

Pele, Maradona ... Zidane?

INTERNET, undated

He walked off the pitch with a wink. While the younger ones cowered in front of the blue corner, Zinedine Zidane took himself away from the limelight. He embraced a few desolate Brazilians, saluted some unused substitutes, stood back from the party and took his leave. It is always best to watch the quiet ones.

France began this tournament saddled with worries about the ageing legs at the heart of their team, but they have changed their tune. Allez les vieux. The capacity to inspire beats on inside Zidane.

The games might be running out, but there is a first time for everything. One of the enduring curiosities of the France team - the sheer oddness of a statistic that told of 54 games when Zidane and Thierry Henry played together for France without the master creator setting up the master marksman a single time - was obliterated.

Zidane, just as he did in his finest hour, welcomed the opportunity to shatter Brazil. He stood over a set piece on the flank, measuring the moment. He stroked over a free-kick, the ball dipped perfectly to bypass the bewildered Brazil defence and land in front of Henry's right boot. Merci, mon ami. About time too.

While Henry ran off into goalscoring glory, followed by the

majority of his teammates, the old maestro smiled to himself. Patrick Vieira, his vice captain, ran over to engulf him. The legend lives on and on.

How could he have had an ordinary game here? How could he not bow out just after reminding us of his wonders with that vintage goal against Spain? How could he not have illuminated this occasion with flashes of the sumptuous talent that has made him probably the greatest player of his generation. A genuine maestro.

'Zizou president' - on the night of 12 July 1998, those two words filled the night air like fireworks. And in a funny way, Zizou's disciples really believed what they were singing. Zidane, the son of Algerian immigrants, the child of the Marseille banlieue come good, the man whose humility made him the most introverted kind of hero imaginable, he didn't just unite football fans. He united France.

It was inevitable there would be so many flashbacks here. France versus Brazil, with Zidane and Ronaldo on the pitch, it was impossible not to reflect on the drama that entwined these two players - the best of their generation - eight years ago.

They shared a private joke in front of thousands of prying eyes here in Frankfurt in the seconds before kick-off. Beaming at one another with silly grins from oppos-

ing sides of the centre circle, they would be the best of enemies for one more night.

It was first blood to Zidane, who rolled the ball, piroetted and surged away. A classic move. The French fans roared their approval. He emulated it just before half time with another example of ageless craft. Zidane made difficult control look easy and then had the imagination to conjure a pass that sent Patrick Vieira hurtling towards goal.

For a man whose gait is a little ungainly, he has always possessed such delicacy of touch, such deft balance. It seems effortless, and yet evidently not entirely so. Sweat always drips off him like Amazonian rainfall.

There will be time ahead to reflect on the snapshots of a gilt-edged career. He will remember the day he began making strides as a teenager with Cannes, taking his first wage packet of £500 and handing it straight over to his parents. On his first appearance along the coast in his hometown, at the Stade Velodrome, he helped the underdogs of Cannes inflict a rare defeat on the Olympique Marseille team managed by none other than Franz Beckenbauer.

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that with a gaspingly poetic volley to win the European Cup in the white of Real Madrid at Hampden Park.

He will remember les Bleus. The full spectrum of emotions. Thigh strapped and legs shackled, he was part of the abomination that was France's World Cup exit from the 2002 World Cup. Two years before that he was a great player playing out of his skin in a team designed around his brilliance. He was the arch trickster. He was the team's metronome. He was zen master. He was the man. Watching him keep yogic calm at the penalty spot while Portugal virtually started a riot around him was to witness a man entirely at one with his chosen art. Of course he scored.

Above all, he will remember the summer of 1998. Throughout the tournament his face covered the side of a building overlooking Marseille's port along the Corniche. By the end, that familiar gaze illuminated the Arc de Triomphe after two soaring headers to propel France to their only World Cup. So far. And for that he will always be Zizou President.

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PHOTO: AFP

ROLLING BACK THE YEARS: French maestro Zinedine Zidane exults after inspiring his team to a remarkable victory over defending champions Brazil in Frankfurt on Saturday.

Flair-less Latins bow out

AFP, Berlin

"We were looking for a miracle in the end - and it was not to be."

Ronaldinho's view was to the point after Brazil's quarterfinal exit to France.

But the man who wowed Europe by winning the Champions League with Barcelona at the expense of

Arsenal's French match-winner Thierry Henry missed out one other thing which Brazil neither looked for at this tournament or found.

Flair.

Brazil's achievement in winning the World Cup in Sweden in 1958 thus remains unique - for all the Ronaldos, the Ronaldinhos, the Roberto Carlos's and the Kakas it

needed a Pele for a non-European side to lift the Cup on European soil.

As France, Portugal, Germany and Italy prepare to face off in the first all-European semi-finals in 24 years closer examination of Brazil's failure - and that of neighbours Argentina - shows the flair was not left behind in Rio, Sao Paulo or indeed Buenos Aires.

It was packed away with the European club shirts almost all of the Selecao will don once more in August.

Brazil's and Argentina's demise cannot be put down to factors of environment or cultural or climactic unfamiliarity.

No fewer than 20 of Brazil's current squad and 18 of Argentina's players are European-based.

When faced with the unique challenge of Asia four years ago Ronaldo came up trumps for Brazil whereas Argentina totally failed to get into gear as England and Sweden sent them packing at the first stage for the first time since 1962.

This time, as Europeanised as they can get - witness the pragmatism of both Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira and Argentine counterpart Jose Pekerman, who left his best players on the bench against Germany - both South American giants missed the semi-final cut.

"It just didn't work out for us, and I am very sad," said Ronaldinho, who in contrast to Ronaldo suddenly found his worst form for his country while his teammate enjoyed a brief renaissance before drawing a blank against the French.

Just as England did nothing when a goal down to the 'auriverde' in the 2002 quarters, so Brazil fell back into the shellshocked and shot-shy mode of the 1998 final on Saturday following Henry's volley.

In the end President Lula, embroiled in a spat over Ronaldo's

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THIRD EYE

AL MUSABBIR SADI

The saying goes, 'Old is gold'. And the 24-carat gold that good old Zinedine Zidane produced in Frankfurt on Saturday night made the Auriverde look pale. The gold of Brazil was without the gloss.

That the world champions failed to take one single shot at the French goal in 90 minutes of the quarterfinal (the great Ronaldo did take one shot at Fabien Barthez in injury time) says all about how Brazil played against the 1998 World Cup winners.

There can be no denying that Brazil had been struggling throughout the tournament, failing to produce anything resembling their best football despite winning four matches. And it was difficult for the battling side trying to play against a reunited team who just put everyone behind the ball under the leadership of Zidane.

The French were anything less than impressive on way to the last eight and knowing their limitation, they did the best thing to stop a team that know only one way to play: attacking. Raymond Domenech's five-pack midfield suffocated their counterparts effectively, cutting the link between the two forwards and the playmakers, with Patrick Vieira and Claude Makelele doing the dirty work. Kaka or Juninho never delivered the trademark 'Brazilian' final passes that were menacing or could bother the tight French defence. Still, it would have been a stalemate had not the man with a two-syllable nickname dominated by letters from the alphabet -- Zizou -- decided to prepare the stage for his own farewell by himself.

The match itself, was nowhere

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England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson lambasted his team's failure to score from the penalty spot after a heartbreaking World Cup quarterfinal exit to Portugal here Saturday.

Eriksson was devastated after his five-and-a-half year reign as England manager ended with his team being dumped out on spot-

kicks for the fifth time in eight tournaments.

Afterwards the Swede said his team could have no complaints despite a controversial sending off for star striker Wayne Rooney, but was adamant England should have gone further than the quarter-finals.

"It's not good enough to miss three penalties out of four," Eriksson said. "Well done to their goalkeeper. But we should still be in the tourna-

ment and I'm very sorry too for the team, and our fans, which are fantastic.

"To get over this disappointment will take a long time because I was convinced we had a team which could reach the final but we're out."

Eriksson said he had been satisfied with England's previous two performances in big tournaments during his time in charge, quarter-final exits at the 2002 World

Cup and Euro 2004.

But Saturday's loss was unacceptable, he said, given England's much-vaunted playing resources, often dubbed 'The Golden Generation'.

"To get to the quarter-finals four years ago was a good result, to get to the quarter-finals two years ago was a good result.

"But this time no, it is not good enough. The team we have and the squad we have we should at least - at least - played in the semi-final."

"That's been my opinion for a long time. It's more our fault than the force of Portugal that won the game."

Eriksson reserved judgement on the sending-off of Wayne Rooney, the pivotal moment of the match. Rooney was red-carded for sinking his studs into Ricardo Carvalho's groin as he attempted to free himself.

"I just saw it on a small television screen so I'll need to see it again," Eriksson said. "I will have more ideas about it tomorrow but I don't think we can complain about the red card, from what I saw on television."

But everything boiled down to another penalty flop, which Eriksson was at a loss to explain.

"We have trained so much I don't think we could have trained any more than we did. Anyhow we missed three of them and that's not good enough," he said. "Ricardo made good saves but here we are once again in the same situation." I'm sorry for the team and the squad for the fans. Really sorry because I think with all the fans we have they deserve to have a team in the semi-final."

Asked if he felt relieved to finally be free of the pressures of one of the most demanding jobs in football, Eriksson replied: "I don't feel relieved - I feel sad. I feel a bit angry. Because we should be in the tournament. But we are not and we

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PHOTO: AFP

LEAVING THE WORLD STAGE ONCE AND FOR ALL: A dejected Brazil forward Ronaldinho leaves the field after his side's quarterfinal failure against France in Frankfurt on Saturday.

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