

Ready to win again!

AFP, Cape Town

England striker Gary Lineker once joked: "Football is a simple game; 22 men chase a ball for 90 minutes and at the end, the Germans win", but why do Germany always seem to prosper at the World Cup?

Spain will be hoping Germany fail to live up to Lineker's quip in Wednesday's World Cup semifinal in Durban.

However, the facts speak for themselves: Germany have won the World Cup three times (1954, 1974 and 1990), have contested seven finals and finished third three times.

They have reached the last eight at 14 of the 18 World Cup finals they have contested as they were excluded from the 1950 edition following World War II.

Having lost in the 1982 and 1986 finals, they made it third time lucky in terms of successive finals by beating Argentina 1-0 in 1990 and cap their golden era.

They exited at the quarterfinals of the 1994 and 1998 editions, but reached the final in 2002 and came third as hosts in 2006.

While Portugal, England, France, Italy, Argentina and Brazil all exited before the quarterfinals were over here, a young German squad (the average age is just under 25) has brushed off key injuries to reach the semifinals.

"We're just a compact unit and have proved again that Germany is a 'tournament team'," said striker Miroslav Klose.

"I think it's all down to a certain quality, it's crucial to have self belief and present yourself as a true team on the pitch."

Klose is a good example of a player who has saved himself for the World Cup.

Having mostly warmed Bayern Munich's bench last season, he has four goals in South Africa and needs only two more to beat Ronaldo's record of 15 in all finals. England's Wayne Rooney -- goalless in two World Cup finals campaigns -- take note.

Injured Germany captain Michael Ballack insists that while history weighs heavy on their rivals, German players flourish in the knowledge of past national success.

"German teams approach every competition expecting to do well," wrote Ballack in The Times.

"Expectation can create pressure, but we're inspired by our history, whereas I've sensed that England are intimidated by their past."

"Individually, England have better players, but I'd rather be in the German team."

"We're one of the fittest sides in the tournament, play good football and have an outstanding mentality. We're a big country, with a big history, and have to go for it."

Ballack's mention of fitness gives a clue to Germany's success.

Firstly, the entire squad plays in the Bundesliga which enjoys a four-week winter break in January, allowing players to rejuvenate at the season's halfway stage.

Secondly, Bundesliga clubs play in only three other competitions during their regular season: the Champions League, which runs in tandem with the Europa League, and the German Cup.

German footballers refer to a week when they play a midweek game, plus a weekend match, as an "English week" -- a reference to the England players' workload.

The way Germany's Mesut Ozil and Thomas Mueller carved

up England's sluggish defence in the 4-1 rout highlighted that and the 4-0 hammering of Argentina in the last eight was not performed by tired players.

Historically Germany can also cope with big-game pressure: they have won all four of the penalty shoot-outs they ever faced in World Cup finals.

Captain Philipp Lahm explains how the German Football Federation's (DFB) academy programme plays a role.

"The ability to cope with pressure, comes at a very young age," said the Bayern Munich star.

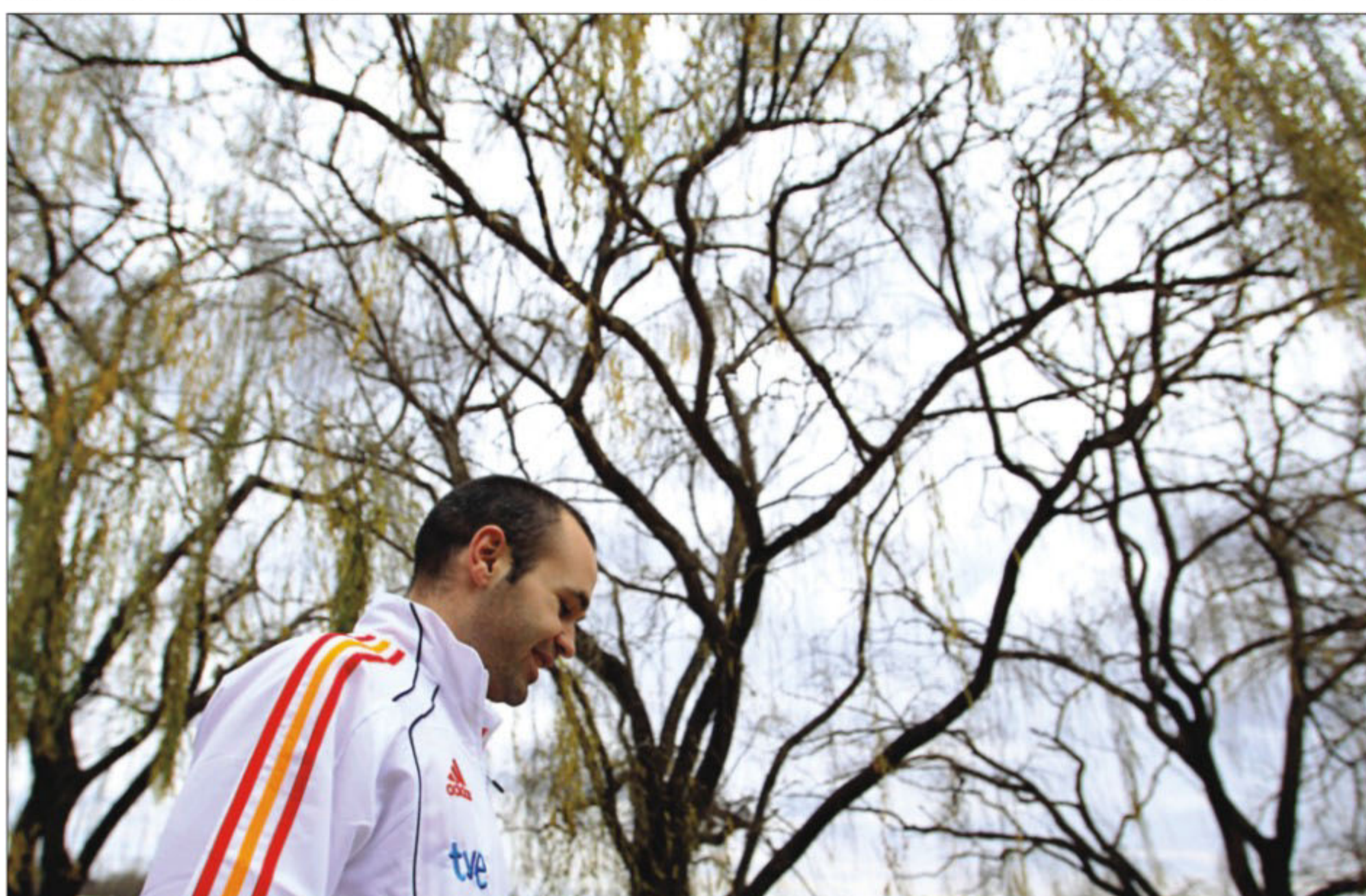


PHOTO: REUTERS

Spain's midfield maestro Andres Iniesta in a relaxed mood at the team base in Potchefstroom on Monday. Iniesta will have a big role to play if Spain are to beat Germany in tonight's semifinal.

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'Spain have more than one Messi'

REUTERS, Erasmus

Germany's World Cup semifinal opponents Spain are far more dangerous than Argentina, with their game based on the world's best teamwork and not just individual qualities, said coach Joachim Loew.

Germany crushed the Argentines 4-0 in the last eight after stifling their playmaker Lionel Messi but Loew said European champions Spain were a completely different proposition.

"They are the country with the greatest consistency for the past two to three years," the 50-year-old told reporters ahead of Wednesday's showdown in Durban.

"Spain do not have one Messi. They have more than one Messi. Especially in attack there are many players who can decide a game. Spain are not like England and Argentina, teams that make mistakes," added Loew.

"They make very few mistakes in offence or defence so we have to force them to make those mistakes."

Loew, who will need to replace suspended striker Thomas Mueller, singled out Spain midfielders Xavi and Andres Iniesta as the engine that needs to be switched off.

"Spain's midfield has a well-oiled axis with Iniesta and Xavi. But (Germany's) Sami Khedira and (Bastian) Schweinsteiger are good as well so there will be a key situation there to carve out advantages."

Khedira, nursing a thigh muscle injury picked up in the quarterfinal, should be fit for the match, said Loew.

The coach's only injury real concern is striker Cacau, a possible replacement for Mueller. Loew said he could also opt to play Toni Kroos or even Piotr Trochowski in his place.

Spain coach Vicente del Bosque and his players have expressed their admiration for Germany, praising Loew's success in building a side out of exciting new talent mixed with experienced campaigners.

Del Bosque has indicated the European champions, who beat Germany in the Euro 2008 final, will stick with a fast-flowing, attacking style and, with the Germans employing similar tactics in South Africa, it should be an open, fluid match.

The form of Fernando Torres is a concern for Del Bosque, though he is likely to keep faith with the misfiring striker in a twin-pronged attack with World Cup top scorer David Villa.

Midfielder Cesc Fabregas hurt a shoulder after coming off the bench in the 1-0, quarterfinal win over Paraguay but has said he will take a pain-killing injection to be available.

"We know we are on the verge of realising something that is the dream of any child, or any player," goalkeeper Pepe Reina told a news conference on Monday.

"Just two more matches now, we are very close."

Casillas charged up Sneijder calls 'em idiots

REUTERS, Potchefstroom

Spain's World Cup semifinal against Germany is the most important soccer match in the nation's history, more important even than their Euro 2008 victory, according to captain Iker Casillas.

Their triumph two years ago, when they beat Germany in the final in Vienna, was their first major trophy in 44 years but goalkeeper Casillas said that was now part of history and the Spanish people wanted more.

"People are not telling us how good we were at Euro 2008," Casillas said in an interview published on the Spanish soccer federation's website on Monday.

"People are saying we have to win the World Cup. The people want the World Cup," he added. "We know that the Germany match is the most important in our history, even more than the Euro 2008 final in Austria."

Spain have already made history by progressing to a World Cup knockout semifinal for the first time and play the Germans on Wednesday in Durban for a place in the final at Johannesburg's Soccer City stadium on July 11.

The Spanish finished fourth at the 1950 World Cup in Brazil when the competition had

a different format, with a group phase followed by a mini league of four teams deciding who advanced to the final.

"We did not come here to finish fourth," Casillas said.

"The European championships is in the past and was a complete success, it was fantastic," he added.

"Everyone was flying the (Spanish) flag from the rooftops but now, from what we are seeing, this is the most important match for Spain for a very long time."

Casillas said he had been surprised that some of the world's best forwards, including current World Player of the Year Lionel Messi and his immediate predecessor Cristiano Ronaldo, had exited the tournament in South Africa early.

"This shows that a national team is not at all about only one player," said Casillas, who plays with Ronaldo at La Liga club Real Madrid.

"A player can win you a tournament, like Argentina and (Diego) Maradona (in Mexico in 1986) but today, more and more, the team is what counts."

"A player can perform very well but at the end of the day everything is based around teamwork."

INTERNET

Wesley Sneijder launched a stinging attack on Diego Maradona and Carlos Dunga, dubbing them 'a couple of idiots', but later refuted the claim as mere 'huge misunderstanding'.



DUNGA

The Holland midfielder made the statements in an interview with Dutch magazine Helden.

"It's wonderful having someone leading the team for the sake of it or just to make it a show of strength that I am the one in command."

This trademark of having good relations with the players served Del Bosque well during his four years in charge of Real from 1999-2003 where he had especially strong relations with Guti, who he had known since he was a child.

But it also had a negative effect as he was sneered at for the manner in which Real icons Fernando Hierro and Raul appeared to wield excessive influence over him, criticism that he rejected.

That type of balanced regime certainly paid off as with his trusty homegrown Real players aligned with the galacticos such as Luis Figo and Zinedine Zidane they collected two Champions League trophies and two league titles.

However, even the affable del Bosque's principles were tested to the limit in the manner of his summary dismissal from the Real post by club president Florentino Perez a day after he handed them the 2003 league title.

Especially hurtful was the manner in which Perez explained his sacking because a man who had served the club for 35 years apparently did not 'fit the image of Real...'

"Me also I have my moodswings; sometimes I can't contain myself and I lose my sangfroid, even if I always try to keep a certain balance," said del Bosque.

"After a difficult first half in the quarterfinal against Brazil, we were able to keep our cool. I prefer to have someone like Van Marwijk on the bench rather than a couple of idiots like Maradona and Dunga."

Brazil's 2-1 defeat to Holland saw Dunga sacked,



MARADONA

while Maradona has hinted he'll resign after Argentina's 4-0 loss to Germany.

However, Sneijder later insisted it was "a huge misunderstanding" from the Dutch media and that he never called Diego Maradona and Carlos Dunga "idiots, in an official

statement through the Inter website.

"There has been a huge misunderstanding in the transcribing and various translations of my words," he insisted.

"In the interview I never referred directly to Maradona and Dunga, who I have a great deal of respect for both for what they have achieved as players and as Coaches."

"In the interview I only spoke about the differences between tacticians, because no two people can be alike."

"I am terribly sorry for the incorrect interpretation that was given to my words."

Sneijder also had praise for his teammates and the coach.

"Everyone talked about the 'fantastic four' of myself, Arjen Robben, Robin Van Persie and Rafael Van Der Vaart, but now look at Dirk Kuyt. He is a regular first team pick and that is how it should be. I also think it's right not to remove Van Persie, as he has been very useful for us."

"Van Marwijk reminds me of Jose Mourinho, who was able to give us great self-belief at Inter."

Heroes welcome greets Black Stars

AFP, Accra

Thousands of football fans thronged Ghana's main airport Monday to welcome back home the national team who gallantly and narrowly lost to Uruguay in quarterfinals at the World Cup in South Africa.

Kotoka international airport was choked with fans who started gathering as early as six hours before the team's expected arrival.

Even a two hours delay in arrival would not deter the drumming and dancing fans who eagerly awaited the heroes' return.

There were spontaneous shouts of joy when the South African Airways jet the Black Stars flew in touched down.

National flags were waved at the players as they stepped out of the plane amid a deafening sound of vuvuzelas.

Fans carried placards reading "We love you our heroes, you made Ghana and Africa proud".

Ghana's Black Eagles made it to the quarterfinals of the World Cup for the first time equalling the feat chalked up by Senegal and Cameroon, and became the only African team to make that far at the tournament in South Africa.

"You've really held high the flag of Ghana and the entire African continent," Nii Nortey Duah, Deputy Minister of Sports, told the players at the airport.

"We did our best but luck was not on our side but we'll go to Brazil in 2014 to be major contenders," captain Stephen Appiah said.

Kwasi Amponsah, a fan said: "What the boys have done will forever be remembered by the whole world. They displayed quality football only to lose by hard luck".

Friend, philosopher and guide

AFP, Durban

Vicente Del Bosque may lack the unpredictability and colourfulness of Luis Aragones, his predecessor as Spanish coach, but to the players he brings a calmness and authority which are imperative when things are not going smoothly.

However, the 59-year-old, who casts a lugubrious looking figure on the bench, rejects the notion that he is simply a father figure to a group of players who won the European title under Aragones and are within touching distance of adding the World Cup to it.

"To be a father figure is not sufficient in order to do a good job," said a clearly agitated del Bosque at the 2009 Confederations Cup where Spain failed to win the trophy losing to the United States in the semifinals.

"You have to have other qualities. I have enough experience in order to earn the respect of my players."

This he has in spades as the out of form Fernando Torres attested to AFP.

"He (del Bosque) is a very good coach, of course," said the Liverpool star, who scored Spain's winner in the 1-0 win over Germany in the Euro 2008 final.

"He coached Real Madrid for years, with the biggest stars in the world at that time, and the best players. He knows exactly how to deal with players."

Spain's rampaging rightback Sergi Ramos also professes a great respect for Del Bosque.

"We love his philosophy," said Ramos.

"He is a great coach, he is very refined psychologically as well, and very interested in the players' welfare."

That is not to say that del Bosque -- who devoted most of his footballing career to Real Madrid making over 300 appearances for them as a defensive midfielder and winning 18 caps -- shies away from letting his players know when he is dissatisfied with them as he did after the

GERMAN SHOOTING DOWN ITALIANS

Police hunting a German man suspected of shooting two Italians in a pub after a row about the World Cup said Tuesday that both victims were now dead.

Authorities in Hanover, northern Germany said they were searching for the man, a 42-year-old identified only as Holger B., after uncovering surveillance camera footage of the suspect withdrawing money just before the shoot-out.

The argument, which took place early on Monday morning, was apparently about the performances of Italy and Germany in past football World Cups, according to police.

But the bar banter turned deadly when B. left the pub, returned a short time later with a 9mm pistol and shot the two Italians in the head.

One of the victims, a 47-year-old, died mid-morning on Monday of his injuries in hospital. The other, 49, died later.

NOT THE BOGEYMAN

New France coach Laurent Blanc said it was not his responsibility to take disciplinary action against the players who led a mutiny during the team's dismal World Cup campaign.

"I followed the events with great sadness. I was disappointed by the results and I was particularly shocked by some behaviour," Blanc, a member of France's World Cup-winning squad in 1998, told a news conference on Tuesday.

"However, I'm not the bogeyman. It is not my responsibility to take disciplinary action."

NOVUZUZELAS AT PAMPLONA

The Spanish city of Pamplona on Monday banned World Cup vuvuzela trumpets on the eve of its famous bull run, with the deafening instrument already popular ahead of Spain's football semifinal.

"The municipality has banned the sale of vuvuzelas in the stands set up for the San Fermin festival, due to the noise disturbance they produce," the mayor of the northern town said in a statement.

The trumpets would produce "unpleasant and dangerous noise for neighbours," the mayor said, the day before the annual San Fermin festival begins, which involves the famous bull run through the streets of Pamplona.

The tuneless, deafening plastic vuvuzelas have become the defining sound of South Africa's World Cup, leaving television networks hunting for

ways to filter out the constant buzz.

GOODLUCK SAVES NIGERIA

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan said on Tuesday hundreds of posts on his Facebook page had helped persuade him to reverse his suspension of the national soccer team from international competitions.

Jonathan on Monday rescinded a two-year suspension imposed following the side's embarrassing performance in the World Cup. The Super Eagles were knocked out in the first round after failing to win a game.

"To Suleiman Musa, Nwanze Francis Uchenna and Ifade Uduonye Peter and the hundreds of Nigerians who appealed to me on this page, I have listened to your voices and those of others," Jonathan said.

"We must now work together to make sure that the Nigerian Football Federation and our players do us proud in future events," he wrote on the social networking site.

The presidency confirmed late last month that Jonathan had launched a page on Facebook.

The leader of Africa's most populous nation has more than 75,000 Facebook followers and lists his political views as "moderate".

BALLON D'OR, GOLDEN BALL SET FOR MERGER

FIFA unveiled on Monday a deal with France Football to present a new global soccer award that combines the "Ballon d'Or" or Golden Ball prize with the World Player of the Year trophy.

The first "FIFA Ballon d'Or" prize will be awarded in Switzerland on January 10 next year, officials said at a news conference on the sidelines of the World Cup.

"I am a very happy president today," enthused FIFA president Sepp Blatter, signing the agreement with Marie-Odile Amaury, president of the group that owns the France Football publication which had been making the annual Ballon d'Or award.

Coaches and captains of national teams, as well as media, will vote for the new award.

Argentina's Lionel Messi is this year's FIFA World Player of the Year, while German's Lothar Matthaus won the first one in 1991. Messi also took the 2009 Ballon d'Or, which stretches back to 1956 which, under the title of European Football of the Year, was won by England's Stanley Matthews.



BLANC



JONATHAN