

Out but not down



AFP, Leipzig

Mexico may have crashed out of the World Cup in the second round, but coach Ricardo Lavolpe took solace from his side's battling performance against Argentina.

The Mexicans, who had won only one match in the group stages - against Iran, were real underdogs going into the second round match here against their Latin American rivals but came close to providing a major upset.

Led superbly by captain Rafael Marquez, the Mexicans took the game to Argentina in a full-blooded, end-to-end affair.

Regulation time ended 1-1, after an early Marquez strike and an unfortunate Jared Borgetti own goal, and it took a wonder goal from Argentine midfielder Maxi Rodriguez eight minutes into extra-time to break the deadlock.

"It was an even game, just as I expected it to be, and it was a magnificent individual goal that decided it," said Lavolpe, himself a member of Argentina's 1978 World Cup-winning squad.

"Having said that, Mexico gave an excellent account of themselves. Once again though, we didn't achieve what we came to do, which was to reach the quarterfinals at least."

Mexico have twice been quarterfinalists, but on both occasions, in 1970 and 1986, it was on home ground.

They certainly had not shown any form in the group stages, scraping through with the 3-1 win over Iran, an unconvincing 0-0 draw with Angola and a 2-1 loss to group winners Portugal.

"It has to be said that playing Argentina always brings out the best in Mexico," admitted Argentina coach Jose Pekerman.

Mexico captain Marquez, who excelled in marshalling his back-four against the highly-rated Argentina attacking line, acknowledged that there was massive disappointment among his teammates.

"I'm disappointed because we played so well and unsettled Argentina. Even so, we still lost," said the Barcelona defender.

Germany now believes

AFP, Munich

German fans were dreaming of reaching the World Cup final on Sunday after their side dismissed Sweden 2-0 on Saturday to set up a quarterfinal match-up against South American giants Argentina.

The hosts had little trouble in getting past Sweden with Lukas Podolski scoring twice in 12 hectic first half minutes, and it could have been more after Sweden had Teddy Lucic sent off after 34 minutes.

The result and manner of the performance has increased optimism further and there is now a real belief that Jurgen Klinsmann's team can go all the way and add to their World Cup crowns of 1954, 1974 and 1990.

"World champion-like," headlined Bild daily, the country's best selling newspaper. "Klinsi now against Maradona and co. We think you can send them packing."

Argentina's 1986 World Cup hero Diego Maradona is no longer playing but television pictures have showed him enthusiastically celebrating his country's victories.

"Germany are now in the quarters after Klinsmann's most important win. We can now dream of the title," Bild crowed.

"The latest chapter in Germany's summer fairytale is complete," said Die Welt newspaper.

"Klinsmann's team put up a thrilling display to reach the quarterfinals - Argentina await us in Berlin on Friday."

"We have a lot of respect for Argentina. They have been one of the best teams so far," admitted Klinsmann.

"We often talk about the Jose Pekerman school and Argentina have great individual players."

"We drew twice against them last year and it is about time we took that extra step and beat them," Klinsmann declared.

"I am not content with a quarterfinal spot - and neither are the players."

"I can honestly not remember the last time a German team played like we did in the first 30 minutes. I was just able to relax in the dug-out and watch."

Confidence is certainly growing in the German camp and captain Michael Ballack said the hosts had no fear.

Bayern Munich midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger echoed the sentiments of his skipper.

"We could have won 6-1. We still have a lot more to show," Schweinsteiger crowed. "This was the first step and hopefully there are three more."

American outfit Chivas.

Francisco Fonseca, who was a constant thorn in the Argentinians' side but whose final touch just failed him, said that a review of Mexico's stuttering World Cup performances was needed.

"We're disappointed because we performed well and still lost," he said.

"I'm really pleased we're changing our mentality although we need

to look at why we keep getting knocked out in the second round in World Cup finals."

Goalkeeper Oswaldo Sanchez was more philosophical.

"The game was always going to be decided by a mistake or a wonder goal and that's what happened," said Sanchez, who got nowhere near Rodriguez' exquisite, looping volley in the eighth minute of extra-time.

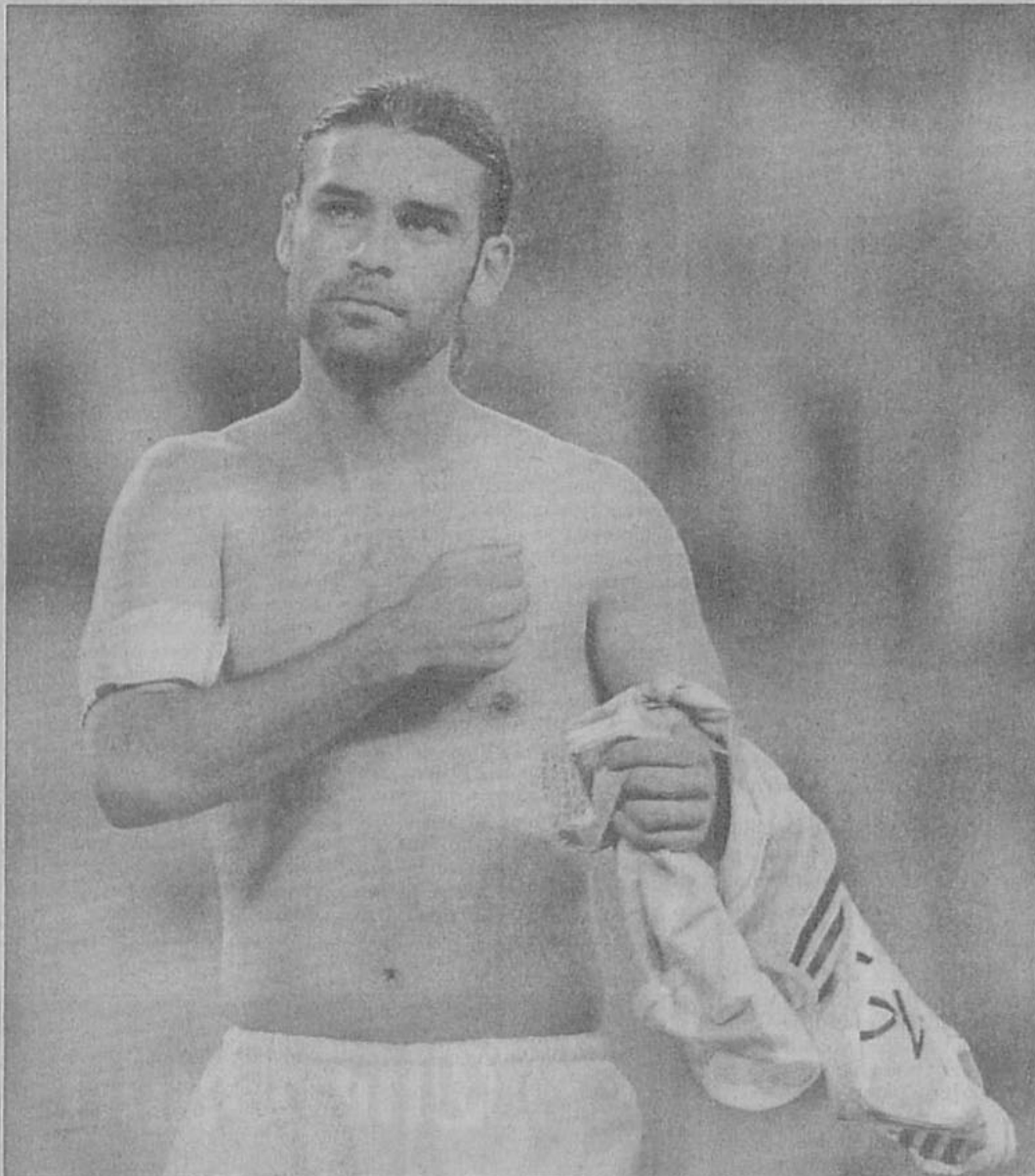


PHOTO: AFP

Mexican captain Rafael Marquez looks dejected after elimination from the World Cup following a 2-1 loss to Argentina in the round of 16 at the Leipzig stadium on Saturday.

Buenos Aires wild



AFP, Reuters, Buenos Aires

Celebrating Argentines poured into the rain-splashed avenues, screaming, singing, dancing, blowing horns and setting off firecrackers after their team secured a 2-1 World Cup win over Mexico on Saturday.

Traffic virtually ground to a halt on 9th of July Avenue, one of the world's busiest boulevards, and drivers sounded their horns and whistles wailed as the celebration went wild, with a sea of blue-and-white flags waving.

"It wasn't easy but we won!" shouted Sergio, who turned out with his wife and three small children after following every minute of the game.

"Brazil, start getting ready - you are just little babies compared to our

side," shouted Ariel, waving a giant plastic baby bottle as a taunt, anticipating a final match between Argentina and neighbouring Brazil.

The team's performance is in keeping with the mood of a nation which is starting to feel good about itself again.

Four years ago Argentina's economy collapsed and its adored soccer team had its worst World Cup performance in years, failing to make it out of the group round.

But things are different this time. Argentines have renewed confidence as their economy surges and to keep the good times rolling, their side won 2-1 in extra time against Mexico on Saturday, moving into the quarterfinals.

"Spectacular. It was the best game. Mexico doesn't exist," said Emanuel Wyberg, 24, a clothing shop employee banging on an empty five-gallon water jug in celebration.

"Euphoric, happy. I never lost faith," shouted an emotional Matias

Brie, 16, a student running down the confetti-strewn street with friends, celebrating after the game.

"Argentina is a team of love and passion," he said, almost choking as he spoke. "We won in '78, we won in '86. We'll win again."

But other fans remained cautious, since Argentina faces hosts Germany in a quarterfinal match in Berlin on Friday.

"Now we have to go up against Germany, it could get complicated," said Silvana Castro, 20, a cashier at a downtown shop, who joined street celebrations.

Miguel Angel Fontana, a 50-year-old taxi driver trying to get his cab through the streets choked with partying teenagers, said Argentines should not let the euphoria blind them to the high levels of poverty that persist in the South American nation.

"Let's not forget in all this happiness that there are kids around here dying of hunger and youths without work, without a future," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Argentine fans celebrate at Republica Square in Buenos Aires after their defeat of Mexico in the on Saturday.

Mexico mourns

REUTERS, Mexico City

Mexicans cried on Saturday after exiting the World Cup with a 2-1 loss to Argentina but took heart from a display that forced one of the tournament favourites to struggle into extra time.

Mexican police unclipped handguns to control dozens of angry local fans who chased down a car load of Argentines celebrating in a drive around the capital. No shots were fired and the local supporters retreated.

Screams rang out in homes and cantinas across the country with Mexico's every attacking move, but they were silenced by a spectacular extra time goal from Argentina's Maxi Rodriguez and the tears began to flow.

"We did not deserve to lose and we were not the favourites, but we gave Argentina the fright of their lives," said Martina Vega, a 21-year student, rubbing her tear-streaked face painted with the colours of the Mexican flag.

At one cantina in Mexico City dozens of stricken fans wiped blurry eyes, although for others the defeat was relief from the soccer frenzy that has taken over the nation.

"I'm eight months pregnant and this sort of nerves might force me to rush to the hospital so to be honest I'm half glad we are out and I can go home and do breathing exercises," said Maria Martinez, 29, a nurse.

Wild celebrations by whole families crammed into bars in Mexico City erupted after a sixth minute goal by captain Rafael Marquez. Argentina equalised minutes later but Mexican hopes were kept alive by one of the team's best performances in years.

A left foot volleyed goal from Rodriguez eight minutes into extra time finally broke the tie and Mexicans had their heads in their hands, certain their team was on its way home early again.

"We played a good game against a team that everyone thought was going to steamroll over us," said captain Marquez. "But we played even better than them and we did not deserve this. A great goal eliminated us."

Other Mexicans said the country should now concentrate more on electing a new president next weekend instead of sport.

"This soccer tournament has distracted the country from the more important task of choosing between the left, the right and the old Mexico next Sunday," said 66-year-old newspaper seller Marco Riquelme.

"Winning the World Cup is not crucial for the future of the country. Choosing who runs it is," said Riquelme.

Mexico's July 2 election is a very tight race, with leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador slightly ahead of right-wing rival Felipe Calderon in opinion polls.

In third place is Roberto Madrazo, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ran Mexico for 71 years before current President Vicente Fox ousted the party in 2000.

Fox watched the game in his rural ranch and criticised Swiss referee Massimo Busacca for bias but said he was proud of the team. "Mexico dominated all the time, the defeat was circumstantial. Mexico was always ahead and deserved victory."

Calderon, a soccer fan and personal friend of World Cup striker Jose Fonseca, could have received a boost in the election if Mexico had beaten Argentina, especially as Lopez Obrador prefers baseball.

Chelsea, United chase Torres

AFP, London

Premiership rivals Chelsea and Manchester United are both racing to sign Spanish World Cup star Fernando Torres from Atletico Madrid, according to reports here Sunday.

According to The Sunday Mirror, Atletico have received a bid that matches their reported 25 million pounds (45 million dollar) valuation of the player.

Torres has scored three goals to help Spain reach the knockout stages of the World Cup.

And he insists that he is just focusing on reaching the finals in Germany.

"It is always flattering when you are linked to great clubs, but I am just focusing myself on the World Cup," said Torres.

Torres has been linked with a move to England for the last three years with Chelsea reported to have made a 28 million pound bid for him shortly after Roman Abramovich bought the club in the summer of 2003.

United meanwhile are desperate to find a replacement for Ruud van Nistelrooy - who seems set to leave once the World Cup is over.

The Reds want around 15 million pounds for the out-of-favour Dutchman, and German giants Bayern Munich have already confirmed their interest.

Aragones warns France



AFP, Kamen

"All respect to the French, but I am sure we will get past them to reach the quarterfinals."

So says Spain coach Luis Aragones, whose red and blue (never yellow, because it brings him bad luck) "furia" have waltzed into the second phase where they now take on the 1998 champions in Hanover on Tuesday.

France may welcome back from suspension ageing warhorse Zinedine Zidane for whom, if Aragones prediction comes true, it will be the last match of his glittering career.

But having squashed Ukraine and Tunisia and then sent the reserves out to dismiss the Saudis the white-haired Aragones could afford to be a satisfied man as he surveyed the first phase at team headquarters in Kamen.

"To carry on we have to go out there and beat them. France are a very good team, there is no doubt about that - but I am convinced we will beat them."

"For that we have to do things well, to play our game well and not make mistakes," said the "Wise man of Hortaleza", 67 years of age and not afraid to speak his mind.

There is an edge to the game as it was Aragones who caused a storm last year by making a racially-charged comment about France striker Thierry Henry to gee up Spanish striker and Arsenal club-mate Jose Antonio Reyes.

French coach Raymond Domenech said after the win over Togo which took Les Bleus through that "there is a little personal history" between the two countries owing to that incident but he will shake his

rival's hand.

The encounter will be a re-run of a memorable 1984 European Championship final which the French won with a Michel Platini in his prime.

French midfield veteran Patrick Vieira noted that "Spain are one of the best teams in the tournament, so we will concentrate hard and will be ready."

Aragones says that the Spanish, who have so often flattered to deceive, are coming of age.

"I have confidence in my impressive team. I am sure we are going to go through. The team truly believe that and I am also convinced of it," Aragones insisted.

"France are a great team and give me a few causes for concern but if we measure up and attack them where it hurts we can come out on top."

Aragones warned of the continued threat from Zidane, "who is very dangerous, maybe not in the context of a 70 or 80-match season - but of one game."

"Spain will play the game which suits her. I think we are quicker with balls to feet."

"But the French have a few areas where they are better - maybe less creative but they put you under pressure. For that reason it will be more difficult to control the ball than it has been up to now," Aragones said.

In 27 previous meetings Spain have won 11 to ten for France with six draws.

But the bulk of Spain's wins came in friendlies and they were found wanting in 1984 when Platini and co proved far too strong.

Tuesday will be their first World Cup meeting.



PHOTO: AFP

Spanish coach Luis Aragones conducts a training session in Kamen on Sunday ahead of their clash against France.

Bits and Bobs

Zidane, the talisman of France's 1998 World Cup winning side, turned 34 on Friday.

Gronkjaer joins FC Copenhagen

INTERNET, undated

Stuttgart winger Jesper Gronkjaer has returned to his homeland to join FC Copenhagen.

The Danish club reported on its website that the former Chelsea and Atletico Madrid player had signed a four-year contract. The 28-year-old has earned 60 caps for his country. He has also played for Ajax and Birmingham.

Ruud expects United return

INTERNET, undated

Ruud van Nistelrooy expects to return to Manchester United for pre-season training after the World Cup despite his end-of-season row with boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

Van Nistelrooy, 29, missed the final game of the season and drove away from Old Trafford ahead of the clash with Charlton; with suggestions he could leave the club in the summer.

However, the Holland striker, who scored for his country against Ivory Coast in Germany, will return to United when they begin preparations to challenge Chelsea for the Barclays Premiership.

"I don't know what has gone wrong," said Van Nistelrooy in The Sun. "I have two years left on my contract and, unless anybody tells

me differently, I will return to Manchester for pre-season training."

Bayern Munich have expressed an interest in signing the Dutch forward.

Lars warns Germans

INTERNET, undated

Sweden coach Lars Lagerback has a message for Argentina ahead of their quarter-final meeting with World Cup hosts Germany in Berlin on Friday: hit top form or pack your bags and head home.

The Swede was doing just that after watching his own team lose to Jurgen Klinsmann's constantly improving team in Munich on Saturday thanks to two rapid-fire strikes by Lukas Podolski, and Lagerback believes the Germans have a decent chance of succeeding in the competition.

"You have to be on top of your game to beat Germany and you won't get anything for free against this German team," said Lagerback.

"Germany has a good team, I think they showed that in this game and in the group stage. After a good start they controlled the game well. I think they have a good chance. They have a fair chance to go on in this tournament."

"I think we showed after the two goals that we can play at the same level as they did, although they changed their game when we were playing with 10 men. The strong side of the team is that Mr Klinsmann and his staff work hard for each other."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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12 Past	46 Old car,	word	supporter
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Solution time: 25 mins.

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GOYPU BOT	ALAS NIGER	JAYWALKS GOMA
ADO ELLIOT MIZ	RAGE ELISINORE	SMALL CLAME
EXCALIBUR SIA	TIPS LIFE AGE	CIAO EGGS PHO

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CRYPTOQUIP

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HJI UIC JSEI GSZXD. YH

CXT XPIZW KYE BZXC.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: NEW SITCOM IN WHICH KIDS COMPOSE POETRY FOR THEIR FATHER: "MAKE RHYME FOR DADDY."

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: I equals E

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.