

'England need rain'

INTERNET, undated

Paraguay striker Roque Santa Cruz believes the heavens will need to open if England are to taste World Cup glory in Germany. The Bayern Munich hitman believes the heat could hinder England's chances of going far in the tournament after seeing them wilt in searing temperatures on Saturday.

"To win the World Cup, England will need rain," said Santa Cruz. "Their players are some of the best in the world as individuals, but they need to get better as a team."

"They have a chance to win, but they are also very tired from a long season in their league and that may be a reason why they can't do it."

But after seeing England flatter to deceive in their 1-0 defeat of Paraguay, Santa Cruz the best is yet to come from Sven-Goran Eriksson's side.

"England can play so much better," he added. "We thought they would come and be positive, but we didn't really see that."

"They could have a problem as they progress through the tournament but in Germany you never know what is going to be with the weather."

No holy water for Lippi

REUTERS, Hanover

There will be no 'holy water' on Italy's bench when they fight it out for the illusive fourth title in Germany.

In South Korea and Japan four years ago, coach Giovanni Trapattoni had a small plastic bottle of water next to him in the dugout but his successor Marcello Lippi will not follow suit.

"I haven't brought holy water," Lippi told reporters on Sunday.

"A friend gave me some wine as a good-luck gift and told me to take it with me to the World Cup but I haven't brought it. I've already drunk a good part of it."

Trapattoni's ritual before the first match of the 2002 World Cup involved carrying out 'confession' sessions with players in their rooms.

Lippi said he would not be paying any such visits to his players.

"I don't even carry out confession myself and I won't be visiting their rooms," he said.

Swedes in brawl again

AFP, Stockholm

Swedish captain Olof Mellberg and teammate Fredrik Ljungberg had a bustup after a disappointing World Cup draw against Trinidad and Tobago, the Swedish press reported on Monday.

The brawl brought back memories of the 2002 World Cup in Japan, when Ljungberg angrily went for Mellberg following a hard sliding tackle during training and the players had to be separated by force.

But this time, it was no more than "a hot but short dispute", the IT news agency quoted team spokesman Thomas Saletag as saying.

According to Swedish reports, the row began when Ljungberg expressed his unhappiness with the Swedish game after the Trinidad and Tobago match Saturday, which ended in a goalless draw.

He specifically complained about long passes coming from the Swedish defence, especially from Mellberg.

'Don't write off Costa Rica'

INTERNET, undated

Ecuador coach Luis Fernando Suarez believes Costa Rica will prove sterner opposition than Poland when the two sides meet on Thursday.

Ecuador defeated Poland 2-0, while their Central American rivals went down 4-2 to Germany, but Suarez insists his side will be taking nothing for granted.

"We know them well and they know us well," said the Ecuador coach. "It's going to be a completely different game. It is a more dangerous game for us than against Poland."

"We have a cultural problem in South America," he added. "Before the start nobody said Ecuador would win against Poland. Now after we have won, everyone is saying (beating) Costa Rica will not be difficult and we will win."

"We must change that way of thinking. We respect Costa Rica as rivals. They have a very aggressive frontline, they are quick at breaking down the flanks and have a good striker in (Paulo) Wanchope."



Argentine striker Hernan Crespo leaves the AOL Arena at Hamburg after a satisfying 2-1 win against Ivory Coast on Sunday. The Chelsea forward scored the opening goal.

PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea marksmen firing



AFP, Berlin

If anyone doubted Roman Abramovich's money was ill spent on his strikers then the opening matches of the World Cup would have blown those apart.

The Russian billionaire's millions has so far seen Blues' marksmen Didier Drogba, Hernan Crespo and Arjen Robben score goals -- with two of the three Drogba and Robben hitting the back of the net in unfamiliar orange.

And that is even before the fearsome Andriy Shevchenko, recently signed from AC Milan for a reported club record fee of

30million pounds, lets rip for Ukraine, even if he may sit out the opener against Spain for injury.

Drogba for all his awkwardness with his gangly frame and reputation for diving showed in the 2-1 defeat by Argentina that he can mix it with the best.

"His heart is what is important to me," opined Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho, though, cynics might suggest that having outlasted over 20million pounds for the Ivory Coast star he would say that anyway to justify the fee.

"He is one of the last players I would sell. He gives his all even in lost causes," added Mourinho, though, there have been few of those in the past two seasons at Stamford Bridge.

While Drogba seems certain to stay at Chelsea, according to his agent they are negotiating a new contract, for Crespo the future

seems less of a blue hue and perhaps a new turn in Turkey with Fenerbahce.

The ambitious Turkish outfit have had their fair share of bohemian strikers -- though Istanbul is the perfect city for those of that vein given it is at the crossroads of Europe and the Orient -- and Crespo seems destined all the same to leave.

"What more can I do?" pleaded a bemused Crespo prior to the World Cup.

"I have always produced it for Chelsea when asked but the coach seems to have a blind spot when it comes to choosing between me and Didier as to the long term future."

"All I can do now is produce the goods at the World Cup and find a club willing to take me."

For the third successive World Cup Crespo has scored a goal in

Argentina's opening match, so he may still be able to sway the enigmatic Mourinho's mind which could see Icelandic international Eidur Gudjohnsen leave instead.

Robben sounded relaxed about his future even prior to his one man show in the 1-0 win over Serbia and Montenegro and his dynamic display will have done him nothing but favours with Mourinho especially as at 22 he has plenty of years in him yet.

However the one thing Mourinho would like to see is more of what he produces for his country, although, the feisty winger appears to be untroubled.

"It doesn't make a difference to me whether I'm playing for Chelsea or the national team," he said.

"The player I am I need some freedom in my game and I've got that from every manager."

Keane hangs up his boots

AFP, Glasgow

Roy Keane, the midfielder who was instrumental in Manchester United's dominance of English football throughout the 1990's, has announced his retirement from football because of injury.

The Irish international, who finished his career by helping Celtic to the Scottish league title, made the announcement on Monday after receiving doctor's advice to quit, six months after leaving United following an acrimonious bust-up with Sir Alex Ferguson.

"Having received medical advice from my surgeon and the Celtic club doctor, I feel my only option is to retire," Keane said in a statement.

The statement did not specify the nature of the injury which has forced Keane to call it a day but the Irishman had been plagued by recurring hip problems in the last few seasons of his illustrious career.

Celtic manager Gordon Strachan, who had been hoping that Keane would be able to play for another season, paid tribute to "one of the greatest ever players to grace the game of football."

"It was fantastic that we were able to bring him to Celtic and it has been a privilege to work with him," Strachan said.

"Even in his short time with the Club, Roy made a great contribution and played an important part in bringing success to the club last season."

"We were delighted to make Roy's dream come true when we signed him for Celtic and we were happy when he made our dream come true, by helping us to win the title."

Strangers in a strange land



AP, Gelsenkirchen

They're surrounded by the tightest security, quizzed about lukewarm support back home and constantly questioned over whether they can reprise a surprisingly successful run in the last World Cup.

Must be the Americans, still strangers in the land of soccer and hoping to prove that Yanks can hang in the world's No. 1 sport.

"Everyone is anxious," USA captain Claudio Reyna said Sunday after arriving in the city where they'll finally play Monday. "It's that time, really. It's what everyone has been waiting for for the last four years."

The United States made it to the quarterfinals at the 2002 tournament in South Korea before losing 1-0 to Germany, their most successful World Cup since 1930.

Since then, midfielder Landon Donovan's hair has thinned and winger Eddie Lewis speaks with a decidedly British accent now that he's played for English clubs the past six years.

There is one constant, though. Security.

When the Americans leave their hotel in Essen to travel to their opener against the Czech Republic, an ever-present convoy of police, State Department officials and private guards will encircle them. The US bus is the only among the 32 teams that doesn't display the country's name.

Reyna said security isn't on players' minds.

"We're here to get results and do well," he said. "The World Cup is an experience you want to enjoy. The

guys are having a great time. There's no tension or anxiety within the team because of the security issues."

Not so the opening game. US players know well that years of work could be wiped out by just a few seconds of lapses against the Czechs, Italy and Ghana, all part of the United States' tough Group E.

"It's very difficult to lose the first game and expect to get through," Donovan said.

Their battle for respect extends beyond the famous soccer grounds of Europe. In America, many sports fans remain unconvinced that soccer is worth their time. Former congressman Jack Kemp, once an NFL quarterback, proclaimed on the floor of the House of Representatives: "Football is democratic, capitalism, whereas soccer is a European socialist sport."

Twelve of the 23 US players are based in Europe, several with big clubs, but many say they still encounter condescension from continental types sceptical of their new-world pedigree.

"Until we've really proven ourselves on kind of the European stage, I think it will still be there," said goalkeeper Kasey Keller, who plays here and lives in a German castle.

Growth has been slow, but steady.

Major League Soccer, launched in 1996, has 12 teams, with more planned. ABC and ESPN bought US English-language television rights for the 2010 and 2014 World Cups for 100 million dollars, and Univision purchased US Spanish-language rights for the next two tournaments for 325 million dollars.

Corporate sponsors have amped up their support, with Nike erecting giant billboards in New York and San Francisco featuring Donovan, Clint

Dempsey, Eddie Johnson and DaMarcus Beasley and the warning "BEWARE."

It's far different than 1990, when the Americans returned to the World Cup for the first time since 1950 -- and were manhandled 5-1 by Czechoslovakia in their opener.

Current coach Bruce Arena sat in the stands at Stadio Comunale in Florence, Italy, that day to root on players he coached at the University of Virginia.

"In a sense it was embarrassing how far behind we were," he said. "We didn't belong on the field."

As host of the 1994 World Cup, the United States made it to the second round before losing to eventual champion Brazil. At the 1998 tournament in France, the Americans finished last, leading to Arena's shiring.

He is now the longest-tenured of the 32 World Cup coaches.

Arena has plenty of line-up options, but won't divulge them. His defence appeared set, with Keller in goal, Lewis at left back, 6-foot-4 Oguchi Onyewu and Eddie Pope in the centre, and Steve Cherundolo on the right. Reyna anchors the midfield, where Beasley could flank him on either side, with Bobby Conway and Dempsey possible starters.

Donovan and Brian McBride, who each scored two goals in 2002, are starters barring unforeseen injuries, and forward Josh Wolff or defensive midfielder Pablo Mastroeni could get selected.

Four years ago, the United States upset highly favoured Portugal 3-2 in the opener, so the Czechs say they expect the Americans to play them tough.

"They play fast soccer," midfielder Tomas Rosicky said. "We've seen what they're capable of."

Blessed from heaven



REUTERS, Nuremberg

Two days after attending his father's funeral in Guadalajara, Mexico's Oswaldo Sanchez fell to his knees as he tasted World Cup joy in front of a mass of his country's fans at the Frankenstadion.

The 32-year-old goalkeeper, who was confirmed as playing only after a lunchtime chat with Mexico coach Ricardo Lavolpe, played a fundamental role as Mexico beat Iran 3-1 in their opening group D clash.

And when the game ended, he could not hold back his feelings as the fans who greeted him warmly on his return and chanted his name before the kick-off gave him another huge ovation.

"I'm glad for the result. I had the desire of coming back to the team to play today's match," he said. "It was my dream and it was my father's dream. I couldn't stay in Guadalajara -- I had to be here."

For Sanchez, one of the most popular players in the Mexico squad and one of the most experienced, it was a triumph to emerge from four traumatic days with a Mexican victory.

Lavolpe, who had waited as late as possible to give him a chance to play, said that Sanchez would now have a guardian angel to protect him throughout the rest of the tournament.

"He has been waiting four years for this to happen," said Lavolpe.

"He did not play last time, at the last World Cup. So he has worked hard for four years and he has his chance now."

"He has been with me now for these three years. He went home to be with his family and talk to them and he came back."

"Now his father is up there" and he is looking down on him. He wanted him to be in this World Cup

and to play and now he has him looking down and he has an angel to protect him in this World Cup."

Sanchez's career had previously been played in the shadows of Jorge Campos at the 1996 finals in France and then Oscar Perez in 2002.

But he came to the fore last year during the Confederation Cup and conceded only five goals in the 12-qualifiers in which he played.



PHOTO: AFP

THIS ONE'S FOR YOU DAD: Mexican goalkeeper Oswaldo Sanchez gestures towards the heavens as a mark of respect towards his father following his team's victory over Iran at Nuremberg on Sunday.

World Cup is hazardous!



AFP, Berlin

From Mogadishu to Kabul to Baghdad, watching the World Cup is proving to be bad for your health.

Sometimes it's fatal.

Hardline Islamic courts in the Somali capital have banned people from watching the action in Germany on television believing it to be against Muslim teaching.

In a brief but violent protest, two people were killed as gunmen, reportedly allied to the Joint Islamic Courts, forced three cinema halls to shut and warned football lovers against watching the matches which were being relayed through satellite.

"The Islamic courts have ordered the closure of three cinema halls," said Sukahola resident Abdulaziz Hanad.

"They want to make sure that nobody in Mogadishu watches the World Cup."

In war-torn Baghdad, many Iraqis feared they would miss out on the spectacle as the coun-

try's public broadcaster had no retransmission rights and the cost of subscriptions are beyond the means of many.

"I can't buy a decoder for the Arab channel that is showing all the matches," said student Mustafa Abdel Sattar.

For 175 dollars (135 euros), subscribers receive a special package that includes all 64 matches broadcast by the ART channel.

In Afghanistan, the 10,000-strong NATO force can watch the games on cinema-style screens at the International Security Assistance Force headquarters (ISAF) in Kabul.

German soldiers were to first to test-run the facility by watching their team's 4-2 win over Costa Rica on Friday 5,000 kilometres (3,000 miles) from where the match was being played in Munich.

They were some of the 200 NATO soldiers -- German, French, British, Macedonian, Turkish and Swiss -- who gathered in the Wolves' Den bar in Camp Warehouse to watch a live transmission of the match.

It's a scenario which would have been impossible five years ago when the Taliban banned television and initially outlawed

football.

They relented, but insisted that players wear trousers and sleeves and ordered them to stop for prayers during matches.

Supporters were forbidden to cheer.

On Indonesia's Java island, where 5,800 people died in May's earthquake, locals were also trying to get access to World Cup television coverage.

Football fan Fatur Rahman said the prospect of missing out on the tournament would be painful.

"I'm ruined. The electricity in this area is only enough for lights. We can't watch TV and besides that, my set was flattened by rubble from my house," said the 19-year-old whose favourite player is England striker Michael Owen.

"People in this area really love to watch soccer. Watching the World Cup would be entertainment for us while we are still grieving from the earthquake."

Elsewhere, there are other dangers.

Three Kenyans, hoisting a television antenna to watch the World Cup, were electrocuted and nearly killed when they accidentally hit a high-voltage power line in Nairobi.