-up games to fine-tune his first eleven, Raymond Domenech used every opportunity to shuffle his forward line. First David Trezeguet joined Djibril Cisse up front against Mexico, then Thierry Henry partnered Louis Saha against Denmark and finally Henry led the attack with Cisse (followed by Trezeguet) for the match against China. Those switches yielded 1-0, 2-0 and 3-1 wins, but they also suggested hesitation on the part of the coach, not least because the rest of his team remained unchanged throughout.

It is not hard to understand French concerns, of course, especially with the spectre of Korea/Japan 2002 hanging over

them. Four years ago, the then-world champions arrived in Asia nurturing great hopes of retaining their title, only to exit the competition without a single point and, more embarrassingly, without having netted a single goal.

Unsurprisingly then, the focus has fallen squarely on France's strikers as their first encounter in the 2006 FIFA World Cup™ draws close. Beyond the natural desire to erase memories of their previous outing, Les Bleus have been desperate to settle upon an attacking partnership capable of creating sparks against a Swiss side that has frustrated them more than once recently.

Pitted together during the qualifiers, the European neighbours played out two hard-fought draws, beginning with a goalless stalemate at the Stade de France. Djibril Cisse then fired the French in front during the return match, but a Ludovic Magnin equaliser ensured a share of the spoils for their hosts in Basle. This time the stakes are even higher, and the team that can

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Trezeguet aims Platini record

AFP, Hamelin

Juventus striker David Trezeguet is gunning for Michel Platini's record of scoring 41 goals for the national team.

He is currently third on the all-time list with 32 goals behind Platini who hit the net 41 times in the 1980s and his own current strike partner Thierry Henry who has 33.

"My goal with the national team in the next few years is to beat Michel Platini's record," said Trezeguet who in November, 2005 edged ahead of the same player for goals scored at Juventus before going on to become the club's all-

time top foreign-born scorer.

"It meant a lot to me this season when I became Juve's top foreign goal-scorer," he said.

Trezeguet looks set to resume his partnership with Henry for France's World Cup opener against Switzerland in Stuttgart on Tuesday.

Coach Raymond Domenech played Liverpool striker Djibril Cisse up front with the Arsenal player in Les Bleus' final warm-up game against China in St Etienne

last week.

But Cisse broke his right leg early in the match and Trezeguet was brought on scoring the opening goal in a 3-1 win.

FRANCE V SWITZERLAND

Mission: Exorcise 2002

AFP, Stuttgart

France takes on neighbours Switzerland in their opening World Cup skirmish in Stuttgart on Tuesday eager to atone for their tepid title defence four years ago.

Chastened by the Asian nightmare when they became the first defending champions to crash out of the group stages without scoring a single goal Les Bleus will be out to get their 2006 campaign off to a flying start.

Anxious not to see history repeating itself Raymond Domenech has gone to great lengths to ensure his men are fitter and fresher than Roger Lemerre's jaded class of 2002.

Preparations have included a team-building expedition up a 3,000 metre alpine glacier and they have another mountain to climb in Kobi Kuhn's young, well-honed, efficient side that held Italy to a 1-1 draw in a warm-up.

The two countries know each other well, having crossed swords in qualifying, with France pinching the group on the last day and Switzerland joining them after surviving an explosive play-off with Turkey.

Domenech has at his disposal a potent mix of experience in the guise of the talismanic Zinedine Zidane, for whom this represents a final curtain call before retirement,

Claude Makelele and potential matchwinner Thierry Henry, and fresh blood in the shape of the Frank Ribery-the joker in the pack. The Marseille midfielder's exceptional pace and lust for battle have earned him a huge fan club. Introduced late in the game on only his third cap he was at the heart of France's last gasp win against the Chinese at Saint Etienne.

"Amongst ourselves we talk about letting him off the leash again," said teammate Claude Makelele.

Henry, Arsenal's record goalscorer, marshals the attack but

Domenech's plans to team him up with Djibril Cisse were dashed by the broken leg the Liverpool striker suffered against China last Wednesday.

Domenech, whose one injury concern involves Florent Malouda, is relaxed ahead of Tuesday's curtain raiser.

"Perhaps this will worry you but I don't have any particular concerns," he told reporters.

"I know that we're going well, I don't see why I should be worried when the players show a collective wish that this World Cup passes off well."

"We want to show our true side against the Swiss, the South Koreans and the Togolese (France's other Group G rivals), and I hope against other teams."

But the former France Under 21 coach sounded a cautionary note too.

"There's still room for improvement in defence, in recovering the ball and in ball control between the players."

"We're far from being perfect," he stressed.

"Everything can improve and I hope we'll have plenty of time to improve," said Kuhn.

Alexander Frei, who comes off an injury-hit season with French club Rennes, heads the Swiss frontline and he will be hoping to stick around longer than he did at

Euro 2004 when he was sent home early for spitting.

Frei took his international tally to 25 with a double in Switzerland's 4-1 win, also against the Chinese, in their final friendly.

His preferred strike partner, Johann Vonlanthen, is injured with 29-year-old midfielder Hakan Yakin stepping in as a replacement.

The Swiss backrow has as its cornerstone Henry's Highbury colleague, Philippe Senderos, who made his international bow against France in qualifying a year ago.

The 21-year-old, who missed out on the Champions League final with injury, is highly rated by both his club boss Arsene Wenger and Kuhn and will be lying in wait to stifle Henry and co.

"When we play against France we could play them 10 times and perhaps win twice, so we have to hope one of those wins will come on Tuesday," said Kuhn.

A lot has been made in the Swiss camp of the fact that France striker Thierry Henry missed their last two meetings through injuries.

"He (Henry) is one of the best strikers in the world, if not the best, and I see his inclusion as an important difference to the two qualifying matches," said Kuhn.

The Swiss are the second youngest side at the 2006 World Cup and with that in mind Kuhn warned: "This tournament may come a bit too early for us."

squad player when his country won the 1998 competition.

Yet Wenger reckons the unfaired French should not be underestimated in Germany, with the inspirational Henry one of several experienced players.

Wenger said: "I watched England's match against Paraguay and it wasn't stunning, I'm wondering why France don't get more credit."

"Henry can have a great World Cup but you have to be careful with that. If the team plays badly, a single player cannot do everything."

But Domenech gave a public vote of confidence to former Arsenal skipper Patrick Vieira, one of six veterans from the France 98 squad.

Gallas a Linekar fan

REUTERS, undated

Asked for his favourite FIFA World Cup player and moment, France defender William Gallas came up with unexpected answers.

"Gary Lineker and England v Cameroon," Gallas told reporters on Sunday with no hesitation at all.

Zinedine Zidane and France's 3-0 triumph over Brazil in the 1998 FIFA World Cup final would have sounded more natural choices for a French international but Gallas explained he loved English and African football.

"Gary Lineker is a player I always loved," said the Chelsea player. "I like his style very much."

The match Gallas picked was an epic quarter-final battle in Naples at the 1990 FIFA World Cup final. France won 3-2 after extra time by England over the Indomitable Lions of England's Arsenal.

The Swiss want respect and manager Koebl Kuhn is eager to get by beating former world champion France in their World Cup opener.

"The idea of the little Switzerland, that's over," striker Alexander Frei said.

Even Kuhn says Swiss soccer is getting bolder, thanks to a decade of nurturing young players, many now employed by big European clubs. The Swiss side contains two members from the team that won the 2002 European Under-17 Championship, midfielder Tranquillo Barnetta of Germany's Bayer Leverkusen and defender Philippe Senderos of England's Arsenal.

The Swiss drew twice with France in qualifying, albeit the French were without Thierry Henry, whom Kuhn praised as one of the best strikers in the world.

Big Swiss

AP, Germany

Kuhn said even with Henry in the lineup, a Swiss victory is not unthinkable.

"It is up to us to make the impossible possible," he said Saturday.

The Swiss arrived in remote Bad Bertrich, a village near the Moselle River, earlier this week, seeking seclusion during the last days before their first World Cup appearance in 12 years on Tuesday in Stuttgart. In 1994, the Swiss reached the second round before losing to Spain.

In this tournament, France is the favourite of most in Switzerland's Group G, followed by South Korea.

The remaining team in the group, Togo, was in turmoil Saturday after coach Otto Pfister quit, apparently because of a pay dispute between players and Togo's national federation. The cautious Kuhn said the upheaval

didn't necessarily weaken the Togo team.

Frei said beating France and moving to the next round will earn it credibility as a serious soccer nation.

"Then everyone will say, those little Swiss, they can really play soccer," he said.

One of Kuhn's concerns eased Saturday when Senderos returned to full training Saturday after recovering from a muscle strain. Midfielder Valon Behrami, also with a muscle injury, isn't 100 percent fit yet, team doctors said.

With the big game approaching, the players said they are charging to play and prove themselves.

"It's positive pressure," goalkeeper Pascal Zuberbuehler said. "There's a lot of anticipation."

Kuhn was also upbeat.

"The squad knows what it's capable of," he said. "We can only surprise ourselves."

Blatter passes up Stuttgart match

INTERNET, Berlin

FIFA chief Joseph Blatter said Sunday he will skip his native Switzerland's first World Cup match and pledged neutrality during their clash with France.

Blatter said he will go to watch the Swiss at some point, but not in Stuttgart on Wednesday.

"One's heart beats faster with a game like Switzerland against France, but I will be neutral and will not attend the match," Blatter told German broadcaster

Wenger guns for France

INTERNET, undated

Arsene Wenger claims France will surpass England at the World Cup and insists Thierry Henry will finally prove himself on the game's biggest stage.

The Arsenal boss was unimpressed by England's 1-0 victory over Paraguay on Saturday.

And he believes his own nation will be a bigger hit when they start their campaign against Switzerland in Stuttgart tomorrow.

Gunners skipper Henry was a flop at the last World Cup, when he was sent off against Uruguay as the French crashed out in the first round.

And he was an inexperienced

squad player when his country won the 1998 competition.

Yet Wenger reckons the unfaired French should not be underestimated in Germany, with the inspirational Henry one of several experienced players.

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"Henry can have a great World Cup but you have to be careful with that. If the team plays badly, a single player cannot do everything."

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Switzerland players (L-R) strikers Daniel Gygax, Marco Streller, midfielder Ricardo Cabanas and forward Alexander Frei enjoy their final training session at the Uessbachtal Stadium near the resort town of Bad Bertrich on Monday.