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'Ticos exit with pride'

REUTERS, *Salvador*

Costa Rica achieved "wonderful things" at this World Cup and are proud to bow out having conceded only two goals and without losing a game, coach Jorge Luis Pinto said on Saturday.

"During this World Cup we have done very beautiful things that many people didn't believe we could achieve -- wonderful things," Pinto said after a 4-3 penalty shootout defeat by the Netherlands following a quarterfinal which finished 0-0 at the end of extra time.

"We played against great powerhouses of football. We leave the tournament unbeaten. It's incredible. We played five matches and conceded only one goal and one penalty."

Costa Rica have been one of the revelations of the tournament, beating Uruguay and Italy and drawing with England to reach the knock-out stages for only the second time in their history.

They beat Greece in a penalty shootout in the second round and held the Netherlands to a goalless draw for two hours in Salvador.

"The Netherlands are a very strong team, they're internationally renowned, but we proved we are at the same level as them," Pinto said.

"They have players who have played at European Championships and World Cups before and who compete in the big leagues.

"We think we have left a very positive and dignified image of Costa Rican football."

Pinto was asked about the Dutch decision to switch goalkeepers just before the shootout and bring on Tim Krul.

"Maybe he's a specialist. I respect that. I've never seen that before ... but we were not intimidated at all," he said.

At one point late in the match, Pinto engaged Dutch forward Arjen Robben in a lengthy conversation on the touchline.

"I told Robben he was one of the best players in the world," Pinto said. "I asked him let us win something today. He's won so much in his career."

Costa Rica goalkeeper Keylor Navas, described by Pinto as "brilliant" and "spectacular", kept the Dutch at bay for much of the match but was unable to stop any of their four penalties.

Miraculous makeover ... Netherlands manager Louis van Gaal (C) supervises the swap between goalkeepers Jasper Cillessen (L) and Tim Krul in the dying moments of their quarterfinal on Saturday.
PHOTO: REUTERS

Tim Krul in dreamland

AFP, *Salvador*

Goalkeeper Tim Krul called it a "dream come true" Saturday after he was boldly brought on as a penalty-kicks specialist and saved two against Costa Rica to put the Netherlands into the World Cup semifinals.

The towering Newcastle United custodian replaced Jasper Cillessen in the last minute of extra-time in an outlandish gambit by Manchester United-bound coach Louis van Gaal.

And the 1.93m (six feet three inches) Krul duly saved from Bryan Ruiz and Michael Umana, both low and to the right-hand corner, to win it 4-3 and set up a meeting with Argentina.

It ended a woeful Dutch run in penalty shoot-outs which previously stood at only one victory in five attempts at World Cups and European Championships.

Krul said the switch, which was kept secret from Cillessen, had been in the works all week as the Netherlands built up to the game in Salvador.

"I knew before the game that the possibility was there. If we had one more substitution the manager said that he would consider putting me in goal and it happened," he said.

"It's a dream come true for me. I watched the penalties. We've been preparing with all the goalkeepers and the goalkeeper coach."

Van Gaal, who has already redeployed forward Dirk Kuyt in defence and used a cooling break against Mexico to switch tactics, was proud of his latest "trick".

"We thought this through beforehand. Every player in my selection has certain skills and qualities," he told reporters.

"We felt, all of us that Tim was the most appropriate 'keeper to stop penalties, because he has a long reach.

"We prepared Costa Rica's penalties and they prepared our penalties as well and we've seen that Tim Krul dived into the right corner time and time again."

Kuyt, who played his part by burying his spot-kick -- along with fellow veterans Robin van Persie, Arjen Robben and Wesley Sneijder -- hailed a "great job" by Krul.

"I was not too busy with Tim because I was expecting that we could kill the game beforehand," he said.

"But everything has been spoken in the team and we know that Tim is a very good penalty-saver. Let's say that when he came in, I was not surprised."

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A cold, calculated gamble

ESPNFC.COM

Netherlands coach Louis van Gaal made perhaps the gutsiest managerial decision of the World Cup when he decided to swap goalkeepers just ahead of the penalty shootout with Costa Rica, but he said afterward that was the plan all along.

Van Gaal pulled Jasper Cillessen in the 120th minute in favour of the slightly taller Tim Krul, who made two saves to help the Dutch reach the semifinals.

"Every player in my selection has certain skills and qualities and they don't always coincide," Van Gaal said. "We always felt that Tim Krul would be the most appropriate player to stop penalties.

"He has a long reach and we prepared Costa Rican penalties. He dove into the right corner time and time again. We are a little bit proud that this trick has helped us through."

The Netherlands staff had discussed the goalkeeper change as they prepared for the match -- but no one told starting keeper Cillessen.

"First and foremost, the coach decides who is going to play and who is going to be a substitute," Van Gaal said.

GPH ispat

"We said nothing to Jasper Cillessen because we didn't want to face this before the match. It would be disappointing for him, but every keeper has his specific qualities. We felt Tim had a better track record of saving penalties. Fortunately, this worked out."

Krul has saved two of 20 penalties during his time with Newcastle but failed to stop any of the five spot-kicks he faced last season.

The incoming boss of Manchester United said he planned to use Krul while heading into extra time, and didn't feel the move came at the expense of swapping out a third outfield before the shootout.

"Before the 90 minutes had ended, I thought they were playing well and that we created lots of opportunities. I didn't have this need to substitute anyone," Van Gaal said.

"I felt that Memphis [Depay] didn't play really well, so I exchanged him for [Jeremain] Lens. In the extra time, I took into account that I would maybe want to use Krul should it come down to penalties.

"Of course, we also had the injuries to [Ron] Vlaar. [Georginio] Wijnaldum was exhausted, [Robin] van Persie as well. I brought in [Klaas-Jan] Huntelaar, which was a risk. I went from five to four defenders. It was a bit tricky, touch-and-go, but in hindsight, it was a big success."

The Netherlands move on to face Argentina in the semifinals on Wednesday, and Van Gaal was not very complimentary of his next opponents.

BRAZILIAN BAURU

AFP, *Rio de Janeiro*

BLIND FANS LISTEN TO THE ACTION

Two commentators sat in a broadcast booth at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium, put on their mics and looked down at the pitch before narrating a World Cup game for an exclusive audience.

As the teams arrived, they began giving detailed descriptions to a group of people sitting in the stands. All were blind and visually-impaired fans listening through short-range radio signals on their smartphones.

For the first time in a World Cup, the sport's governing body, FIFA, set up the special audio system at stadiums with the assistance of Urece, a Brazilian non-governmental group that provides services to the blind.

"You must accurately describe everything: The atmosphere in the stands, the physical appearance of the players, their kits, the colours, the images broadcast on giant screens," said commentator Eduardo Butter, a 23-year-old journalist.

Some 6.5 million people are visually impaired in the country of 200 million, and many share Brazil's passion for football, attending club games with relatives or guides who describe the action.

FIFA SILENCES BRAZIL SPOKESMAN

FIFA on Saturday banned Brazil's team spokesman for three matches for hitting a Chilean player during their countries' World Cup match.

The media specialist, Rodrigo Paiva, hit Chilean player Mauricio Pinilla in the stadium tunnel at half time in the last 16 match last Saturday.

Paiva was banned for three matches, with a fourth match suspended for two years, and fined 10,000 Swiss francs (11,180 dollars/8,200 euros), the world governing body announced.

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One match of the ban has already been served, but the action means that Paiva will not be allowed into the rest of the World Cup, even if the hosts reach the final.

Chile's media spokesman Maria Jose said his Brazilian counterpart "hit" Pinilla. Paiva told Brazilian media there was shoving by both sides as the two teams left the field.

UZBEK REF SETS NEW RECORD

Uzbekistan referee Ravshan Irmatov made football history on Saturday when he took charge of a record ninth World Cup game, the quarterfinal between Netherlands and Costa Rica.

Before Saturday he held the record on eight with France's Joel Quiniou, Jorge Larrionda of Uruguay and Mexico's Benito Archundia (Mexico).

This was his fourth run out in Brazil.

The 36-year-old's first World Cup game was the 2010 opening fixture between hosts south Africa and Mexico.

Press hail Louis masterstroke

AFP, *The Hague*

Louis van Gaal's unprecedented decision to replace his goalkeeper for the penalty shoot-out in the Netherlands' World Cup quarterfinal victory over Costa Rica was hailed as a masterstroke by the Dutch media on Sunday. To the astonishment of all and sundry, except his coaching staff and replacement goalkeeper Tim Krul, van Gaal sent the latter on for number one Jasper Cillessen and it proved to be an inspired call.

But it was a brave gamble, given that Krul had saved just two of the 20 penalties he had faced at his club Newcastle United.

The positive headlines represent quite a change for van Gaal, who made his name in the 1990s as coach of a vibrant young Ajax side who won the 1995 Champions League.

He had departed after his first unsuccessful spell in charge of the national side, when they failed to qualify for the 2002 finals, to scathing criticism.

None of the Dutch media were able to match the play on words by former Dutch internationals Frank and his twin brother Ronald de Boer, who tweeted 'Louis van G(eni)aal.'

However, they still delivered unstinting praise.

"In sport, at the highest level, success can be decided by the thinnest of margins. Sometimes it stems from luck, sometimes from a sixth sense," commented De Telegraaf.

Another Dutch daily, Volkskrant, also poured superlatives over the 62-year-old coach, who is due to step down and take over the reins at English Premier League giants Manchester United.

"The change was a masterstroke. Tim Krul saved two penalties," it purred.

Dutch TV station NOS also chimed in with admiring comments.

"Contrary to all expectations, Louis van Gaal replaced Cillessen by Tim Krul for the penalties. Tim Krul turned out to be the hero by saving two penalties."

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HIGUAIN makes his mark

AFP, *Brasilia*

With a single swish of the right boot in his side's World Cup quarterfinal against Belgium, Gonzalo Higuain finally showed there may be more to Argentina than Lionel Messi after all.

Higuain had been under scrutiny after going three and a half matches without scoring, but he needed just eight minutes to find the net in Argentina's 1-0 win in Brasilia on Saturday.

When a pass from Angel di Maria was inadvertently flicked into his path by Belgium defender Jan Vertonghen, the 26-year-old pounced to snap a crisp volley into the bottom-left corner that sent his team into the last four.

Having spent a month on the sidelines due to an ankle injury, Higuain had looked ponderous in his previous appearances in Brazil, but after putting Argentina in front against Belgium, he was a man transformed.

From harrying opponents to bringing his team-mates into play with deft lay-offs, Higuain suddenly looked every inch the player who had scored 17 goals for Napoli last season in his debut Serie A campaign.

He clipped the crossbar with a powerful shot after nutmegging Belgian skipper Vincent Kompany in the second half.

Higuain was named man-of-the-match and coach Alejandro Sabella was quick to salute his performance.

"He ran a lot, he helped his team-mates a lot, and he scored a very important goal. That's what you expect from strikers," Sabella said.

Prior to Saturday's game, Sabella had faced a barrage of questions about his team's supposed dependence on Messi, but Higuain's display showed that the Argentina number 10 is not the only player who knows where the goal is.

As a reminder of his abilities, it could scarcely have been more timely, with both Di Maria and Sergio Aguero injury doubts ahead of Wednesday's semifinal against the Netherlands in Sao Paulo.

Di Maria was due to undergo scans on Sunday after being forced off in the 33rd minute against Belgium with an apparent thigh injury, while Aguero has not played since a muscular problem curtailed his participation in the group-phase success against Nigeria.

With only four goals to his name in 35 international appearances, Ezequiel Lavezzi is unlikely to illuminate the path to goal at the Arena de Sao Paulo either.

Higuain has known moments of difficulty before in his career, most notably when he lost his place at Real Madrid to Karim Benzema, but he said that he never doubted his capacity to make a mark at the World Cup.

"I had faith in my qualities. The coach and the staff were behind me, and that's what matters to me," he said.

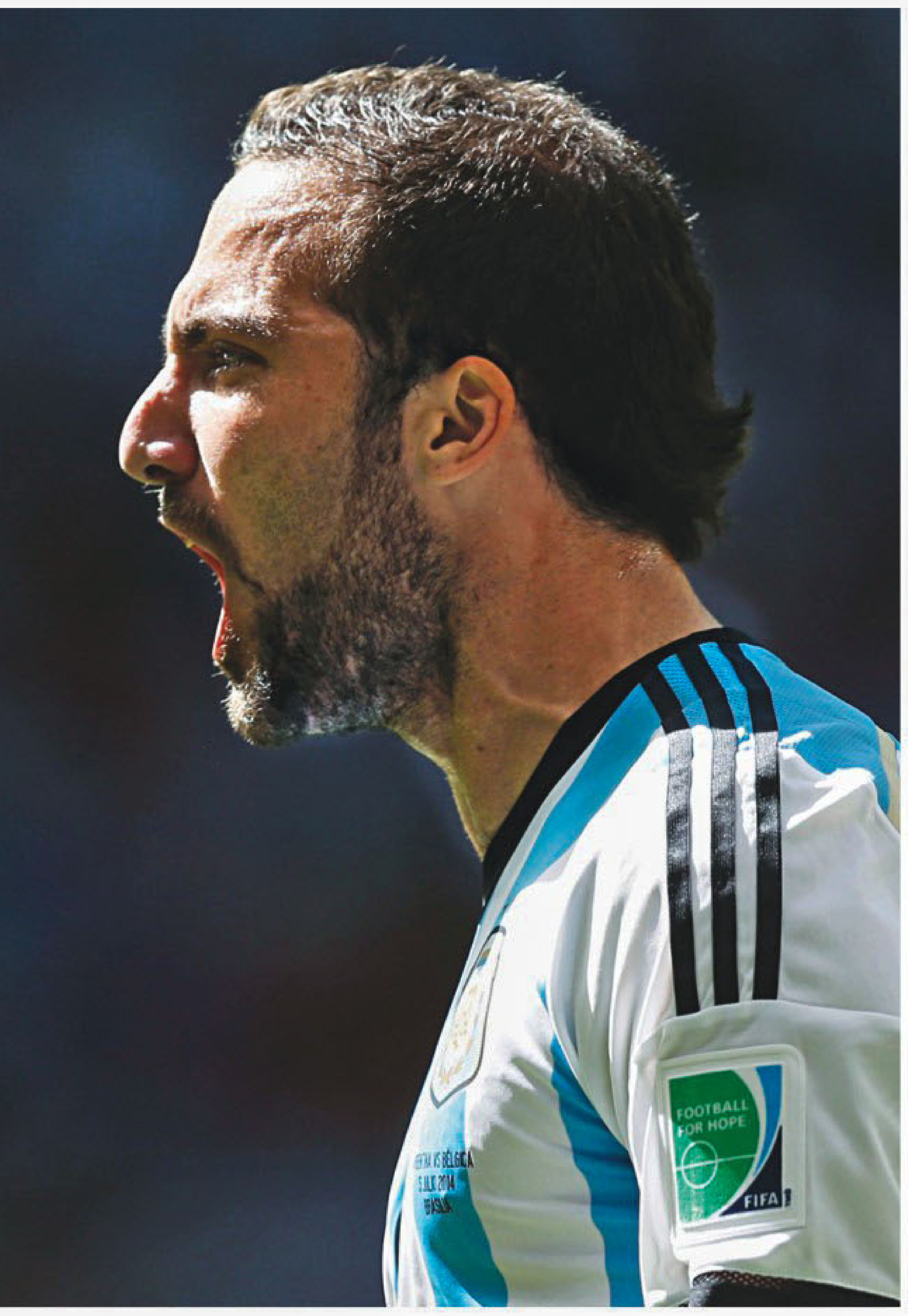
"I'm already thinking about the semifinal. We have two matches left to make history."

While Messi has unsurprisingly been cast as the 2014 Diego Maradona -- who inspired his team to glory at the 1986 World Cup with five goals and five assists -- Higuain may yet prove to be his generation's Jorge Valdano.

By the conclusion of the 1986 tournament, Valdano had emerged as the only striker trusted by coach Carlos Bilardo to lead the line ahead of Maradona in Argentina's innovative 5-3-1-1 system.

The Real Madrid striker ended the competition with four goals to his name -- including one in the final against West Germany -- and a winner's medal around his neck.

Higuain, whose six-year spell at Madrid coincided with Valdano's return to the club as general director in 2009, would accept the same fate gladly.



Di Stefano in serious but stable state

AFP, *Madrid*

Real Madrid legend Alfredo di Stefano remained in a "serious but stable" condition in a Madrid hospital on Sunday, a day after he went into a coma after suffering a heart attack, the hospital said.

Rescuers battled for nearly 20 minutes to revive the 88-year-old, one of the greatest footballers in history, after his heart and breathing stopped while he was eating with his family near Real's Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

The Argentina-born forward was taken in a serious condition to the Gregorio Maranon hospital which later said he was in a coma, had been sedated and was breathing with the help of a machine.

In a new medical report issued on Sunday, the hospital said he remained in its coronary unit in "a serious but stable condition".

Newspaper El Pais said Di Stefano had been eating with his family when he felt ill and sat down in his wheelchair. By the time an ambulance arrived he was in cardiorespiratory arrest.

"We are all very saddened," Real Madrid president Florentino Perez told journalists late on Saturday after he visited Di Stefano at the hospital.

Neuer is world's best keeper: Kahn

AFP, *Santo Andre*

'Icecube' Manuel Neuer has been dubbed 'the best goalkeeper in the world' by Oliver Kahn as Germany's star shot-stopper prepares for Tuesday's World Cup semifinal against Brazil.

The 28-year-old has played a key part in Germany's run to the last four of Brazil 2014 by dominating his penalty area and pulling off a string of key saves.

Neuer has shown great timing and judgement by frequently cutting out long passes or crosses with runs out of his own area, often acting more like an extra defender.

He has leaked only three goals in five games here and was outstanding in the Germans' nervy 2-1 last 16 win to shut Algeria out until the 121st-minute of extra time.

Neuer then nullified France's potent attack in Friday's 1-0 quarterfinal win at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium to set up the Selecao clash in Belo Horizonte on Tuesday for a place in the July 13 final.

He constantly denied France's Karim Benzema including a crucial save just before the final whistle to palm away the Real Madrid star's goal-bound shot.

Former Germany midfielder and TV pundit Mehmet Scholl has dubbed him 'Icecube Neuer' for his composure while ex-national team captain Kahn says he is the world's best.

"He has proven at this World Cup that he is currently the world's best goalkeeper," said Kahn, who captained Germany to their 2002 World Cup final defeat to Brazil.

"Everyone knows that he is a wonderful footballer who can play really well.

"But what is crucial is that in important situations he can rescue the victory.

"That is ultimately what he will be measured by."

Kahn was voted best player and goalkeeper at the 2002 World Cup in South Korea and Japan, but Neuer said he would rather finish his stay in Brazil with a different trophy.

"I'd rather have the World Cup," he said with a grin.

His Maracana heroics earned some teasing from team-mates Thomas Mueller and Lukas Podolski who chanted 'world's best keeper!' as Neuer took questions in the mixed zone.

With the Selecao up next, albeit minus injured superstar Neymar, Neuer lived up to his ice-cool nickname.

"Well have to see what sort of a spectacle the semifinal is," said Neuer, who broke into the Germany team before the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

"A lot of my saves are automatic, the team defends the middle of the goal, so I just have to close down the short corner.

"I'm proud of the performances and results, I hope the fans are behind us now."

Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer has been so impressive that his predecessor Oliver Kahn called him the best in the world.
PHOTO: REUTERS

Messi hails 'best performance'

AFP, *Brasilia*

Argentina superstar Lionel Messi said that his side had produced their best match of the World Cup in beating Belgium 1-0 in the quarterfinals on Saturday.

And goalscorer Gonzalez Higuain said getting off the mark with the winning goal had been a "beautiful" moment.

"We produced a very complete match. We weren't able to create that many chances, but they didn't make that many clear chances either," said Messi.

Asked if it was Argentina's most accomplished display of the tournament, the Barcelona forward told reporters: "I think it was."

Argentina have now won their first five matches at a World Cup for the first time, even though they laboured in the group phase and were criticised for a lacklustre display in their 1-0 victory over Switzerland in the last 16.

It is 24 years since Argentina last reached the semi-finals of a World Cup and Messi said the team took great pride in the feat.

"This is amazing," he said. "We knew it was going to be difficult.

Colombia want Jose to stay

AFP, *Bogota*

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos late Saturday thanked his country's football team for their strong World Cup performance, and urged sports officials to keep the side's Argentine coach.

In his first public presentation since winning re-election on June 15, an emotional Santos, wearing the team's yellow jersey, thanked the players and coach Jose Pekerman for taking Colombia to the tournament's quarterfinals for the first time.

"Many thanks to our players who gave it all in the field, with honour, dignity and clean play," Santos said. "What pride! We are so proud of our Colombian national team."

Colombia was eliminated from the tournament when they lost to Brazil 2-1 at the Estadio Castelao in Fortaleza on Friday.

Santos, who flew to Brazil for the match, asked the Federacion Colombiana de Futbol to keep Pekerman on the job.

Pekerman has successfully guided the team "with class and professionalism," Santos said.

The 64-year-old Pekerman, a former taxi driver and club football player, was Argentina's coach in the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

Pekerman's contract with Colombia ends in August.

Loew relishing Brazil tie

AFP, *Santo Andre*

Germany head coach Joachim Loew is relishing the chance to take on hosts Brazil in Tuesday's World Cup semifinal as his side bid to win a fourth world title.

"What can be more beautiful in a football dreamland than to play a World Cup semifinal against the hosts?" said Loew after his team trained on Saturday.

"It will be a huge game in Belo Horizonte."

Germany booked their semifinal place with a 1-0 last eight win over France at Rio de Janeiro on Friday.

The Germans are bidding to reach an eighth World Cup final.

Hosts Brazil stand in the Germans' path to the Maracana on July 13, but the Selecao will be without midfield star Neymar, who has a fractured vertebrae, and suspended captain Thiago Silva at Belo Horizonte's Mineirao Stadium.

Lothar Matthaeus, who captained Germany to the 1990 World Cup win, said Loew's side face a tough challenge against the hosts, but "otherwise we have nothing to fear from this [Brazil] team".

Matthaeus said Neymar's injury was good for Germany, but bad for football: "He is one who stands out", while Arsenal forward Lukas Podolski tweeted "can't wait to face Brazil, sad for Neymar, hope you get better soon."

The Germans regard the semifinal as a chance to avenge their 2002 World Cup final defeat against Brazil when Ronaldo scored both goals in a 2-0 victory in Yokohama.

"I have reminded the team that we would like to correct the result," quipped German FA (DFB) president Wolfgang Niersbach.

Striker Miroslav Klose, who played in the 2002 final and was the tournament's top scorer, said Germany have a good chance to lift the title.

"I think we have a great chance to finally grab it and get the trophy in our hands," said Klose.

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