

Messi so cute

AFP, London

Former world number one Victoria Azarenka can't support her native Belarus at the World Cup so she follows Argentina because Lionel Messi is "cute".

"I've been a supporter of Argentina for the last three World Cups," said former double Australian Open winner Azarenka.

"They even have pictures of me wearing an Argentina shirt from maybe 2000. I love Messi. I think he's one of the greatest players of all time."

"He's so little, so cute. It's just fun."

Azarenka made the Wimbledon second round on Monday with a 6-3, 7-5 win over Croatia's Mirjana Lucic-Baroni for only her first win on the tour since January.

Sami, Jerome nursing knocks

AFP, Santo Andre

Right-back Jerome Boateng and defensive midfielder Sami Khedira are both nursing knocks ahead of Germany's final World Cup group match against the USA on Thursday, according to the German FA.

Boateng suffered a strain in his left thigh and failed to come out for the second-half of Germany's 2-2 draw with Ghana on Saturday in Group C.

Khedira strained a ligament in his left knee in the draw and the pair were both treated at Germany's World Cup base on Sunday and missed training. German team manager Oliver Bierhoff said Khedira should be fit to face former German national team boss Jurgen Klinsmann's Stars and Stripes in Recife and it is hoped the pair will be able to train on Monday.

Thomas Mueller, who scored a hat-trick in their opening 4-0 win against Portugal, will be fit despite needing stitches in a head wound after crashing into the shoulder of Ghana defender John Boye in the final stages.

COSTA RICA V ENGLAND

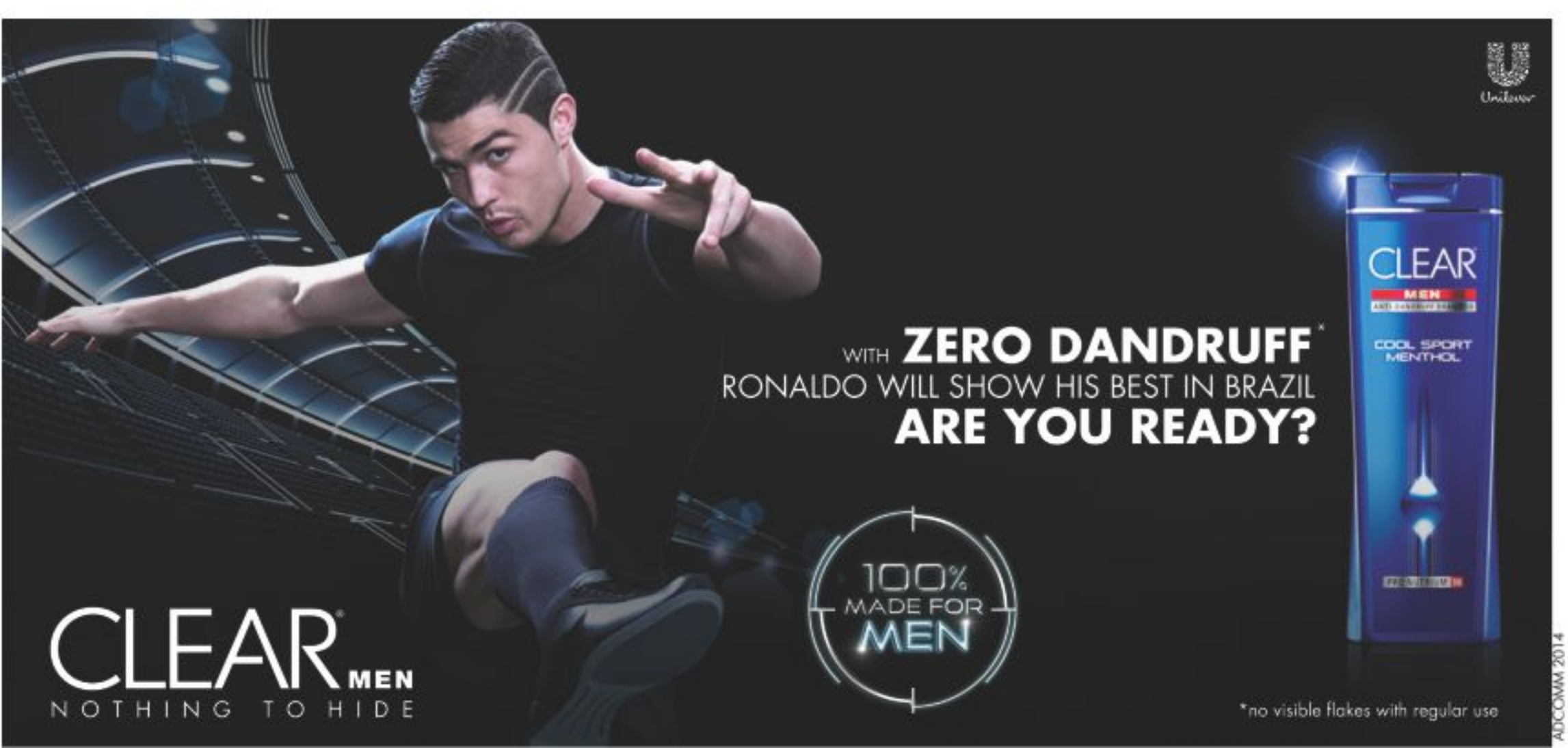
English pride at stake

REUTERS, Belo Horizonte

England's wounded 'Three Lions' play for pride only in their final World Cup game on Tuesday against Costa Rica who want another scalp to seal top spot in Group D after shocking Uruguay and Italy.

In a thrilling tournament with no pushover teams, the Central Americans have perhaps proved the biggest surprise, fully deserving wins over two former world champions that have taken them beyond the group stage for the first time since 1990.

Having beaten Uruguay 3-1 in their opener, then marked Italy's Andrea Pirlo and Mario Balotelli out of the second game in a 1-0 win, the 'Ticos' are bouncing and will have no fear of England who they have never played before.



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I shoot, you stop ... Uruguay forward Luis Suarez (L) and Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon during their respective training sessions for today's crunch Group D match.



PHOTOS: AFP

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ITALY V URUGUAY

Draw or break for Azzurri

AFP, Natal

Four-time champions Italy admitted they are struggling with the weather conditions ahead of their clash with Uruguay in Natal on Tuesday where they will try to avoid being eliminated in the first round at successive World Cups.

A win for the South Americans would send Cesare Prandelli's side crashing out at the first hurdle, four years after bowing out at the group stage as then world champions in South Africa.

The Azzurri require just a draw to go through, but after a lifeless display in a 1-0 defeat to Costa Rica, captain Gianluigi Buffon hinted that the hot and humid conditions have taken their toll.

"Once we've finished training today we'll see what kind of condition we are in," said Buffon. "I think a lot of European teams are struggling compared to the Latin Americans."

"But that isn't an excuse. The climate is the same for all of our

opponents."

If there is belief that Latin American sides are coping better than teams from Europe in such a testing climate, Group D is arguably a good indicator.

Costa Rica host England on Tuesday looking for their third consecutive group win having fought back from a goal down to stun Uruguay 3-1, before outplaying a visibly jaded Italy in Recife on Friday.

Juventus midfielder Claudio Marchisio said after the defeat: "In the second half we suffered, the heat made it difficult to remain lucid."

Uruguay bounced back from that shock reverse with a far improved performance to beat England 2-1 thanks to a Luis Suarez double.

"They've managed to re-launch their campaign by beating

England and now the whole of Uruguay believes they can beat us and go through," added Buffon, who said Italy will have to be wary

"We need to show some strength and pride and come up with a win. We need cool heads but also to be highly motivated."

"If we end up going out in the first round, it will be a failure."

With Costa Rica already through and England eliminated by the Italians' defeat in Recife, Italy and Uruguay -- who both have three points -- have been left to battle for the second qualifying spot.

Due to an inferior goal difference, Uruguay need a win if

they are to have a chance of repeating their exploits of 2010 when current coach Oscar Tabarez steered the 1950 champions to their first semifinals appearance in 40 years.

After their win against England, spirits are high in the Celeste camp.

"I have a group who are used to

resisting pressure and who react to it in a good way," said Tabarez.

"The pressure was worse against England, or do you think that we'd gone shopping?"

But Tabarez, who spent spells with AC Milan and Cagliari in the 1990s, acknowledged the challenge the Azzurri pose.

"They've been world champions four times and we have a lot of respect for them. It will be a tough challenge for us but I believe we'll have our chances," said the 67-year-old.

Italy have had barely three days to digest defeat to Costa Rica, recuperate spent forces and get in the right frame of mind.

It is only a year since last the two sides met in the Confederations Cup, drawing 2-2 in the match for third place before Italy won 3-2 in a penalty shoot-out.

"It's going to be an especially challenging match. We played them last year in the Confederations Cup and after we played well for 35 minutes, they

Klinsmann hits out at FIFA

INTERNET, undated

United States head coach Jurgen Klinsmann is one of the most successful strikers in the history of the German national team, having won a World Cup with West Germany in 1990 and a European Championship with the reunified Germany side in 1996. On top of all that, his stint as manager of the national team helped to reestablish them as a world power. Yet, despite that long history, Klinsmann had strong words for FIFA and preferential treatment of Germany after the United States' 2-2 draw against Portugal in their second match in Group G.

Minutes after a shocking late goal for Portugal robbed the United States of clinching a spot in the Round of 16, Klinsmann spoke with ESPN's Jeremy Schaap about the US's difficult travel schedule and relative lack of rest throughout the group stage and particularly ahead of Thursday's match against Germany, the strong favourite to win Group G.

"We have one day less to recover. They played yesterday, we played today. We played in the Amazon, they played in the locations where they don't have to travel as much. Everything was done for the big favourites to move on. We have to do it the tough way but we're going to do it the tough way," said Klinsmann.

Here are the facts as laid out by Klinsmann. Thursday's match takes place in Recife, the largest metropolitan area in the northern regions of Brazil. Germany played Saturday's match vs. Ghana in Fortaleza, another city in the northeast with a relatively pleasant tropical climate. The US, by contrast, played Sunday's match in Manaus, a very humid city right in the middle of the Amazon Rainforest. In effect, Germany gets an extra day of rest, played in a more temperate climate and has to travel less distance than Thursday's match.

GREECE V IVORY COAST

No time for emotion

AFP, Fortaleza

Yaya and Kolo Toure will have to shake off their grief over the death of their brother against Greece on Tuesday as they try to take Ivory Coast into the World Cup knock-out stages.

The Premier League pair were dealt a terrible blow with the news that their 28-year-old brother Ibrahim died of cancer in Manchester last week.

Just days later, Ivory Coast will take to the field with their World Cup hopes on the line in their final Group C game against former European champions Greece.

In what will be one of Yaya Toure's final memories of his brother, Ibrahim was at Manchester City's stadium last month when he collected the Premier League trophy.

Now the captain will have to contend with his emotions as well as the magnitude of the occasion as Ivory Coast seek to progress from Group C in Fortaleza.

Last week's 2-1 loss to Colombia means Ivory Coast's progress is far from assured and they will need a win to make sure of reaching the knock-out stages for the first time.

The Elephants trailed Japan in their opening game before the introduction of benched ex-Chelsea star Didier Drogba was credited with inspiring their 2-1 comeback win.

Former France midfielder Sabri Lamouchi, who took charge two years ago in what is his first role as coach, has showed signs of impatience with the constant debate over Drogba, 36.

"It is important not to get fixated over Didier Drogba, it is only the second match he is on the bench," said Lamouchi following the defeat to Colombia.

But Ivory Coast will take heart from Greece's goalless record so far which has left them bottom of the group and needing nothing less than a win.

The 2004 European champions, despite going a man down, fought off Asian title-holders Japan to rescue a 0-0 draw last week and keep their hopes alive.

And after resolving a training ground bust-up between Giorgos Tzavellas and Giannis Maniatis, they will hope to finally find the net and reach the eliminators for the first time.

A win would take Greece through, provided already qualified Colombia do not lose to third-placed Japan in

JAPAN V COLOMBIA

Blue Samurai looking for missing spark

AFP, Cuaiaba

Coach Alberto Zaccheroni must urgently find a way to unlock Japan's attacking potential against already-qualified Colombia on Tuesday but is relying on events elsewhere if his side are to reach the World Cup last 16.

Japan came to Brazil with their hopes high after finishing ahead of Australia in their Asian qualifying group, aiming to better their impressive last-16 showing in South Africa.

But little has gone right for the Blue Samurai since they started brightly against Ivory Coast, taking an early lead through Keisuke Honda only to concede twice.

Manchester United playmaker Shinji Kagawa was relegated to the bench for the next game against Greece and although he came on in the second half, the match finished in a draw 0-0 draw.

After the stalemate against 10-man Greece a frustrated Honda was damning about the team's lack of creative spark.

"We lack ideas," Japan's bleach-blond talisman told local media. "We tried to attack but we just can't put the ball in the back of the net."

It means the side's destiny is out of their hands ahead of their match in the heat of Cuaiaba.

Colombia are already assured of a

place in the next round after two victories in Group C while Ivory Coast, who meet Greece in Fortaleza on Tuesday, have three points.

Greece and Asian champions Japan have one point apiece, though Greece's goal difference is inferior.

Scratching his head for answers, on Saturday Zaccheroni gave his players, based in Ito, time off at short notice, hoping the break would enable them to recharge their batteries.

The veteran Italian said despite the disappointing start in Brazil he was feeling "pretty positive" ahead of Tuesday's match, even though he bemoaned their lack of attacking zest.

"We haven't had enough speed in our play and it's as though the players have been playing with the brakes on," he said. "The problem is probably mental."

"We're not satisfied with our performances so far. This team has given lots of joy and satisfaction in previous matches over the past four years so I'm hoping we can show that good part of our football against Colombia."

It's a very different story for Colombia, buoyant after dispatching Greece 3-0 and then beating Ivory Coast 2-1 to clinch a last-16 place for the first time since 1990, when they boasted the likes of Rene Higuita and Carlos Valderrama.

Portugal not good enough

AFP, Manaus

Portugal are not good enough to win the World Cup, their world-footballer-of-the-year Cristiano Ronaldo admitted after Sunday's thrilling 2-2 draw with the United States.

The 29-year-old Real Madrid superstar -- whose fitness has been a hot source of debate -- kept his country's slim hopes of reaching the second round alive with a sublime cross which was headed home by Silvestre Varela in the dying seconds of time added on.

The Portuguese, who were hammered 4-0 by Germany in their opening game, must beat Ghana and hope there is a winner from the other match between Germany and the Americans -- who both have four points -- on Thursday to leave the second qualifying spot down to goal difference.

However, Ronaldo -- who looks doomed to prolong the curse of the world footballer of the year never winning the World Cup trophy for the first time -- said even reaching the second round will not presage a revival that will see them lift the World Cup trophy for the first time.

"Portugal were never a favourite," said Ronaldo.

"Even qualifying for the finals was problematic [he almost single-handedly got Portugal to the finals with a hat-trick in the second leg of the play-off with Sweden in Stockholm in a 3-2 win, and a 4-2 victory on aggregate].

"I never thought we would be world champions. We have to be humble and recognise our limitations. There are things we cannot do, like running faster or having more quality."

"At the moment there are better teams and better players than our own."

"Also with the setbacks we have had here, with the suspension of Pepe and the injury to Fabio Coentrão."

Ronaldo, who had an outstanding season for Real which culminated with the 'meringues' 10th Champions League trophy, said he could have taken the easy way out and not come to the finals given his fitness concerns.

"It could have been a lot easier for me. I could have not come to the World Cup and I would have sat at home as a Champions League winner."

"Instead I answered my country's call as always," said Ronaldo, who inspired the Portuguese to a surprise run to the Euro 2012 semifinals.

Portugal coach Paulo Bento also sprang to his captain's defence denying it was his patchy form which has been responsible for them clinging on to hopes of qualifying only by their fingernails.



PHOTO: AFP

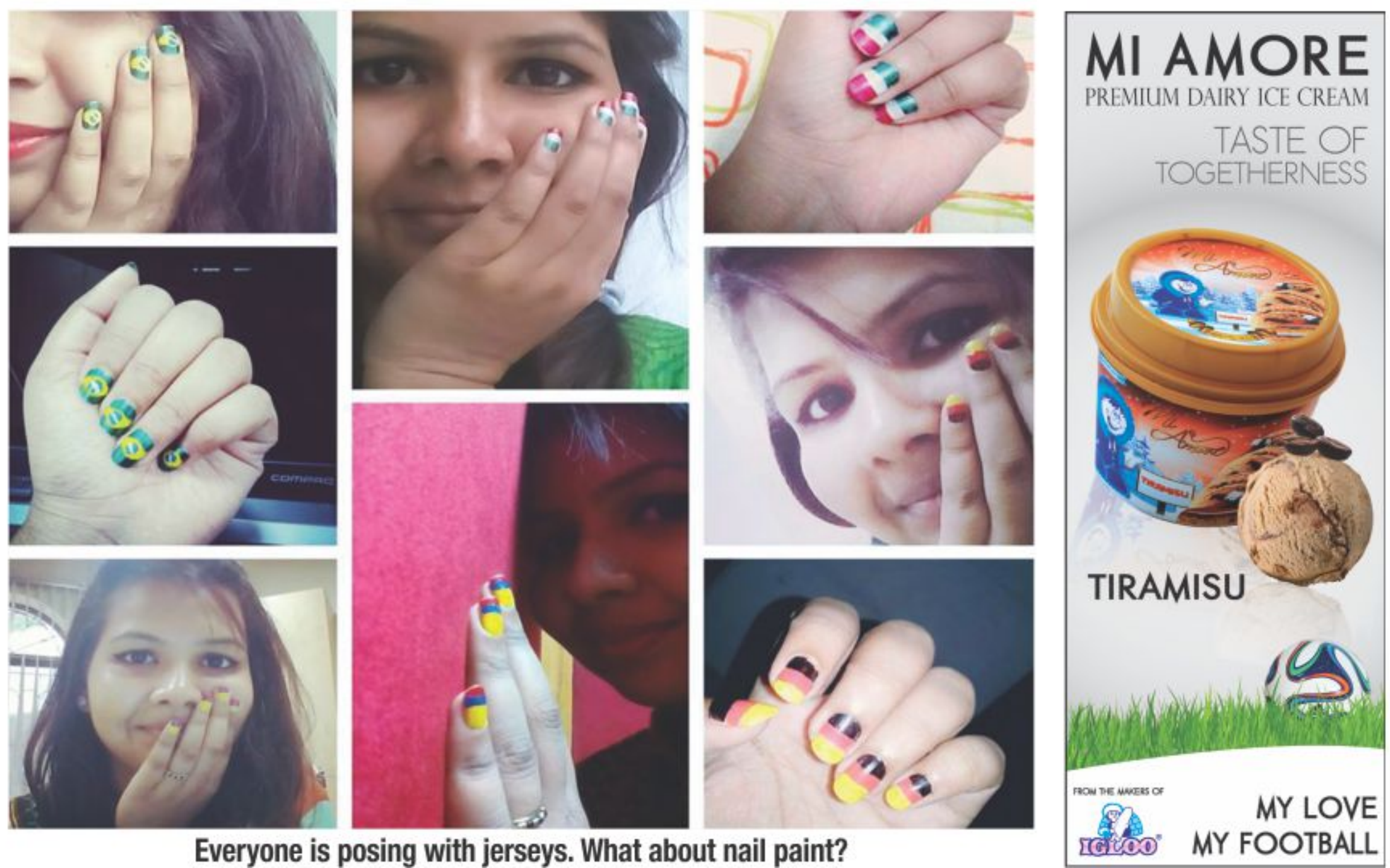
From Russia with love ... a Russian fan cheers her team on against Belgium at the Maracana on Sunday.



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MY LOVE MY FOOTBALL

Iran arrests WC clip actors

AFP, Tehran

Iran has arrested two actors who were part of a video clip filmed in support of the country's World Cup football team, the official IRNA news agency reported.

Produced by the London-based Ajam Band, the clip features contributions from Iranians in more than a dozen countries around the world, including the town of Shahroud, east of the Iranian capital Tehran.

It shows people singing and dancing in support of Team Melli, who are competing at the World Cup finals in Brazil.

Two 23-year-olds in the clip, identified only as S. M. and M. L., had been arrested following an investigation, IRNA said, citing Shahroud police commander Colonel Rahmatollah Taheri, who described the clip as "vulgar".

The film was reportedly aired on satellite television networks, access to which is only possible through dishes which are illegal but widespread in the Islamic republic.

No more details were provided.

Iran in May arrested six Iranian youths for dancing to US singer Pharrell Williams' hit "Happy" in a video that was posted online and went viral on social media.

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BRAZILIAN BAURU

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

RIO PITCH 'VERY DRY'

The Maracana pitch is very energy-sapping and, given warm conditions, was tough for Belgium and Russia in Sunday's World Cup encounter, Belgian midfielder Marouane Fellaini said.

Both Fabio Capello, the Russia coach, and Belgian counterpart Marc Wilmots said the match had been "very intense" and Fellaini said the dry conditions had made life difficult.

"The pitch was very dry. It was physically hard out there for both teams and we also had to deal with the warm conditions," said Fellaini, who scored from the bench against Algeria in the opening group game.

Fellow midfielder Axel Witsel also highlighted the dry playing surface.

"It was a very dry pitch. This is turning out to be a great World Cup."

"Today, we came through -- but we mustn't get carried away."

CONTROVERSY OVER PICTURE

A picture of a Brazilian fan standing in front of her wheelchair and clapping at a World Cup stadium has sparked controversy over the alleged "miracle".

FIFA has not confirmed the authenticity of the picture and similar ones circulating on social media, but the football governing body condemned any bid to fraudulently acquire seats for the handicapped.

"We strongly condemn any attempt to wrongly use tickets reserved for disabled members of the general public," a FIFA spokesman said on condition of anonymity.

"FIFA asks fans to be respectful and only request these seats if they qualify for them."

The most controversial picture shows the

back of a fan wearing Brazil's yellow team jersey at the Castelao Stadium in the north-eastern city of Fortaleza, standing and applauding in front of the wheelchair.

The photo was apparently taken during Brazil's 0-0 draw with Mexico on June 17.

But the two teams had played at the same venue during last year's Confederations Cup tournament, when Brazil won 2-0.

The picture sparked a debate on Twitter, with one Brazilian user sarcastically questioning the "great miracle", while others noted that some disabled people can stand up some times.

Brazilian law has set aside at least one percent of World Cup tickets for people with disabilities.

FIFA said that people buying handicapped seats must show a medical certificate when picking up their tickets. More checks are conducted on game day.

'COURTOIS SET FOR CHELSEA'

Belgium goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois will be back at parent club Chelsea next season having starred in Atletico Madrid's La Liga-winning campaign, his country's coach Marc Wilmots said Sunday.

A Belgian television station caught Wilmots chatting and admitting as much to former France and Liverpool coach Gerard Houllier before the game.

Courtois has had three seasons away from Stamford Bridge on loan but having helped Atletico to the Spanish title and the Champions League final, the Blues consider him ready for Premier League duty.

Asked the question by Houllier, Wilmots replied: "He's going back to Chelsea, yes."

Houllier then asks: "So they'll sell [Czech keeper Petr] Cech?" Wilmots responds: "It's possible, yes."



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