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DHAKA THURSDAY JULY 6, 2006

Panel

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The sky is Azzurri

AFP, Dortmund

Notwithstanding the country's biggest football scandal, the apparent suicide attempt of a former international, and the loss of key players to suspension and injury, Italy are in the World Cup final.

The Italians clinched a place in Sunday's Berlin showpiece courtesy of a dramatic 2-0 extra-time win over host nation Germany in front of a partisan home crowd.

Tuesday's emotional match was two minutes away from a penalty shoot-out when defender Fabio Grosso curled a shot past Jens Lehmann after being put through by the man of the match Andrea Pirlo.

Germany poured forward in a desperate search for an equaliser, but they were caught on the break in time added on with substitute Alessandro Del Piero applying a cool finishing touch to a swift counter-attack.

Italy have been criticised for being too negative in this tournament, but coach Marcello Lippi threw caution to the wind to try and win the match, and his gamble of playing with four strikers in extra-time paid rich dividends.

Grosso admitted Italy's World

Cup campaign had been far from easy given all their problems.

"We went out there on the pitch with many things going on around us and now we can celebrate," said the 28-year-old.

The day had not begun well for Italy with the news that prosecutor Stefano Palazzi had recommended relegation for Juventus, AC Milan, Lazio and Fiorentina as punishment for the clubs' suspected involvement in match-fixing.

Thirteen of the Italy squad, none of whom are implicated in the scandal, play for the four accused Serie A clubs and could soon be considering their futures.

Italy were also rocked eight days ago by the apparent suicide attempt of 35-year-old Gianluca Pessotto, who spent 11 years with Juventus before hanging up his boots in May and becoming their team manager.

Pessotto, who threw himself out of his office window and is in a serious condition in a Turin hospital, played alongside and against many of the current Italian squad. He also made 22 appearances for the national team.

Del Piero dedicated his goal to his striker former teammate.

"That's for you, Gianluca," he

screamed into a microphone as he ran off the pitch.

Italy have also suffered injuries to key players.

Gianluca Zambrotta and Gennaro Gattuso missed the opening match against Ghana, while Alessandro Nesta has not played in the last two games due to a groin strain.

Furthermore, Francesco Totti lacked his usual sharpness in Italy's early games due to fitness problems.

The Roma captain broke his left ankle in February and only returned to action in late May.

To add to Italy's woes, tenacious mid-fielder Daniele De Rossi was banned for four matches for elbowing USA's Brian McBride in the face in the second first phase match against the United States. His suspension has now ended and he will be able to play in the final.

Then Marco Materazzi received a one-match ban for his dismissal against Australia in the second round, which left Italy to cope with 10 men for almost the entire second half.

Lippi praised his players for the

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2



PHOTO: AFP

A LA TARDELLI: Italian defender Fabio Grosso (C) is unstoppable as he is chased by teammates Gianluca Zambrotta (R) and Gianluca Zambrotta (L) after his extra-time goal in the World Cup semifinal against Germany at Dortmund's Westfalenstadion on Tuesday.

Party starts in Rome

AFP, Rome

The Italian capital burst into wild celebrations on Tuesday after Italy scored two late goals to beat host nation Germany in the World Cup semifinal.

After watching TV coverage of a tense two hours of play in Dortmund, cries of joy rang out from apartments and cafes in Rome after Fabio Grosso and then Alessandro Del Piero scored the decisive goals to take Italy into Sunday's final.

Minutes after the final whistle, a stream of cars and mopeds streamed into the streets of the capital, sounding their horns in joy, while supporters waved Italy's white, red and green flag.

Thousands of Italian fans had watched the match on a giant

screen at the Circo Massimo in the heart of ancient Rome.

While most bars installed TV sets for customers to follow the action, the capital's venerable Peroni restaurant simply closed for the evening, informing customers in a notice outside: "Sorry, but Italy are playing."

The joyous reaction at the victory in Dortmund overtook the shock felt earlier in the day when the Italian Football Federation's prosecutor called for all four clubs at the centre of a match-fixing scandal to be thrown out of Serie A.

Prosecutor Stefano Palazzi called for Juventus to drop two divisions, and be stripped of its 2005 and 2006 titles, and for AC Milan, Fiorentina and Lazio to drop one division.

Italy's success here contrasts starkly with their miserable early exits at the 2004 European championships and the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea.

In Portugal two years ago, they failed to survive the first round group stage.

And in Asia they suffered one of their most humiliating defeats, a

controversial 2-1 loss to South Korea in the second round which the Italians blamed on Ecuadorian referee Byron Moreno.

"We've accumulated a lot of anger after two major disappointments," said the 32-year-old Cannavaro, who will make his 100th appearance for the Azzurri in Sunday's final where they will meet either France or Portugal.

"First we lost to the host nation in 2002 and that was dubious, and then we failed in Portugal.

"We've put that rage to good use on the pitch, and you can see that at this World Cup. We're turning this anger into something positive."

Cannavaro said he wasn't thinking about surpassing Paolo Maldini's record of 126 Italy caps, and was simply going to enjoy reaching treble figures.

"I'm a long way from Paolo's record," he said. "I feel that I am reaching an important milestone, and that gives me a great deal of pleasure."

Cannavaro revealed that Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, who flew in especially for the Germany game, joined him and the team in the post-match celebrations.

"We sang a few songs together in the dressing room. We sang 'O sole mio,'" said the former Napoli, Parma and Inter Milan centre-back.

Cannavaro admitted revenge will be on his mind if Italy meet France in the final, having played in the quarterfinal defeat to 'Les Bleus' on penalties in the 1998 World Cup.

"That defeat in Paris still hurts," he said. "I was young, but it's still painful. Maybe it's a chance for revenge. Let's see what happens. Portugal could beat them."

It was another classic: Mazzola

INTERNET, undated

Italian legend Sandro Mazzola has admitted that Tuesday night's World Cup semifinal against Germany brought back memories of the 1970 classic.

The two teams met at the same stage of the competition in Mexico when an Azzurri side containing Mazzola dramatically won 4-3 after extra-time.

Now Mazzola, who was working as a co-commentator for state broadcasters RAI Tuesday night, admits that the Dortmund clash will go down in Italian football history.

"It's certainly comparable to 1970," he stated. "The same heart, determination and grit was on show, with the extra bonus of doing it all in their own back yard."

Thousands of Italian fans had watched the match on a giant



PHOTO: AFP

RISING HIGH: Italian fans make merry in Rome's Circo Massimo after Italy won the World Cup semifinal against Germany late on Tuesday.

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THIRD EYE

AL MUSABBIR SADI

For those who mourned the absence of the beautiful game at the World Cup 2006 need not worry. The Latinos might have exited without showing the flair, but a new-look Italy have arrived. The Europeans, determined not to lose at the knockout stage, almost choked the beauty of the game with conservative play but the Italians proved Tuesday night in Dortmund that a team willing to win will win indeed.

And their victims were none other than the hosts, Jürgen Klinsmann's young and energetic 'Die Mannschaft' who bit the dust at a ground where they had never lost a single international. The legend lived as Italy maintained their World Cup record against Germany with two late, late goals.

Italy 2, Germany 0. This scoreline is not enough to describe the match, perhaps the best we would see in years between two European sides. The first half ended so fast that I watched it without looking at the watch. Germans tried very hard, matched Italy for pace, but in the end, not for class.

The positive aura and optimism that sparked from the Azzurri means everything has started to fall into places. And perhaps, Italy's moment has arrived. Marcello Lippi's boys advance to the final and come July 9 in Berlin, France or Portugal could be burned.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 6

Revenge driving Cannavaro

AFP, Duisburg

Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro said Wednesday the scars left by the team's failure in the past two major tournaments has been the driving force behind their march to the World Cup final.

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Lippi hails bravehearts

INTERNET, undated

Marcello Lippi has praised his players for their sheer will-power in reaching the World Cup Final by knocking out the hosts.

"It really would've been a pity if we hadn't won this match on the field. Perhaps we would've triumphed on penalties anyway, as we certainly played better than Germany in their own back yard in front of thousands of German fans. The lads were absolutely extraordinary," said the Azzurri boss.

Italy emerged 2-0 winners with two late goals in the final moments of extra time, sealing Germany's first ever defeat at the Dortmund Westfalenstadion. The deadlock could've been broken earlier, but Alberto Gilardino and Gianluca Zambrotta hit the woodwork in close succession.

"I admit some of my language was a little fruity at that moment," smiled Lippi. "These boys kept on going, though, even if we ran one risk in extra time with that Gianluca Buffon save. It's immensely satisfying and now we hope to complete

the job on Sunday."

Alessandro Del Piero came off the bench to put the icing on the cake after Fabio Grosso's opener and the former Juventus Coach reveals it was a decision dictated by emotion more than technical considerations.

"On the bench I said Del Piero would score. He watched his teammates during the warm-up and in the game as if he was already out there. You could see how much he wanted to play and I believe that can make the difference."

They'll face either France or Portugal in Berlin for the Final, but he refused to name a favourite option. "I would be an idiot to say I had a preference, as then the others would say 'We'll show you!'"

However, the question marks remain over whether Lippi will stay on the Nazionale bench after this tournament.

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