

Suarez given credit for apology

AFP, Brasilia

FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke has given disgraced Uruguayan star Luis Suarez credit for apologising over the biting incident that saw him expelled from the World Cup.

Valcke, though, pointed out in an interview with Brazilian television station SporTV that Suarez' apology had not gone as far as accepting he had deliberately bitten Italian defender Giorgio Chiellini in a group game on June 24.

"It is good he has apologised," said the Frenchman. "He does not, however, accept that it was intentional, he says it was an accident."

Valcke, who commented after the incident he felt Suarez should seek professional help as it was the third time he had been found guilty of biting an opponent, said he could not comment on how the apology could affect Suarez' appeal.

FIFA handed down a record nine international game suspension, a four month global ban from football and a six figure fine for the player.

"He has appealed, there is an ongoing legal process and if he is not happy with the outcome his resort could be to take the case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport [CAS]."



Belgian fans come alive at the Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro after their team's nervy 2-1 win over USA in the World Cup round of 16 in Salvador on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Hummels fit for France

AFP, Santo Andre

Germany's Mats Hummels and Lukas Podolski are fit to face France in Friday's World Cup quarter-final in Rio de Janeiro after recovering from illness and injury respectively.

Both Hummels and Podolski missed Monday's 2-1 win over Algeria in the last 16, but are available to face Les Bleus at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana in the last eight.

"Almost back at 100 percent," Hummels wrote on his Twitter account on Wednesday having missed Monday's match with flu.

Left winger Podolski is also set to return having recovered from a thigh strain as both he and Hummels took part in Wednesday's training session.

With 33 appearances and three goals for Germany, including a header in the 4-0 drubbing of Portugal, Hummels should slot straight back in.

He is set to partner Per Mertesacker at centre-back-- his replacement in the starting line-up on Monday Shkodran Mustafi has been ruled out of the rest of the tournament with a torn hamstring.

Podolski will compete with both Andre Schuerle, who scored in extra time against Algeria, and Mario Goetze for the left wing berth.

Germany on Didier's mind

AFP, Ribeirao Preto

France coach Didier Deschamps on Tuesday sought to temper growing expectations generated by his team's impressive run to the World Cup quarterfinals.

Les Bleus defeated Nigeria 2-0 in Monday's last 16 game in Brasilia to set up a quarterfinal meeting with Germany on Friday.

Under Deschamps's steady guidance, France have risen majestically from the ashes of the chaotic 2010 campaign in South Africa.

But the skipper of the 1998 world title-winning side was keeping his feet firmly on the ground back at his squad's Brazil headquarters in Ribeirao Preto on Tuesday.

"I'm a realist, my target, like my players, is Friday," he said the day after goals from Paul Pogba and an own goal from Joseph Yobo downed Nigeria.

Deschamps, 45, added: "It doesn't serve any purpose to look any further ahead."

"The reality now is Germany on Friday. "Everyone can dream, including me, but I'm a pragmatist and a realist, Friday is the only thing that counts."

Deschamps, who succeeded fellow World Cup and Euro 2000 winner Laurent Blanc as national coach after Euro 2012, rejected the notion that France were favourites against Germany, but at the same time made clear his team weren't going to Rio de Janeiro's Maracana "as tourists".

"We're going there to give it everything we've got."

Reflecting on France's progress through to the last eight after topping their first round group he stated: "We haven't made a mess of our World Cup."

"I'm very proud and the players deserve it, it's a huge pleasure for me and my staff to be involved on a daily basis with them and to manage them, to be with them."

"But we're not going there [to Rio de Janeiro] as tourists on Friday."

He downplayed any lingering significance of the memorable 1982 World Cup semifinal between the two teams.

The game in Seville attained notoriety when German keeper Harald Schumacher shoulder-charged Patrick Battiston, leaving the Frenchman unconscious on the ground.

"They [his players] weren't even born then, what would I speak to them about?"

Joachim Loew (Germany coach) is completely right. Have respect for former players and what's taken place but we're not playing against old rivals."

Juergen back to future



AFP, Salvador

Juergen Klinsmann has called on his United States players to toughen their mental approach as he begins to plot the long road towards the 2018 World Cup.

Klinsmann and the United States exited Brazil 2014 on Tuesday after losing 2-1 to Belgium in a thrilling last 16 game which exploded into life during extra-time.

The Americans, who had confounded pre-tournament predictions by qualifying from a group which also contained Germany, Portugal and Ghana, ran Belgium to the wire and almost equalised as they fought back from 2-0 down.

While Klinsmann was delighted with his team's performance, the former German international wasted no time in looking forward to the challenges ahead.

A busy schedule sees the US play in the CONCACAF Gold Cup regional tournament next year before a 2016 which includes the Centennial Copa America, staged in the United States, and

the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

Beyond those events looms the 2018 World Cup in Russia, which Klinsmann said he plans to stick around for.

But before then, Klinsmann wants to see his team adopt a harder mental edge.

While basking in the success of their Brazilian campaign, Klinsmann believes his players are guilty of showing too much respect to opponents.

"We are still in the process of learning to take our game to the opponent," he said.

"No matter what their name is, we cannot just wait too long to start our game."

"I think there is a little bit too much respect when it comes to the big stage -- why not play them eye-to-eye? I don't know how many years that takes to change but it's something we have to go through."

"The players have got to realise they have to take it to the opponent."

Klinsmann is confident however that the

foundations have been laid.

The future, as represented by teenagers such as Julian Green, who scored against Belgium, is bright, says Klinsmann.

"We will find ways to introduce new young players and develop our program to develop the game at every level," he said. "I think we've done a lot of work."

"We're excited about building a next Olympic team cycle which is huge for us going to Rio de Janeiro in two years [for the Olympics]."

The burgeoning popularity of football in the US, reflected in record television viewing figures and huge crowds at World Cup viewing events, also augurs well, Klinsmann believes.

"The way the people the fans embraced their team and the sport over the last couple of years will only continue to grow, especially with a league which is getting stronger and stronger, and especially with the competitions we have ahead of ourselves," Klinsmann said. "There's a lot to build on going forward."

Rojo missing quarters

AFP, Sao Paulo

Argentina defender Marcos Rojo will be suspended for his country's World Cup quarter final on Saturday after picking up a second yellow card in the last 10 win over Switzerland.

He was booked in the 90th minute for bringing down Switzerland's Ricardo Rodriguez to halt a counter-attack. The 24-year-old Sporting Lisbon full back picked up a first warning in Argentina's Group G match against Bosnia.

He has been a key part of what has appeared a suspect defence but also scored the winning goal in the 3-2 group win over Nigeria.

Under FIFA rules, any two yellow cards between the groups and the quarter finals lead to an immediate one match suspension.

Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella said Jose Maria Basanta, who came on in the first period of extra time against Switzerland, was Rojo's likely replacement.

"Most probably Basanta will play the next game," Sabella said. "Marcos does everything at a very high level but we also trust Basanta."

Keshi shocked at quit report

AFP, Brasilia

Nigeria coach Stephen Keshi said Tuesday that he was "shocked" by reports that he has resigned after his side's World Cup defeat.

Keshi, whose side lost to France in the last 16, insisted that nothing has been decided.

"What I said to my players was that this was maybe my last match at the helm of affairs in the national team, because my contract terminates with the World Cup and I have not been offered a new one," the 52-year-old explained late Tuesday.

"I was a bit shocked that the global media went to town to say I have called it quits with the national team. Resignations are not done on the pages of newspapers, but formally."

Keshi's comments were released by the Nigerian team's media officer, Ben Alaiya.

Keshi did say that several countries have expressed interest in employing him after Nigeria, including South Africa, which he suggested was positive for Nigerian football and their coaches.

BRAZILIAN BAURU

AFP, Salvador

FAN RUNS ONTO PITCH

A man ran onto the pitch early in Tuesday's last 16 game between Belgium and the United States in the World Cup's first pitch security breach.

The man ran from one side of the pitch almost to the other before being halted and led away by security officers.

Before being sent off, the man who had a t-shirt with the words 'Save Favelas children' written on it, shook hands with Belgian players Eden Hazard and Kevin de Bruyne.

RIBERY NO-SHOW FOR KEY CLASH

Injured France star Franck Ribery will not travel to Brazil to cheer his teammates when they face Germany in the World Cup quarterfinals here Friday, the French Football Federation (FFF) said Tuesday.

Ribery, ruled out of the World Cup after a recurrence of a back injury on the eve of the finals, had been invited to join the squad along with two injured players originally due to travel to Brazil, Steve Mandanda and Clement Grenier.

However FFF president Noel Le Graet told AFP the Bayern Munich star would not be coming to Brazil.

"Ribery is on holiday with his family and is recovering," Le Graet said.

Le Graet said the FFF was still waiting to hear whether Mandanda, who plays for Marseille, and Grenier (Lyon) would accept their invitations to travel to Brazil.

FIFA WOWED BY WC

FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke on Tuesday said he had been impressed by the soaring popularity of the World Cup in the United States, which has discussed a possible bid for the tournament in 2026.

Speaking to Brazilian television channel SporTV, Valcke said FIFA had noted the record viewing figures for World Cup matches in the United States.

"What we have seen during this World Cup in the United States is incredible," Valcke was quoted as saying through an interpreter. "Huge interest, record television figures, even surpassing the NBA [basketball]."

More than 15 million Americans tuned in to watch Germany defeat the United States 1-0 in their World Cup group finale, broadcasters ESPN and Univision said.

The Americans' previous 2-2 draw with Portugal pulled in an average 18.2 million viewers on ESPN alone to become what the network called "the most-viewed soccer match in the United States ever."

The US World Cup campaign came to a brave end on Tuesday with a 2-1 defeat to Belgium after extra-time.

But Valcke said he was convinced the sport had now gained a solid foothold in America, and appeared to give tacit encouragement to a possible US bid in 2026.

"It shows that football in the United States is strong, and we should continue to work with US Soccer and the United States, who have talked about organising the World Cup in 2026," Valcke added.

The United States, which staged a successful World Cup in 1994, made an unsuccessful bid for the 2022 tournament, controversially awarded to Qatar after a corruption-tainted vote in 2010.

ARGENTINA V BELGIUM

1986 semifinal repeat

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Four-time footballer-of-the-year Lionel Messi's misfiring Argentina and Belgium completed the line-up for the World Cup quarterfinals and will face each other in a repeat of the 1986 World Cup semifinal.

Their qualification on Tuesday leaves the make-up of the quarterfinals evenly balanced with four Latin American sides and four Europeans, giving the 'old continent' a good chance of finally triumphing in a World Cup hosted in the Americas.

Both Argentina and Belgium sealed their places with victories in extra-time against Switzerland and the United States respectively, though, the South American giants' performance left a plenty of question marks hanging over whether they can add to their two World Cup trophies.

The last one came in 1986, when like the present team, they relied on the genius of one player, in the volatile Diego Maradona, who all but single-handedly drove them to victory.

This time around the Belgians will be hoping they cope better with the wizardry of Messi than their predecessors did with Maradona, whose double in the 2-0 defeat dashed their dreams of a first ever final appearance.

The Belgian-Argentina clash on Saturday in Brasilia is not the only one of the quarterfinals that evokes memories of a



past in terms of previous match-ups.

For on Friday two European titans, Germany and France, face each other in the appropriately historic setting of the Maracana in Rio de Janeiro with the French bidding to erase memories of two semifinal defeats in the 1980's at the hands of what was then West Germany.

However, it is the 1982 semifinal that still rankles with many in France, not only because they let a 3-1 lead slip in extra-time to go out on penalties, but also due to the infamous incident when German goalkeeper Harald Schumacher's shoulder charge left Patrick Battiston uncon-

scious on the pitch.

Schumacher, himself, persists in his defence that it was unintentional although his one regret is he did not attend to the prone Battiston immediately after the incident.

Indeed the 60-year-old told AFP he feared that a similar incident could happen in Friday's game given the penchant of present German goalkeeper Manuel Neuer to rush from his area to clear the ball.

"If one looks at yesterday's match [Germany's 2-1 win over Algeria on Monday] and how many times Neuer came out of his goal....he can always be unlucky and arrive too late and something like what happened [in 1982] can occur."

Belgian coach Marc Wilmots -- who arrived on the international scene as a player after the 1986 World Cup -- is also focussed solely on beating the present crop of Argentinians.

There were signs of hope for the 'Red Devils' in Messi's mood on Tuesday as the 27-year-old was stifled for the majority of the match by Swiss hardman Valon Behrami and took out his frustration at one point by shoving his opponent.

However, the down side for the Belgians was that almost the first time Messi escaped Behrami's attentions he created the goal which not only killed off the Swiss but brought the curtain down on the glittering career of Switzerland's

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Shades of 1999

AFP, Sao Paulo

Ottmar Hitzfeld said an emotional goodbye to his Swiss team and football Tuesday as he quit the sport after a dramatic World Cup loss to Argentina and following the death of his brother.

Despite the personal trauma of losing his brother Winfried, 81, to leukemia, Hitzfeld very nearly masterminded a seismic upset of Argentina in his last hurrah as coach.

He said the extra-time defeat reminded him of the 1999 Champions League final, when his Bayern Munich team were minutes from victory before Manchester United scored twice.

And Hitzfeld said his "heart was full of emotions" after the Swiss came just two minutes from a penalty shoot-out before Angel Di Maria's extra-time winner in Sao Paulo.

"These are emotions you can only have with football, that's why I love football," he said.

"Switzerland has won a lot of hearts around the world today, that is something that will make us proud."

The 65-year-old German, who won the Champions League with both Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich, had already announced he would retire after the World Cup.

"I will go on working for TV. I'll go to games but as a journalist basically, so I have a quiet life in front of me," he said.

"The job as a coach is difficult. I'm proud of my career. I was fortunate to coach marvellous clubs and also the Swiss national team."

"It has been a great time working for them so I say goodbye with a heart full of emotions."

After Argentina's winner, Hitzfeld went on the pitch to console his stricken players, just as he did in 1999 with his distraught Bayern Munich team following their 2-1 loss.

"It's normal to go on the pitch at a time like that. I did it with Manchester United when we lost the Champions League final in a matter of two or three minutes, and then I did it today," he said.

Spotlight on Pogba

AFP, Brasilia

With his decisive goal against Nigeria in the World Cup last 16, France's young midfielder Paul Pogba indicated that he is ready to bear the burden of his team's expectations.

The captain and stand-out player of the France team that triumphed at last year's Under-20 World Cup in Turkey, the tall, technically refined Juventus player has long been seen to represent his country's future.

National coach Didier Deschamps has described him as a central midfielder who has "everything", but prior to Monday's 2-0 win over Nigeria in Brasilia, his maiden World Cup had been mixed.

He was criticised for kicking out at opposing midfielder Wilson Palacios during France's opening 3-0 win over Honduras, after which Deschamps urged him to show more "control".

He then impressed as a substitute in the 5-2 victory over Switzerland, notably producing a sublime assist for Karim Benzema, but after a lacklustre display in the 0-0 draw with Ecuador, his place in the team was reported to be under threat from Moussa Sissoko.

In keeping with his experiences in Brazil to date, his performance against Nigeria at the Mane Garrincha National Stadium was a slow-burner.

While he forced Nigeria goalkeeper Vincent Enyeama into a spectacular save with an emphatic first-half volley, his final pass often let him down, but as France began to turn the screw in the latter stages, so Pogba came to the fore.

His 79th-minute header may have owed to a handling error by Enyeama, but his team-mates were quick to underline its importance.

"Paul produced a great performance. They say that big players show up in big matches," said midfield colleague Blaise Matuidi.

"He has a lot of weight on his shoulders. Don't forget he's 21."

Pogba's performance also caught the eye of potential semifinal opponents Brazil.

"France are a good team, with excellent players. Perhaps the one who stands out the most is Pogba," said Brazil midfielder Fernandinho, who plays for Manchester City.

"He's a player with very good technique, is a strong finisher, and scored with his head."

Fernandinho might have crossed paths with Pogba sooner had the Frenchman not run out of patience over his slow progress through the youth ranks at former club Manchester United.

United were accused of "stealing" Pogba, then 16, from Le Havre in 2009, but despite the eagerness they showed to acquire his services, Pogba felt that the club's legendary manager Alex Ferguson was stunting his progress.

"It was the feeling I had with the coach," Pogba told French sports daily L'Equipe in August 2012, shortly after joining Juventus.

"He said he trusted me, but he didn't let me play. He said I was too young. He said: 'Your time will come.' It didn't come."

"Even though he's had a 25-year career and despite the fact he's the boss, my objective was to play."

"I'm impatient. When I want something, I'll do anything to get it."



Paul Pogba was a hero for France in last year's U-19 World Cup in Turkey and he has joined the party in Brazil with an all-important goal against Nigeria.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Japan play hardball with Aguirre

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's football supremos have refused to offer Mexico's Javier Aguirre a four-year contract to coach the national team, telling him he must prove himself, local media reported Wednesday.

Italian Alberto Zaccheroni stepped down as coach after the Asian champions flopped at the World Cup, but the Japan Football

Association (JFA) will not be forced into a knee-jerk reaction, according to technical director Hiromi Hara.

"He won't be given four years straight away," Hara told the Sankei Sports newspaper.

The 53-year-old Aguirre, who led Mexico to the last 16 of the World Cup in 2002 and 2010, will pocket an estimated \$2.45 million a year -- more than twice what Zaccheroni was on -- to drag Japan out of the doldrums.

The JFA have reportedly agreed on terms with Aguirre, set to become Japan's highest-paid coach ever, with performance-based incentives to extend his deal to the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

However, Hara insisted that he had other names on his wish-list if talks with Aguirre broke down.

"I can't say how many [names] but we will negotiate with them in order of priority," he added. "If we

just have one target we could end up getting burned."

Japan exited the World Cup with a whimper after losing 2-1 to Ivory Coast, drawing 0-0 with a 10-man Greece and getting thumped 4-1 by Colombia.

Zaccheroni was criticised for his team selection and tactics, while key players Keisuke Honda and Shinji Kagawa were also panned for failing to spark the Blue Samurais.

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