



**A Soccer Commentary**  
The International Game:  
Modern Times

(pre-press sample chapters)

Ian Cesay



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PAPERBACK

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## About the author

East Londoner Ian Cesay is a lifelong fan of soccer and a fervent, loyal and at times suffering supporter of the once great Nottingham Forest. Having squandered the opportunity of making football a career he forged a living as a freelance journalist, researcher, worked in broadcast TV whilst making use of language skills in Cantonese and Japanese working as an interpreter, facilitator and private language teacher. More recently he dabbled in documentary film making self-funding a feature about the 2010 World Cup in South Africa titled 'A Rainbow World Cup: We are the world, we are the people'. Ian's second forthcoming book will be published in conjunction with the documentary made in Africa.

For Ian it had been a long road to the fulfilment of an ambition he first set about some 16 and a-half years earlier. This end result had come about more by way of default. Originally he set in motion about writing about the World Cup in 94, Copa 95, Africa 96 and Euro 96. But he was unable to carry that out due to various reasons and consequently he continually missed deadlines on following tournaments. However, importantly he continued to write hoping to complete a book in a format that would be totally unique in written works on the international soccer game.

# Foreword

## WHAT WAS FOOTBALL???

I mean the true essence, its real definition, its meaning, the blood and guts stuff..

Somebody without much knowledge of the sport may well see it as just as ONLY A GAME. Never!!!

Football's definitely more than just a routine game. It's unique and incomparable: a universal language that unifies thousands, often millions. It was action, excitement, an obsession, a passion, a livelihood, a way of life, and a relaxation from the hectic schedules of daily life. This was from the faithful following fan, armchair supporter, the smallest youngster on the park, the amateur, all the way to professional level. There is no distinction of colour, race, or class. Simply put, for many: 'NO FOOTBALL NO LIFE.'

In making this statement I don't imply that football is as important as life itself, but it certainly plays an important part in the lives of a great many of us throughout every corner of planet earth. No Other individual, or team, sport can play upon the emotions, as does the 'BEAUTIFUL GAME.'

It can take you to the very depths of despair to the dizzy heights of ecstasy. Unmatchable in its beauty, are its patterns of play, its changing and opposing styles and tactics, its flair and excitement. Football, at its peak, inflames a passion inherent within the hearts of men like lions on the hunt. Equally, it can inflict as great pain as that of a knife being thrust within. Like millions, I have had these feelings, not only in great joy and triumph, but also in defeat and perilous disappointment.

ULTIMATELY, football is the PEOPLES game, made Number ONE by the choice of the people.



## PART ONE

### THE 15TH WORLD CUP

### ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA

An event over sixty-years-old, sixty-four to be precise was to take centre stage yet again, for the 15th World Cup finals. An astounding record breaking total of 157 nations, far and wide, would contest the 22 places available from a 24-team tournament. Germany as holders, and the host nation America, already had its places reserved.

The qualifying process would take over some 20 months - from March 21st 92 until November 93 - and some 582 games before completion. This was from the first match in the Oceania section to the very last in Buenos Aries Argentina. The World Cup had been long awaited with tremendous excitement and anticipation by fans worldwide. These 15th finals would take place in a country which it was said 'all dreams were possible' America, possibly the greatest country in the world. Indeed, nowhere on planet earth was there a place more fitting to hold sports greatest contest...the world held its breath.

Though widely accepted as a great choice of venue, heavy criticism, speculation and debate followed the award of the finals to America – this from many hardened and outraged voices. It was not due to any fear of an inability to stage a major sporting event, or a lack of resources available, but because of the real lack of interest within the sport in a country with a population of over some 250,000,000 people.



By awarding these finals to a country with no pro-league, no tradition, nor role-models or superstars - for the home grown talent to look up to - FIFA, for the first time were to break the cycle of alternating between Europe, Latin and South America. It had been the first time a nation would host a tournament under these circumstances.



For America, the last frontier unconquered, the last of the unbelievers, it was the best and last chance for soccer to really take off. This part of sporting history would be a superb advert for a league of its own; a real chance to promote interest within the game so that it could go on and become a real national sport. The success of the finals could not be measured in mere words to the future of the game in a country where its inhabitants were obsessed with high scoring statistics. This was within a culture that did not share any fascination with the underdog or losers. One thing for certain, the warmth and natural joy for the occasion shown by the American public was sure to make it a tournament to remember. America's great enthusiasm for doing things correctly and exuberantly was certain to overcome any misgivings or doubts.

As with all the World Cups of recent, the qualifiers would come from five or six continents - Europe, South America, Africa, Concacaf, Asia and perhaps Oceania. Because European soccer possessed most of the quality teams, a huge proportion of the qualifiers would come from that hemisphere. In South America nine nations (Chile expelled from competing) competed for three assured places with the possibility of a fourth should they defeat the winners of the Oceania region. The recent improvement of African nations meant FIFA made a further place available from that zone. Strong claims at the end of the last World Cup for more entrants, had been voiced following Cameroon's remarkable run in Italy. And so it was to be as possibly

some of the most naturally gifted players on earth had the opportunity to show their ability on the world stage. And what of the sides from Asia, Oceania, and Concacaf regions; generally, thought of as the weakest in soccer with the standard pretty poor. Well that was with the exceptions of the consistent and often brilliant Mexicans and East Asia giants South Korea - the dominant force of the that region. The Japanese were in emergence as were a few Arab teams led by Saudi Arabia, and Australia from Oceania who almost made the 86 finals.

## THE AMERICAN DREAM

With all competing nations finalised the second part of this series was to take centre stage, this some two years following the first qualifier between Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic.

As in 1982, when the finals were first bloated, 24-teams worldwide were to do battle for soccer's highest honour. Teams were put into six groups of four teams with the object to eliminate eight teams by the end of the first round. Four of the six teams in third position would progress as points, goal-difference, goals scored were to come into the equation. From then on the affair will simply be reduced to lottery in an attempt to avoid any statistical farces such as when neighbouring countries the former West Germany and Austria conspired to see Algeria shoved out in 82. Final group games would also be played on the same day.

For the first time ever, three points per win was introduced, a victory to become more priceless and crucial than ever. This surely was to encourage greater attacking football with a new competitive edge given to the first stage.

Players that received cautions in the group matches would see the slate wiped clean as the tournament moved into the second phase. Video evidence would also be called upon if needed, while players would be stretched-off on an electric cart if they were injured; no player to receive treatment on the field. Players rising before they were taken off would be booked. Tackling from behind with no attempt to play the ball would result in the offender receiving his marching orders. The names of each player would be imprinted on the back of their shirts as three substitutes would be allowed to participate in a single game - two outfield players and a keeper. In positive situations linesmen were instructed to give the benefit of doubt to attacking teams. Player's running back not interfering with play would not be deemed offside.

Referees were encouraged to make all stoppages this in order to extend amount of time the ball is on the field. Though all the positive changes would be great, the real success of the finals depended on the quality of judgements made on the field; the flowing of the game, the cracking down on players violating rules blatantly, such as standing over the free-kick etc. Officials that did not uphold the law sufficiently enough would themselves be dealt with stiffly.

A concern voiced by mainly the European nations was of the unsavoury problems of rasping heat and altitude in mid-afternoon temperature with players sure to struggle in acclimatising and in gaining an equal share of the air. Its last effects were experienced in the 86 Mexico finals, sparking off a series of investigations into its effects.

As for the football itself, It would be the first time since 86 that all previous winners would not be present.

Brazil, the only side ever present to date, were the joint 3-time winners and favourites. This was nothing new as they went into every tournament as The Peoples Team, though it had been 24 years since its last triumph led by the legendary PELE in Mexico. The team displayed a brand of football from another planet that was to captivate the worldwide public imagination and raise the game to new heights. It was to end with the destruction of the Italians in a classic duel of the Azteca in front of a colossal audience of 100,000 fans– This perhaps was the finest side to grace the world stage. They had been the only side to win the finals outside its continent. The 30,000 or so following at these finals and the 150 million back home were fully expecting to see football of a similar kind, which if produced would certainly re-capture the trophy and end the long suffering and wait and again re-establish their reputation as the ULTIMATE BEST.

Even so called minnows of yesteryear were no more with each and every side aiming to emulate and then surpass the achievements of Cameroon who in 1990 brought a breath of intrigue, a touch of romance before ending up the people's favourites. Their free-wheeling cavalier style, mixed with a touch of aggression, will long stay in the memories of many. Could an African team really challenge for top honours? They certainly possessed the great individuality and ability needed, but just as important they seemingly lacked the teamwork or discipline. Could they combine the two and conquer world Football? However Nigeria, fresh from their nations cup win looked the likelier to posing a threat to European and South American domination.

From Europe, Italy and Germany - the only nations to match Brazil's feat of three wins - looked to be the most threatening. The Italians had been far from convincing in the qualifiers using some 60 men. They boasted seven of the Milan side that had demolished Barcelona plus Roberto Baggio; however, they needed to find some of the imagination and steel from the teams of 1970 and 1982. The past masters of pacing themselves in competition, Germany had relied more on resilience than brilliance capturing its three trophies. Holland completed the trio of the most fancied Europeans; though clearly not the side of 88, they had shown signs of a re-emergence, witnessed at the 92 Euro-finals. Constant internal bickering had been their downfall at the 1990 World Cup. With neither Ruud Gulit nor Marco Van Basten, Dutch hopes were to rest heavily on Dennis Bergkamp. Argentina, winner of two of the last four finals and a runner-up in another were another of the favourites to continue the tradition of South American dominance on the continent. They were under rehabilitation following a disgraceful and cynical World Cup of 90 that tarnished football's image. Yellow cards were amassed in abundance, not forgetting the few red ones. The anti-soccer came to the boil in the infamous final duel against the equally disgusting Germans. However, could the return of Diego Maradona inspire his country to yet another triumph, this after his late call-up? Many felt he was way past his best, selected on reputation rather than current ability. In his heyday, he was the most magnificent player ever to take to the field, ruling the field supreme, a man of unmatched brilliance possibly matched only by the great Pele as the greatest in the history of the game.

Of the outsiders, Colombia, football's most recent power, had been a name high on everyone's lips. They had won nothing but had built up an outstanding record of recent its most famous result a semi-legendary 5-0 destruction of Argentina.

Later that afternoon at the Rose-Bowl, the two favoured teams lined-up for what promised to be a real attacking feast with a lot expected from attack-minded Colombia, reckoned to be the finest South American side. They were the most explosive new force in world soccer; a side blessed with individuals like Freddy Rincon and Faustino Asprilla, just two out of the many. But Romania had stars of its own, none more so than Gheorghe Hagi, the nation's finest ever player, the Maradona of Europe.

Colombia qualified as winners of South-America Group A - only the team-finishing top gained automatic entry. Under Francisco Maturana, the team had been one of the most flamboyant teams of the 90 finals of Italy.

The campaign opened in frustration with 1986 finalists Paraguay in Barranquilla to gain a worthy 0-0 draw, a lot of luck to fall for the visitors. Peru were defeated by the single goal before an unbeaten Argentina with two wins already made the trip to Colombia looking to consolidate its position. The two nations had played out two draws in recent COPA America duels. The style was turned on in a bruising match of high tension with Ivan Valenciano in his first game, after Asprilla had been dropped, scoring within three minutes with the home side to end the 31 unbeaten game sequence of Argentina. The victory was marred by the recorded 28 deaths during celebrations; drunkenness, fights and traffic accidents the reported causes.

Physically strong Paraguay would again blunt out Colombia, the rain-soaked pitch to stop the visitors from playing its fine brand of soccer, 1-1 the scoreline. With Argentina and Paraguay doing one another no favours by drawing 0-0, Colombia stole the chance to move clear by dismantling pointless Peru by four goals. The result assured Colombia one of the top-two positions.

For the final game, Colombia travelled to Argentina, the scoreline to put the group leaders on the world soccer map with a semi-legendary 5-0 win in Buenos Aries. The result was to almost put the Argies out with unlikely favour to come from Peru. As ever in Colombia the victory would not come without consequence with numbers up to a hundred in the death toll. One wondered what would happen if Colombia won the finals?

Anyway led by captain Carlos Valderrama they were sure to be a credit to the finals with Maradona having to eat his words when he stated quiet emphatically - Colombia were not able to compete with his country. That was putting it nicely to actually what he had said.

To make certain of qualification, Romania had needed to win its final match in Cardiff, while a draw could possibly still see them progress. A mistake from Neville Southall was to gift the Romanians the lead it craved, Hagi's drive to somehow squirm under the body of the Everton keeper. Wales equalised as an opportunity presented itself for the home side to take the lead with a penalty award in their favour. The tension became unbearable with Paul Bodin to smack his drive onto the crossbar and let Romania off the hook. The visitors sealed Wales fate with a sucker punch Raduciu winner near the end, the striker to send Wales out at the final hurdle with it yet to be another case of 'a bridge too far'

Romania begun in cracking form with a dozen goals rattled in home wins over Faroe Islands and Wales, Hagi as ever the inspiration. A five-month break elapsed with a return to action

in Belgium resulting in a narrow single goal defeat. It did not improve as the Czechs left the Romanian capital with a 1-1 result leaving them trailing Belgium, the pacesetters by five points. Back-to-back wins over Cyprus looked to have put them back on track, but, in the 'Battle of Kosice' it all went wrong with disaster to befall the team crushed 5-2. Dinu and his entire coaching staff got sacked with Anghel Iordanescu to take control for the final three games. Faroe Islands saw themselves crushed by four with the narrowest of wins over Belgium to follow. Iiie Dumitrescu's two strikes gave the nation a victory of importance before their visit to Cardiff.

Colombia promised to play the South American way and kept to its word as they moved into total domination of the opening stages producing real exhibition football. The 91,865 crowd were thrilled by Colombia's pace, skill and trickery. Their fluidity and precise passing was dynamic as all players demonstrated how comfortable they were in receiving the ball anywhere on the pitch. The Romanians were totally unable to get any foothold as they failed to string more than two passes. They chased shadows as the much-vaunted trio of Faustino Asprilla, Adolfo Valencia and Freddy Rincon flourished. Asprilla was so elusive, Valencia so fast and powerful not to mention direct while Rincon proved to have a bit of all the qualities mentioned. But for all the adventure and intricate ingenuity of their fine passing patterns they still had failed to contrive any openings on goal, seeming to lack that final cutting edge as Romania needing the assurance of an extra defender stoutly defended in a manner of an away side in a European tie; this with all of the support in Colombia's favour. Asprilla was within inches of connecting to Valencia's chip into the 6-yard box while Mihali was fortunate not to receive a yellow card let alone not to be sent-off. This was after bringing down Valencia on the edge, after having dangerously surrendered possession. As often in football, the dominant team was to get hit by the sucker punch. Romania, soaking up the pressure, was to go in front with virtually its first attack, unbelievably so much against the run of play. The outrageously gifted Hagi dummed Gomez and as the defenders backed-off he threaded a ball to lone striker Floroin Raducioiu, scorer of nine goals in the qualifiers, no-one scored more. He held off three defenders, twisted and turned before giving a clear-cut finish, firing crisply past Cordoba. Now one would see what the Colombians were really made of? Valencia responded with a fine chip that forced the fully-stretched Stelea into a fine save. Under the leadership of Gheorghe Hagi Romania suddenly found its feet, its captain, free of specific duties, such as defending, flourished displaying fine skill, control, whilst always being available and a springboard to attack. With Colombia's finest chance Rincon from point-blank range saw himself denied by an instinctive reaction save by the legs of Stelea. That man Hagi again reminded all of his brilliance, an audacious chip from 30-yards just about palmed away by the keeper. Now more evenly balanced one could detect a frustration creeping into the Colombian play. It was to increase further as that magician Hagi was to bring the stadium to its feet with a 40-yard floated chip that was to fly over the head of the stranded Cordoba and into the far corner just under the bar - 2-0. Valencia, Colombia's finest attacker today, once again showed his real quality, making space he turned and hit venomously at the opposing goal, the ball met with an equally fine save. But this man was not to be denied with Colombia to get a long overdue goal as the half came to a close. Valencia's near post power header was to fly past Stelea and bring Colombia back into the tie, a renewed tonic given for a second-half fightback.

Hagi, with as much space as in the first period, again unhinged the Colombians, his pass to pick out Dumitrescu whose effort was beaten out before Raducioiu blazed wastefully over. Heavily marked and kept very quiet Faustino Asprilla finally broke free, this after slick combinations with Perez and Valderama. His effort was parried away following the drive straight at the keeper. That fearsome Hagi-Raducioiu combination would again almost pave way through Colombia's inept defences. The quick reactions by a keeper forced speedily off his line to clear the danger. At the other end golden boy Asprilla, a true live wire, showed tremendous touch and speed as he got into the 6-yard box, but forced wider than he would have liked he failed to match it with a finish, the ball screwed low and wide off the far post.

A true classic in every sense, one dominant in possession the other razor sharp on the break while remaining disciplined in defence. Asprilla was to be in the thick of things again after he was put in by Valderama, seemingly playing too deep. He twisted and turned, delayed the shot before going over under the challenge. It looked a clear penalty with it a surprise stronger claims not being voiced. Under pressure from Romania's defenders his partner Valencia rather snatched hurriedly at another opportunity, the ball sliced over. A feature of the Colombian play was its obsession in attacking the heart of the Romanian defence as its play was to totally lack variety in its options always seeking to steam-roll through a defence well marshalled by the steal of Belodedici who earlier had a concerning moment after coming off worse in a 50/50 challenge.

Individually the Colombians had it in abundance; collectively they trailed the Eastern Europeans, who always kept their discipline, by a mile. Two minutes from time Colombia was to receive the final body blow as Romania sucked up the pressure before hitting them on the break. Florin Raducioiu was able to get away from his dozing markers to seal the outcome by knocking the ball into an empty net inflicting only Colombia's second defeat in 3 years and some 40 games. This after Cordoba had failed to collect the quickly taken free kick from Hagi.

In a technically brilliant game Hagi was to reign, easily the finest player seen at these finals, this after his ACTS OF TRUE CLASS.



## PART TWO

### A CUP OF NATIONS

### THE SEVENTH TALE

South America's premier tournament - The COPA America - was back for the 38th edition, this in a country Uruguay that had seen victory there on each of the six previous occasions that the finals had been held in the country.

Twelve nations would compete for a second consecutive tournament, following invitations sent out to two competing guest nations Mexico and The United States of America. Each group consisted four teams with each winner and runner-up to proceed to the quarter-final stage, with the two best third-placed teams to join them.

Defending champions Argentina, with eleven wins (not including the three unofficial wins) was the tournament's most successful ever nation. They were looking to record a treble of victories in consecutive tournaments. Minus the great Diego Armando Maradona, Argentina, were still a formidable proposition and were now under the control of former World Cup winning captain Daniel Passarella. Under him they had lost only one of seventeen, winning twelve and drawing four. Under the previous coach Carlos Bilardo they had won 27 of 50, losing a mere six and at one stage going 31 games unbeaten. The current boss had been a fearsome player in his day, possessing an iron left-foot. He put his heart into the partnership of his two dynamic front men, the Italian based strikers Gabriel Batistuta and Abel Balbo. Batistuta had a phenomenal goalscoring record of 26 goals in 52 matches which in the 90s was an extraordinary record at the highest level. Four years ago he was the tournament's top-goalscorer, hitting 6-goals on route to victory. He followed that tally two years later with 3-goals in 93, including both goals in the explosive 'final' victory over Mexico. He was only five behind Maradona's all-time record. The modern day team was a mixture of young talent and foreign exports consisting of no long-haired players as the coach laid down the law. Outstanding talents Fernando Redondo and Claudio Caniggia saw themselves left out due to a refusal to cut their long hair.

Brazil, the current world champions and favourites had not won the COPA since 89 on home soil. That time was one of four occasions they had won the tournament, all of which were on its home territory. The team had amassed a fine record since its last defeat two years earlier in Bolivia, a World Cup qualifier 2-0. Omens for success had been good following a recent treble of victories in a mini-tournament in England, easily disposing of the hosts, Japan and Sweden - defeated by the same World Cup scoreline a year earlier. New stars had emerged and been unearthed from this tournament; Ronaldo, Juninho and Roberto Carlos joining the galaxy of stars already present. However, its two biggest stars of the last World Cup were absent, Romario through injury while Bebeto saw himself dropped after he had chosen to play for his club instead of appearing at the recent Umbro cup. Brazil were now led by Mario Zagallo, assistant at the 94 World Cup and in his third spell as coach, this while Japan-bound Dunga remained as captain. Brazil, not always well represented at these finals, placed its hopes in their rich depth of forward talent. One to look for was Edmundo, known as "The Animal" a talented player who argued with TV crews, linesmen, team-mates, opponents and everybody else.

Uruguay, one of the most successful cup teams with 10 wins (not including three unofficial) looked to re-establish themselves on the world stage. This following its fall from grace in the 90s, past glories to remain a distant memory as recession was to hit this small nation's football. Its last victories had been in 83 and 87. In 89 they were runners-up in 91 also-rans before being quarter-finalists in 93. Missing the 94 World Cup was a heavy blow for the country, especially since their best had not been witnessed at the 86 and 90 finals. Performances were remembered more for its negativity and brutality with the rugged Uruguayans letting the physical get the better of the skill. Coach Nunez was to change that image, re-moulding them into a tough but fair team with hardworking players with world-class firepower. Victory was imperative for the nation's resurgence in soccer.

After flopping at America 94, Colombia was in need of a good performance. Only nine of the squad kept its places as mass changes occurred throughout the ranks. Surviving the clear-out were the so-called 'UNTOUCHABLES' led by twice South American footballer of the year Carlos Valderrama; one of the most distinguished and recognised players in football with his sponge cake hairstyle. Leonel Alvarez was to appear in his fifth COPA while Rene Higuita, after missing the World Cup returned as the number one keeper. He endured a stint in the slammer following involvement in the delivery of a ransom note. He was greatly remembered for his antics and a catastrophic mistake made in Naples 1990. His loss of possession to Roger Mills at a crucial moment was to allow the African to run through and score the clinching killer goal. Faustino Asprilla, another of America 94's major disappointments also took his place. There had been reported interest from English club Leeds United. Rounding off this five-man elite group was Freddy Rincon who had just endured a lacklustre season in Italy.

Famed for their enthusiastic run leading up to the 94 World Cup finals, Bolivia looked for an improvement on an average tournament. Top-star Marco Etcheverry was to appear for his country after only the briefest of appearances in America. Another man also present and within the same mould, Erwin Sanchez, had been Bolivia's most outstanding performer at the 94 finals. They stated that they would not be here just to make up the numbers.

Twice winner of 53 and 79 Paraguay, last seen on the big stage at the 1986 Mexico World Cup were looking more towards the World Cup qualifiers for France 98. Its fans looked for a vastly improved performance on the disappointments of matches at COPA 93 and World Cup qualifiers; missing a chance of a play-off with Australia by one point before getting smashed by host Ecuador 3-0 in a COPA quarter-final.

*Guest nation Mexico came as the 93 runners-up and as the only side to still have the same manager in this 95 campaign. The Mexicans with a population of some 80,000,000 people were a nation of passionate, volatile and fanatical football lovers. They came to these finals with virtually the same squad that had participated at the American World Cup finals; most notably including Luis Garcia, a player that had put pay to the hopes of many a side and Jorge Campos. Mexico's greatest ever player Hugo Sanchez, due to differences with the coach, was to play no part.*

Other guest nation America, making its second appearance, came with the intention of enhancing its reputation. They were a much stronger outfit than of two years ago when they failed to win a game. The team, not blessed with the individual brilliance of other nations, relied on teamwork, spirit, organisation, fitness, physical strength and a strong determination, seen at length at the last World Cup when sides found them difficult to play against. One

wondered how far this spirit and determination could take them. They arrived full of confidence following victory at the US cup with wins over Mexico, Nigeria and a draw with Colombia. After previously moulding its team on stout defence, that left little room for invention upfield, a more attacking philosophy seemed to have been introduced; under the guidance of caretaker coach Paul Sampson.

*Apart from finishing 3rd in 1991, Chile had made little impression at recent COPA tournaments. Its best finish was as runners-up to Uruguay in 1987. The side was built upon the Cola-Cola side with Azkergorta who guided Bolivia to the 94 World Cup finals the man in charge. Their star man Ivan Zamarrano, scoring goals in Spain for Real Madrid, at his own request had asked to be left out. It was a decision to question whether or not he had forgotten his roots after making it big abroad? Chile's record this year had not been so bad.*

*After its World Cup appearances of 1978 and 1982, Peru, heavily in the process of rebuilding, had disappeared from the world spotlight. They had been surprise winners of its 93 qualifying Group ahead of Brazil before falling to Mexico in a quarter-final tie.*

Ecuador, fourth as the hosts of 93 were led by Colombia's coach of 94 Francisco Maturana. Its form of recent had been very poor, thrashed by Japan 3-0 before losing to Scotland. They would need to produce an almighty effort to improve on its performance of two years earlier.

Rounding up the list was to be Venezuela, truly among the dead ranks of soccer that had one of the worst records in world soccer. It was the one and only country in the region with NO football pedigree, baseball the number one sport. A game with these bottom-of-the-table specialists guaranteed goals. The 90s had produced a single victory, winning a mere six games in a 20-year period that included one win (a 1967 3-0 win over Bolivia) in 31 COPA matches, losing 24, drawing six. Results were expected to go no different at these finals.

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Brazil and Argentina, one of the matches of the year in world football, matched up ahead of schedule for a game in which there was sure to be no love lost in a fixture that created an atmosphere of its own. These two awesome powers, possibly the two best footballing nations in the world, had been involved in some of the most bruising clashes of recent years with today's encounter expected to be no different.

No team in world football had beaten Brazil as often as the Argentines, the most crucial of recent the World Cup duel of 90 when Maradona's finest piece of magic of those finals supplied Claudio Caniggia with the goal to rock the hot favourites at that time. A year later Brazil got defeated 3-2 in the COPA as men from each side were dismissed in a hot tempered clash with luck to not improve for the Brazilians defeated in a penalty shoot-out some two years later.

The players on view were awesome not to mention those absent - Bebeto, Romario, Caniggia, and Redondo.

Brazil, stepping up a gear in each group game, remained unchanged with Cruz and Leonardo to retain their places. Argentina, with some blistering attacking power devastated Chile, but, believing the group had been won, this going into the last match with America, Passarella rang in the changes that were to have dire consequence with his side pushed into second position

following a humiliating loss. All the big names came back with the exception of one of the coaches favourite players Ayala, Fabbri surprisingly the preferred choice.

The match begun in the ferocious style expected with Brazil to feel the brunt of Argentina's attacking might with its defence punctured for the first time at these finals by the most lethal partnership of the tournament in only two minutes. Captain for the night Abel Balbo after chasing the through ball shot on sight past Taffarel, slow in his response with the ball skimming through his hands. Balbo clenched his fists as if to say 'we are back.' The blazing attacks continued on the Brazilian goal, however, Brazil under all this bombardment, somehow still managed to shock their opponents with an equaliser on 9 minutes. Roberto Carlos saw his drive across goal met 6-yards-out by Edmundo, in the correct place giving a calm finish with a side-footed effort past Cristante.

The frantic pace continued without pause with only a lack of control shown by Abel Balbo near goal to prevent Argentina from retaking the lead; had he hit it first time he probably would have scored. Edmundo, finding himself momentarily in the clear, saw the legs of Cristante block his low driven effort from inside the box. It was to be a crucial save with Gabriel Batistuta to sweep Argentina back in front 10 minutes before the interval. His power drive hit first time, from Ortega's ball over the top, somehow sneaking into the near post as Taffarel made his second mistake of the game. What a half! Easily the best of the finals with it a shame it had to stop with the only blemish being the last minute activities of the period when Argentina lost their holding man Astrada after receiving his second yellow card. This followed a dangerous lunging challenge with intent to injure an opponent's right leg.

The brilliance of Ariel Ortega was sacrificed so that Perez could fill in for Astrada. Going for placement rather than power Cesar Sampaio attempted to curl an equaliser from the edge of the box into the top corner; Brazil, with the man advantage, pressing further forward. Roberto Carlos then wasted an opportunity with a sliced angled effort into the sidenetting, this as men in abundance had laid in wait. In what could only be seen as a panic move, Daniel Passarella made the extra-ordinary decision of taking off goal-King Gabriel Batistuta - one goal short of Maradona's all-time goalscoring record - for a defender Ayala. Tulio, another substitute on for Leonardo then side-footed amazingly past the post from a mere 2 yards-out after Roberto Carlos had driven the ball across the 6-yard box. The raised flag did not take away the shame of the miss as Abel Balbo should have done better when he attempted to find the near post from close range, his effort weak. Aldair then made the lifesaving blocked tackle as Chamot prepared to shoot 6-yards-out as lack of control and choice of the wrong option shown by Juninho, shooting on goal rather than picking out his colleagues in wait, prevented a Brazilian equaliser. The dynamic deadly-duo of Argentina was totally disbanded when Passarella replaced Abel Balbo with Acosta; as the manager soon followed his strikers after being dismissed from the bench and escorted away by police into the stands. The 80th minute was to see the biggest controversy of the finals, this after Tulio, clearly with the use of his hand, controlled Jorginho's crossfield ball. Expecting the decision as well as offside, neither of which was to come, Argentina were left stunned that Tulio was allowed to continue before expertly lifting the ball over the keeper. The Argentines, with pure justification were totally devastated, just as England had been nine years earlier when the great Diego Maradona did a similar act; the seeds of injustice in evidence. This if anything had been more blatant with the referee who had been otherwise excellent getting the game's most important decision wrong. What do they say...'

it always comes back to you' no matter how long it takes. Perhaps this was to be Argentina's long awaited pay-back as 'THE HAND OF TULLIO' denied them victory. With no Batistuta or Balbo, Argentina were running out of ideas as the now customary sending-off in these clashes reared itself again; Cesar Sampaio for two bookable offences on Acosta seeing red. Having suffered a similar fate against Paraguay a few years earlier he was to be the first Brazilian sent-off at these finals. Fabbri's important block soon prevented Roberto Carlos's fierce drive from heading straight into the far corner as Acosta with the final chance was just unable to get his footing completely enough around the ball to trouble Taffarel.

As with two of the previous three quarter-finals, a game moved into a penalty shoot-out contest; a year to the day Brazil won that shoot-out in the Pasadena Rose Bowl. Roberto Carlos began the sequence with a low rasping drive into the corner with Perez's effort low into the middle levelling matters. Tulio and Acosta, veteran of the 93 shoot-out made the score 2-2. When Cruz saw his kick saved one thought a repeat of 93 was on, but that all changed after Simeone saw his effort also saved. With a low effort Dunga showed how it should be done before Fabbri saw his drive pushed out leaving Edmundo to step up and put Brazil into a semi-final duel with the United states of America for a repeat of their World Cup match just over a year earlier.

## PART TWO

### A CUP OF NATIONS: AFRICA 96

#### A DATE WITH DESTINY

The Twentieth edition of Africa's premier tournament was to see the expansion of contenders double from eight to sixteen teams. In a country fresh from the long struggle against the tyranny of apartheid it was to be the biggest, most open, and eagerly awaited finals of recent times.

The 'Nations Cup of Africa' produced three weeks of total enjoyment as the best kind of African football was witnessed in a spirit of sportsmanship and goodwill, totally free of any real nastiness. When play did get out of hand with reckless or hard tackling players hardly reacted. As always it was to be an improvement on the finals of previous with even the so-called no hoper playing its part fully in producing enterprising football of a high order and quality.

The new three-points per win system helped immensely as practically all teams showed a real willingness to attack and express themselves. All competitors displayed great passion, skill, one-touch football, counter attacking, and control. Defending and organisation, perhaps due to the influence of foreign coaches, had shown a vast improvement as well as the poor finishing that had plagued the 94 finals of Tunisia.

The only downside was the lack of interest shown by the South African people in any other team apart from their own 'Bafana Bafana' (The Boys) team. A valid reason could be that it had been out of football season as well as there being other big sporting attractions. Most players on view were also unknown to home followers who were more informed on European soccer. A better promotion like that given to rugby and cricket may well have helped. However, low

attendances did not bother players keyed up to doing well in front of watching scouts as so they could move onto greater heights and exposure. A mass of African players were now seen in abundance throughout the leagues of Europe with some 90 players alone in France.

Controversy opened the finals with the African football world stunned by the big news that Nigeria, the holders, clear favourites and Africa's best, were to be withheld from defending its crown. The military dictatorship deciding against sending the team to South Africa in the wake of political turmoil following an outcry in regard to executions a few months earlier in that country. The Nigerian government expressed the safety fears of its players should they participate when it looked more as if it had been a protest against the South African regime that had called for sanctions against the leadership of Nigeria. The finals were robbed of players that figured prominently throughout Europe's top leagues, a true wealth of talent absent from Daniel Amokachi, Finidi George, Sunday Oliseh, new stars Celestine Babayaro, Nwankwo Kanu to the great magician Augustine Okocha. Such was the player's discontent at the boycott that some threatened to not represent the team in the forthcoming World Cup qualifiers for France 98. Players described the decision as the 'Gravest Disappointments in their careers.' Repeated attempts of persuasion were to fail with Guinea given the opportunity to come in at the last, an invitation they were to decline, claiming not enough time had been given to preparation. Right up until the last day Nigeria had the chance of taking its place. Punishment was to be severe as CAF were to carry out its threat of punishing Nigeria should it not comply with the law that stated 'Any team pulling out with less than 20 days before the start would be banned.' A four-year ban was imposed while FIFA threatened to impose its own sanctions for the qualifiers of the coming World Cup.

With Nigeria withheld from defending the trophy the Black Stars of Ghana were installed as the new favourites. No other African nation won the cup more times than this darky nation, the premier team with four title wins. They were known as the 'Brazilians of Africa' dominant and blistering at youth level, a nation blessed with players of quicksilver movement. None so more than Abedi Pele, an extraordinary talent in his prime and a sole survivor of Ghana's last win of 1982. It was 14 years too long for his compatriots. Pele had reached the soaring heights of European soccer as a league championship and European cup winner with Olympique Marseille. Of recent he had only shown glimpses of his former self. However, given the room the ability was still there to do damage. Joining him as the nation's biggest hope was Anthony Yeboah seen crashing goals for English club Leeds United at the beginning of the season.

Tunisia, the biggest flops as a host nation of recent times, joined Ghana in Group D. They had the unenviable record of not having gained a single nations cup victory since 1978 in Uganda - their World Cup year when they came third. The team, starved of recent success was very much hoping to get over the debacle of two years earlier when they were knocked out in the first week. Elimination almost killed the finals as fans stayed away with the biscuit coming with the 2-0 loss to Mali - who? The old guard was immediately dispelled off with the new team to take them to these finals as runners-up to Liberia of qualifying Group 2, rarely shinning, only perhaps in the 4-0 demolition of Senegal. Their finest moment came in the 1965 final defeat to Ghana.

The Tunisians, one of the two most consistent sides in Africa last year, were a side of limited

ability but hardworking and organised. Its players were somewhat under-exposed as they showed a reluctance to travel abroad. All squad members were home-based.

Ivory Coast, a ghost for the Ghana team, swept to victory four years earlier at the expense of the favourites following a dramatic penalty shoot-out win in Senegal. Victory at the quarter-final stage over Ghana followed two years later before defeat was tasted against Nigeria in a penalty shoot-out. Despite Ivory Coast being one of the two most consistent sides of 1995 they were clearly a side in demise, basically on its last legs, living on the past and borrowed time. The team, third-placed finishers four times in 20 years, were appearing in its seventh consecutive finals. In the group stages, Ivory Coast surprisingly trailed in second position behind Burkina Faso as Morocco dropped out in third place. Once again they would rely on the combination of Tiehi and Traore. Making up the group was little Mozambique, second time qualifier who were just happy to be competing at the finals. They hoped on improving on the three consecutive defeats first time round in Egypt 1986. Its most famous born player Eusebio never played for them.

The host nation South Africa - isolated from world sport for 30 years - hoped its re-entry into football would end with a unique treble of winning the cricket, rugby and football. They were newcomers to this event, but in 17 games had only suffered defeat twice, this having not even been rated six months earlier. They had held both recent and former world champions to draws, Germany and Argentina. A bold prediction by some was that this South African team would eventually become the best team on the continent. It certainly had the potential looking at displays of recent, so full of African flair and European organisation, possessing players that had gained experience abroad. Its newly liberated folk, for whom football was an obsession, looked to all-time top goalscorer Phil Masinga (seven goals), John Moshoeu, and Doctor Khumalo, now wanted in the new American soccer league. One thing for certain was that the entire nation would get fully behind its team as they set sights at first attempt in conquering Africa before the world in 98.

Cameroon, ambassadors of African football for so long had long seen its power diminish going into the 1990s, this after being the greatest nation from the continent for ten years, from 1980 to 1990. Just look at the achievements - 84 and 88 African Nations Cup winners, runners-up to host Egypt in 86, World Cup finalist in 82 remaining unbeaten in three games with Peru, Poland, and Italy before going on to its greatest triumph of reaching the quarter-final of the 1990 World Cup in Italy when nine minutes remained for a place in the semi-finals. Plagued by lack of finance and scandal they performed dismally at America 94 and it required the defeat of Zimbabwe in the final tie, just as in 1993 in order to accomplish qualification. Only six players remained from the 94 squad with it to be the first time 20 years that the great Roger Milla was not to represent Cameroon at a major tournament.

Egypt had the second most number of tournament wins with three titles, one behind Ghana with their last victory achieved ten years earlier on home soil. They were remembered on the vast stage for producing two fine performances at the 1990 World Cup, the most memorable a 1-1 draw with Holland; the Europeans played-off the park. It had been a while since they had been the dominant force of the 50's. Egypt, a side with a reputation for the unspectacular, were well organised, efficient, and skilled, aided with fine passing ability that kept possession very well in midfield. The backbone of the team was built around El-kas, Hazem and Ramzy, veteran of the 1990 finals of Italy; out of favour at Werder Bremen before the sacking of the

coach. The team was guided by former World Cup runner-up Rudi Krol.

Angola, winners of an easy Group 6 were the real underdogs of the section, this in its first ever nations cup appearance. For its inhabitants, qualification had been seen as a dream, in a country that encountered great amounts of social unrest, famine and wars. Sixteen of the squad was based in Portugal with the most prominent Benfica's Paulo.

Zambia, twice finalists of 1974 (at first attempt) and 1994, were a team that had come together through adversity, reconstructing a new team from the ashes of a great disaster that robbed them of the heart of their squad decimated by the loss of 18 men, 30 including officials. They pushed the current African kings Nigeria all the way at Tunisia 94. The nucleus of the side remained for this 1996 campaign, Malitoli, Litana, Choongo, and star man Kalusha Bwalya who performed greatly for Cercle Bruges in Belgium and for P.S.V. in Holland before taking his trade to Mexico.

Algeria's former captain Ali Fergani led the 'Desert Warriors' for their ninth participation at the finals. Fergani had replaced former player Rabah Madjer, sacked mid-way through the qualifying campaign. They were the team most expected to join Zambia in Round 2, but would be without most of its foreign-based French stars that included the top-scorer Abdelhalid Tassafout who would have been a certain starter in the line-up. However, star man Moussa Saib, the lone survivor of Algeria's 1990 victory, was released. The 1990 victory was still not regarded as Algeria's greatest achievement, that distinction being the World Cup 1982 victory over the former West Germany. The current coach had been captain on that glorious day in Spain.

Sierra Leone, disappointing in Tunisia where they failed to register a goal, gaining a mere point had made greater strides of recent. They came into these finals as joint leaders with Ghana from Group 3 with the men to watch being Mohamed Kallon, whom had signed a five-year deal with Inter Milan despite temporarily being loaned to Swiss team Lugano, and Lamine Conteh whose brother Kewulay would be joining Atlanta in Italy.

The Stallions of Burkina Faso were appearing in its second ever finals having previously played under the name Upper Volta. They were the only unbeaten side of the qualifiers, a 2-1 home win over Morocco and a decisive 0-0 blank in Casablanca seeing them progress. They arrived with no real high expectations apart from its goal of attempting to play fine football.

Group C, Nigeria's original section contained two evenly matched nations in Liberia and Zaire. Liberia, another upstart at these finals, were led by George Weah, a man that attained status in that country greater than that of the president with his ability matching that of his stature. He was a man whose pride in his roots was a key motivation in his services to his nation - settling debts of the nation's football association as well as paying all expenses for trips. If this incorruptible saint was not a one-man team, he certainly was an inspiration. His cousin James Debbah, of which there was no love lost between, was the man expected in forming a deadly partnership with the AC Milan striker.

It had been over 20 years since Zaire 'The Leopards' were a powerhouse in African football, winning the finals of Egypt 1974 - they reached the World Cup finals the same year.

This would be an eighth successive appearance for them in competition and were a team heavily backed by European experience with over some 50 players playing abroad; 13 of whom would compete at these finals.

Gabon, in its first ever appearance of 1994, were remembered for the conceding the fastest goal ever in the finals, scoring no goals in two defeats by three and four goals. They were not given any hope by observers despite defeating Zambia in the qualifiers to head the table.

**Within the presence of one of the world's most distinguished statesmen - President Nelson Mandela - the start of the African Nations Cup tournament was to see the rise of one nation and the death of a legend. Both paths of the competitors would lead into total opposite directions; one seemingly on the way to greatness the other into oblivion.**

The Soweto stadium, full of 70,000 expectant fans, was to be the arena in which hosts South Africa set about its adventure and quest for glory at first attempt - an occasion to unite the nation as one. Cameroon, Africa's most powerful nation of the 80s only arrived 24 hours earlier and had been on a steady road to decline for many a year, culminating in a pathetic World Cup at America 94. Only Oman Biyik remained from the fine side of 1990 as they gambled on two unblooded teenagers Wome and Tchangwo.

The setting was perfect - the weather, the immaculate pitch, the electric atmosphere. One just hoped it would rise above the heights usually associated with the opening game with a good result for the host imperative; not only for themselves but also for the finals itself as Cameroon aimed to be the party spoilers. The twice champions of the 1980s began the brighter, the hosts required to overcome initial and very evident nerves; needing also to find its rhythm in passing and movement. The ball watching South African defence suffered a narrow-escape on just three minutes when Moyeme's far post header glided just over.

The crowd got behind its team and it began to show greater fluidity in attack and solidity at the back and soon were able to take control with it of no surprise to see a 14th minute lead come there way thanks to Philemon Masinga, the last foreign-based player to arrive. The striker pounced onto the inside-flick of Doctor Kumalo before the side-foot past the keeper... Confidence zoomed sky-high. Poor marking and hesitation almost cost South Africa its lead as Cameroon showed glimpses to indicate the tie was far from over. However, importantly they lacked the connection to its forwards as the final touch continued to let them down. A leader or a midfield general that could take command was not there. As in all matches, the good spell ended with the South Africans to sweep into a two-goal lead on 37 minutes. Mark Williams from close range crashing the ball past a helpless keeper. It would take an almighty, NO a HEAVENLY intervention to defeat a rampant home team backed by its united crowd. It was not until just before half-time that the South African keeper was called onto making his first save. Doctor Kumalo, overshadowed by Williams and Moshoeu was swept off his feet on the touchline with the offence to bring coach Clive Barker ranting from the line in rage. The sinner received no punishment.

The good work for the hosts continued into the restart, the punctured lions finding no way of penetrating defences well marshalled by Tovy and local boy Mark Fish. Cameroon had no answer when man-of-the-match John Moshoeu was to start and finish the move that buried them into the soil. He received the ball exchanged with Masinga, whose exquisite flick put him on goal, before showing coolness and determination in beating Songo. Certainly there would

now be no way back for the fallen magicians. It should have more, Mikhalele failed to deliver the required pass to the far post as men laid in wait while Williams, following a quick burst, saw his effort squirm past the left-hand post. For the remainder, the hosts coasted it with Mark Fish in a final flurry attempting the chip over the keeper. The effort narrowly beat the bar. Had it gone in it would have brought the roof down on a swelled up capacity now at almost 100,000 after generous police showed its heart and allowed thousands without tickets to enter. This victory would install South Africa as one of the favourites; this while the watching world had just witnessed seeing Cameroon's poorest team on the international stage within memory. It was to be their heaviest ever defeat in African cup nations soccer. The duel with Egypt was sure to prove more testing for the hosts.

## PART TWO

### A CUP OF NATIONS

### FOOTBALL COMES HOME

*The 8th of June 1996 was to see 'Football Come Home' with the arrival of England's biggest tournament in 30 years, since winning the World Cup of 1966, for the holding of the European Nations finals. This, the 10th edition was the biggest ever, not only in size, but also in the quality of the participating teams, in a tournament second only in prestige to the World Cup finals.*

In keeping with the tradition of the finals, England, as the hosts would kick-off the tournament; the game at Wembley stadium, the spiritual home of football, with World Cup finalists of 1994 Switzerland the opposition. The home team had been preparing relentlessly for over two years for this day, this since the appointment of a new supremo Terry Venables, the undoubted peoples choice at the time, who on the conclusion of these finals was to handover the leadership to the equally popular Glenn Hoddle.

The country's form in this two-year period had been mixed, of course winning more than they had lost, but drawing more than its fair share.

England's past performance at the European finals had been nothing short of abysmal. Since 1980, spanning three tournaments, they failed to proceed beyond the first stage on each occasion, winning just once against a poor Spanish team in Naples 1980 through goals from Brooking and Woodcock. The 1-1 draw with Belgium in Turin was followed by a 1-0 defeat to the hosts Italy. 1984 brought no improvement with elimination at the hands of a fine Danish team in the qualifying rounds. When they did return to competition results were no better for the finals of 1988 and 1992 crashing out at the first stage, this after having performed impeccably in the original qualifying groups. They fell to three successive defeats in Germany 1988, the most humiliating a 1-0 loss at the hands of outsiders Republic of Ireland, whom qualified for its first tournament ever. Marco Van Basten's crushing treble smashed them into bits after the score had been locked at 1-1 before the Soviet Union completed their misery with another 3-1 defeat. Being one of the favourites in Sweden 92 proved deceiving with the team undone by the brilliance of Tomas Brodin. This followed tame 0-0 draws with Denmark and

France. 1964 resulted in an exit at the first stage after not entering in 1960. 1968 produced the nation's best ever performance with a third-place finish, Sir Alf Ramsey's team defeating the Soviet Union 2-0 in Rome. 1972 resulted in a quarter-final defeat in Yugoslavia while 1976 was to prove just as fruitless as the first two appearances.

*The Venables reign got off to a flying start with two Wembley victories over Denmark and then Greece. The first was a 1-0 victory over the then current European Champs Denmark with Captain David Platt hitting the winner. 94 World Cup finalists Greece, the first qualifier of those finals, crashed under a welter of FIVE Wembley goals as England's following four games of that year brought sides to the home of football that participated in America.*

A jam-packed Norwegian defensive unit held on for a scoreless draw before Alan Shearer showed his great potency with a double strike in the 2-0 defeat of the United States side that had inflicted the same scoreline defeat a year earlier on the English. This was during Graham Taylor's reign of abuse. The game with Romania saw them outplayed for a lot of the match in a 1-1 draw with Robert Lee wiping out Ilie Dumitrescu's opener.

Africa's most populous nation Nigeria 'THE SUPER EAGLES' arrived with a band of 5,000 fans, this for its first visit to the world's greatest football arena, arriving full of hope. It was the seventh time that England played opposition to African opponents, a sequence that still was yet to end in defeat. For Nigeria, physically powerful, skilled, robust and full of individual brilliance, it was to be their first game since the traumatizing loss to Italy four months earlier at the 1994 finals of America.

Today, in a game the away side practically dominated possession Rashidi Yekini missed two sitters, while Okocha, who dazzled the Wembley crowd with a superb array of skills, was a yard-off close on goal. This before poor marking enabled David Platt, in his 50th International to head his 24th national goal. England's following contest did not arrive until March 95, a match in Dublin with the Irish Republic to fall foul of violent crowd behaviour that led to the abandonment of the game. A match with South American opponents Uruguay brought a night of pure frustration with the Uruguayans to survive some scares, none so more than when Andrew 'king' Cole sent a close range header onto the crossbar. The following three games came by way of the Umbro cup, a mini tournament, involving European, Asian, and South American opposition. Japan, having made fine strides of recent in International football, almost caused the biggest upset in the Venables reign with a 1-1 draw on the famous Wembley turf. But a handball offence in the final minute led to the culprit's dismissal presenting captain Platt with the opportunity of a penalty winner to deny a spirited Asian challenge. The team then demonstrated its powers of recovery after coming back from 2-0 and 3-1 down to force a 3-3 draw with a powerful Swedish team. Two-goals in the final two minutes from Platt - who else - and Darren Anderton saved the blushes of a proud nation. Brazil proved to be much more superior and class opponents with the home side succumbing to a comprehensive 3-1 loss, this after full-back Le Saux had shot his team ahead with a fine strike. England then again failed to defeat South American opposition when Colombia, the nearly men in football played out a fine and entertaining 0-0 draw. It was the home side's finest display for a while, with a spectacular 'Scorpion-Kick' invented by extrovert Rene Higuita the Colombian keeper to be the highlight of the occasion. The good work did not hold-up with the depressing blank in Oslo...No surprise! Goals finally come a month later, this thanks to the influence of Steve Stone - whom had a fine season with Nottingham Forest - scoring one and setting up the other for Edward Sheringham.

Stone's Forest colleague Stuart Pearce put England on level terms after they had fallen behind. Portugal proved more testing and earned a creditable 1-1 draw, this after Stone, starting his first full match fired the home side in front. Winning ways were restored with the single goal Wembley victory over Bulgaria, Sheringham contriving with Lesley Ferdinand to score the only goal. England's fourth Wembley blank of the Venables reign came with the visit of the highly fancied but highly negative, on the night, Croatians who seemed to take its first visit to the Mecca of football like a complete holiday. Hungary, as poor as any Hungarian team of recent years fell easily in the home side's following test with Anderton (2) and Platt bringing joy on a wet day. The finishing touches of England's long campaign came with the controversial trip to face China and a Hong Kong select. The 3-0 victory in Beijing was good enough, but the single goal scored by Ferdinand in the Hong Kong victory was not enough to curb viscous attacks from the English press, this amidst the uncovering of some unruly behaviour from the English players on an aircraft returning home.

As ever, the final selection of the 22-man squad brought its usual share of surprises, not least the sensational AXING of Dennis Wise and Peter Beardsley from the original choice of 27 players. Andrew Cole, a goal-machine, who according to some (England managers) had now perfected the art of missing open goals, never really got a sustained run or had any hope of making it; as did Stanley Collymore, the most expensive British player ever whom started his new career at Liverpool slowly before finding some form. Venables was to prefer Edward Sheringham, who after months of uncertainty had fully justified his inclusion. Some felt his inclusion owed more to him being an alleged favourite drinking partner of the manager. Alan Shearer, a proven goal-getter at club level with around 130 goals in four seasons was a player in high regard and was the first striker to score 100 goals in the Premiership. However, the man entrusted with filling in the boots of Gary Lineker (England's 2nd all-time great goalscorer with 48 goals) had so far been a complete FAILURE on the International stage, scoring 5-goals in 23 outings, seemingly unable to come to terms with the close marking of a higher standard of football. He knew DELIVERANCE at this tournament was imperative, this after Venables had shown continued faith in him. Other fine strikers had been discarded in a much shorter time period. Given the correct ammunition this goal-machine had the capability of firing the bullets needed to take the nation to victory. Waiting for him to slip-up was Lesley Ferdinand, Newcastle United's most able goalscorer last season and were he called upon he could prove an effective replacement. The third main goal-getter in the squad was Robbie Fowler, hailed as 'The greatest talent since Paul Gascoigne.' He was a young lad playing well beyond his age of 21, scoring 36 the last season, many of which were spectacular efforts. Nicholas Barmby with 2-goals in China, after enduring the most tiring second-half to the season, did enough to win a place in squad. Matthew Le Tissier and Ian Wright had long since been discarded.

Of the midfield; Venables picked what was pretty much expected with Platt, a player of importance to the side, Paul Gascoigne, a man with the ability to decide a game on his own, along with Ince to be the main three. Ince had only recently made a comeback to the International stage following a long fall-out with Venables that led to him being overlooked; this after he had decided against joining the team for the Umbro cup. Ince perhaps thought himself as being irreplaceable - he wasn't and was seemingly punished by a man-in-charge that had shown increased tendencies in wanting to keep the team 'PURE' if you know what I mean? Come on Tel-Boy 'own-up' The defence caused the greater concern for Venners with Mark Wright, just back from a very long lay off, dropping out of the squad due to injury, as did Gary

Pallister a possible definite starter. Severe injury also took away Graham Le Saux and Robert Jones. Steve Howey, a former striker, and Gareth Southgate seized upon the opportunity, as did Sol Campbell. Desmond Walker, at one time the undisputed best defender in the country had long been discarded, this following a disastrous one-year spell in Italy, coupled with two inept performances against Holland and Norway that hastened an end to his international career. Goalkeepers Tim Flowers and Ian Walker were expected to compete as the understudies to David Seaman, the man in possession of the No.1 jersey in goal. Darren Anderton beat-off injury to take his place, as did Jamie Redknapp. Perhaps the only concern was that the side did not possess any natural left-winged player with Jason Wilcox, after being involved against Hungary discarded. Perhaps Terry would put his faith in the exciting Steve Mcmanaman? One wondered why Ian Woan of Forest, whom had a splendid season with his team, was overlooked. But his club captain Stuart Pearce took his place, probably as the starting left-back, this after it looked like that he had been discarded by Venables.

Switzerland appearing at the finals for the first time ever, stated that they had not come to roll over for England. They had one of the worst records of any finalists, crashing out at every qualifying stage. Its closest taste of near qualification came on route to Sweden 1992 with failure to win in Bucharest resulting in Scotland's progression.

Roy Hodgson, the man whom guided them through the last World Cup and through to these finals, was now coach of Inter Milan, having been sacked, this to the great annoyance of his loyal following. The Swiss FA did not grant his request of wanting to guide the team on a part-time basis, instead opting for Portuguese Artur Jorge, acclaimed 'one of the finest coaches in Portugal' once the national team coach in a successful unbeaten spell before taking Porto to a European cup victory.

As in the World Cup qualifying rounds of 94 the Swiss started the campaign well, beginning with a stunning victory over World Cup semi-finalists and group favourites Sweden - 4-2 the scoreline. The home side came back twice from behind to draw level before Sforza's goals in the 79th and 80th minute gave the Swiss the win. The good work continued with two more wins, the first at home to Iceland 1-0 with Bickel grabbing the all-important winner before a mere 15,800 crowd. Command of the group was taken with the 2-1 win in Istanbul over Turkey with Koller and Bickel giving the away side a 2-0 lead in just 16 minutes before they held out for the 2-1 win. Galatasaray's Turkish-born striker Turkyilmaz, now at Grasshoppers Zurich, requested to be omitted from the squad for fear of contributing to the downfall of his homeland. Depleted by injuries the Swiss dropped their first points of the campaign, Subiat's 2-goals in the last 18 minutes cancelling out Hungary's two goals in the 51st and 70th minute. The visit of Turkey brought Switzerland down with a bump as the visitor's extracted full revenge for the home defeat by achieving an identical scoreline victory. For an overconfident Swiss team missing Knap, Subiat and Chapuisat, it proved to be their worst run under Hodgson, failing to win in five games, that included two friendly defeats. Marc Hottiger's goal was not enough to save them from defeat at the hands of the underrated Turks. The crucial tie in Gothenburg resulted in the elimination of group favourites Sweden as Switzerland held out for a creditable 0-0 draw, after a 2-0 victory in Iceland had been achieved as the home side suffered their first defeat in five matches. Qualification was confirmed in the final game in Zurich with the easy disposal of Hungary. The 3-0 victory made them the first qualifiers of the tournament bar England, their record consisting of five wins, two draws and a single defeat.

Switzerland brought more a less the side that had performed admirably in 1994, the only controversy would surround the banishment of favourites, Adrian Knup and Alain Sutter by the new coach who experienced problems in winning over fans that had loved Roy Hodgson. Hottiger, Chapuisat, Sforza and Turkyilmaz were the ones that the nation would look toward. Its build-up had been nothing to shout about - a 1-1 draw with Luxembourg and one win over Wales. Two defeats were suffered, one in Vienna and at home to the Czech Republic 2-1.

For the Great-British nation, the occasion was to bring huge nervous excitement with an end to come for the hype, speculation and preparation. This was an event the people had waited for two years in coming with expectation very high from a hopeful public. A 76,000 sell-out crowd packed to see an enjoyable colourful opening ceremony as conditions, not as hot as the previous day, became perfect for football.

For the hosts at an insulting 7/1, former captain David Platt and current top-scorer with 27 goals started on the bench - as predicted. This as Venables, in his quest for the glory and the championship, opted for a formation with two wingers; Mcmanaman and Anderton the men in form whom it was hoped could supply the crosses for Shearer in a forward line of strikers that had scored 13 times in a total of 55-caps - a true lack of International goal-getters. The selection, that including seven men that had never played at a major tournament, had the look of a fine balance throughout the team. Ince and Gascoigne took their places in the middle while Tony Adams, a captain for Arsenal at 21, took the armband in a team full of leaders; Pearce, Ince... etc. The back four consisted of Gary Neville at right-back with Southgate, whom had come on heaps and bounds since his move from Palace to Aston Villa, partnering Adams. Pearce on the left completed the untried defensive unit while Sheringham, as expected, partnered Alan Shearer. The big question asked by many was could Paul Gascoigne, footballer of the year in Scotland, lead his nation to glory? His ability was unquestioned, just his application, attitude and stamina. Had he finally matured? England, with an 11-3 win ratio over Switzerland (and two draws) really needed to be patient. If not, they could possibly lose this tie to the Swiss, not expected by the British public to spoil the party. Surely they would not roll over as easily as they had seven months earlier? They warned the English to forget about that result. For the underdogs today, it was not only to be a test of character, but also ability. With Knup and Sutter out of the squad and Chapuisat not selected to start, responsibility fell heavily on the shoulders of Ciriaco Sforza - known as the Quarterback - described by the great Johan Cruyff as the best attacking midfielder in Europe. Also expected in carrying the challenge to England was Kubilay Turkyilmaz, this as Alain Geiger, winning his 111th cap (looking to overtake the all-time record of 117 set by Heinz-Hermann) was sure to be of some importance within the defence; especially with Marc Hottiger suspended.

**AN AFTERNOON OF GREAT EARLY PROMISE WAS TO TURN SOUR FOR THE HOST NATION, AS THE SO-CALLED NO HOPER SWITZERLAND SPOILED ENGLAND'S HOMECOMING WITH A WELL MERITED SHARE OF THE SPOILS. THIS WAS AFTER A DISJOINTED AND DISAPPOINTING DISPLAY BY THE HOME BOYS. THE RESULT WAS A HUGE LET DOWN TO THE NATION WHOM HAD EXPECTED NO LESS THAN OUTRIGHT VICTORY. FEAR OF LOSING, TIREDNESS AND FAILURE TO HOLD ONTO THE BALL PRODUCED THE BEST KIND OF RESULTS FOR THE OTHER GROUP OPPONENTS. THE ONLY BONUS WOULD COME WITH THE ENDING OF ALAN SHEARER'S GOALSCORING NIGHTMARE ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE.**

In what was Terry Venables 20th game in charge, England expectedly breezed swiftly into attack with Mcmanaman showing his pace on the flanks while Anderton, in the contest's early moments, had seen his shot into the ground bounce high towards the top corner. Pascolo was required to get across lively. However, it was to be the hosts that were to come under the earliest scrutiny as the defence showed signs of insecurity with Southgate forced into a life-saving clearance after the speed of Turkyilmaz exposed Adams. He was required to make a second similar clearance from the same man as Pearce, through a long-range effort, brought the hosts its finest moment. It was certainly Steve Mcmanaman who was to be the English livewire, with there a buzz of anticipation each time he touched the ball. Sebastian Jeanneret, a newcomer at full-back was unable to come to terms with his speed and trickery and was lucky to get away unpunished with a deliberate tug of the Liverpool man's shirt after he had got clear. On the whole, the home side were comfortable without being electrifying. Sforza, up until now second-best in the head-to-head with Gascoigne, with his first effort failed to keep a well-struck shot under the bar. His keeper Pascolo kept the nation on terms with two saves, firstly denying Mcmanaman's low effort before Gary Neville's tremendous drive was turned over for a corner. The young full-back then received the game's first card following a tackle from behind. Eventually, the home side's prayers were answered on 22 minutes with 37-goal machine Shearer repaying Venables's everlasting faith by shooting the nation ahead; finally to end his 21-month goal-drought of 12 games and 1,088 minutes. The sweet ball played in by Ince took out four Swiss defenders picking out Shearer's whose powerful drive was clipped just inside the post. At first there seemed a hint of offside, but replays proved beyond doubt that he was level with Vega with Sheringham, if anyone the man being off. Shearer almost took advantage of his new found confidence by heading-in number two on 36 minutes, from Pearce's whipped cross. The header downwards perhaps should have at the very least hit the target. Four minutes later England thought that they had been punished for that miss with the underside of the bar coming to the rescue after Marco Grassi virtually 2-yards-out failed to direct the ball-in with his outstretched left-leg; this after Turkyilmaz's had out-witted Pearce before whipping in the ball across goal. He was Switzerland's sharpest and only threat. Yvan Quentin, 'The Assassin' not one to mess with was almost made to pay for a scrap with Shearer that not only earned him a yellow card but also the free-kick against his team that almost resulted in the second goal. Sheringham having two bites on goal before he was strangely blown for offside. His first was the best chance after having got into space unmarked on the far post. The downward header close-in coming off the legs of Pascolo before failing in getting his foot around the ball when to his surprise it came back to him. Unable to contend efficiently with the set-pieces the Swiss looked to have a GREATER MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB HIGHER THAN THAT OF THEIR OWN ALPS. Half-time arrived with no more scoring. Not vintage but bearable from the home side against slow-paced and punchless in attack opposition without its three stars of the last World Cup. But it was no walkover.

Incident appeared very early in the second-half as Vega, a big strong Spanish born player, showed his range with an outrageous shot from distance not too far off target. Shearer, with one object in mind when he received possession saw his low drive cause the keeper to scramble without hitting the target. Meaningless sparring followed until Shearer decided to have another POP on goal 20-yards-out. Look what a goal can do for one! The Swiss, though gaining more of the ball, still looked ragged and sloppy, failing still to test a well-protected Seaman; Switzerland's fans shouted for Chapuisat. A second goal would surely calm the nerves and tension evident

in the stands. Play was brought to a standstill when Gary Neville was in need of treatment, his brother Phil warmed-up in hope of a call; even if it was at the expense of a loved relation. With a perfectly timed sliding challenge, Pearce kept out Grassi as he looked set for an effort on goal, proof that a threat was still there from the away side. Gascoigne and Mcmanaman seemed no longer to exert any great influence on events as the entire side failed to find the rhythm and shape of the first-half. A flurry of substitution activity occurred in a three minute spell that saw the Swiss prayers answered for Stephane Chapuisat - sure to add to the threat for England as they played with three out-and-out strikers. Bonvin was the man replaced as Koller took over from Geiger. England also made its own double with Stone, who played the most major part in the defeat of the Swiss in 95 and Barmby, coming on for Sheringham, so disappointing, and surprisingly Mcmanaman. Without doubt it should have been Anderton, whom had been well off his game today as his touch, awareness and confidence seemed to have deserted him. Mcmanaman's departure was not popular with the crowd as Anderton, whose fitness had been suspect, moved to the left while Stone preceded to his usual right-side and Barmby naturally into Sheringham's position. Teddy had played his worst game since the 1993 fiasco in Norway. Eighteen minutes remained as the Swiss enjoyed their finest spell of the match, confidence reaching its peak as its fans by far were making the greater noise; the home fans remaining silent and filled with apprehension. The England team needed to pull itself together, seemingly now suffering from the effects of tiredness and poor passing; lacking the ability of being able to hold the ball. As an attacking force they looked spent as they sought to hold on for the narrowest of victories. The midfield work-rate of Ince and Gascoigne had deteriorated considerably which led to Venables bringing on Platt in the place of Mr Gascoigne. The two newly arrived Englishmen, Barmby and Stone contrived for the killer second with the former whipping the ball in superbly for Stone coming-in on the far post. The defender got just in front of him to deny the attempt as a yellow card was deservedly flashed at Tony Adams, caught out many a time today, for an assault on Johann Vogel; after he had spun superbly away from the captain. A free-kick on the edge was awarded as Wembley held its breath. After the effort had been beaten out the same man saw his curling effort miss by mere inches. The home fans tried to rally its troops, now on their last legs. Fatefully, the Swiss grabbed its deserved equaliser by way of penalty decision eight minutes from time against Stuart Pearce. This followed the poor defensive header from Southgate with Marco Grassi's drive going upwards to hit the raised hand of the Forest defender in a ball-to-hand incident. The official 6-yards away showed no hesitation and perhaps harshly awarded the penalty for Switzerland. As against Germany six years earlier Pearce held his head in despair. Kubilay Turkylmaz with a low effort nonchalantly dispatched the ball along the ground past the helpless David Seaman. Grassi, following a tussle with the anonymous Ince, was to almost immediately receive the yellow card. The Inter Milan midfielder saw his fine strike soon after pushed out by Pascolo, this as it headed for the corner. With final flurries upfield the Swiss, sensing that they could win it perhaps, looked the most threatening with a crucial near post block from Seaman on time denying Grassi and preventing TOTAL DISASTER. This after Chapuisat had turned young Neville inside out. It was to be the match's final fling

## PART THREE

### WORLD CUP 98

#### A TOUR DE FRANCE

Despite the highly-tempered transport strike in Paris, the draw for the World Cup qualifying rounds was able to proceed on schedule, this on December 12th 1995 and within the presence of French president Jacques Chirac. The event was screened worldwide from Louvre in which an estimated two billion from six continents witnessed.

France as the hosts and Brazil as the 1994 winners gained automatic entry to a 32-team tournament in which an astounding record number of 172 nations far and wide were to compete for the 30 remaining places available in what would be the biggest qualifying process of all time.

The draw beginning at 5.00 pm in Paris brought together the most interesting of groupings, especially from the European section. Two days before the draw FIFA assembled all systems that would be used throughout the qualifying period with the world ruling body accepting a compromise plan from UEFA. This followed a request from the leading nations into changing a format that constructed a system of seven teams in seven groups in which the winner and runner-up would have proceeded to the finals. However, in fear of the playing too many games, top nations revolted with FIFA to change the system to another format. The new proposal was to split the groups into nine sections, five groups of five teams, four groups of six teams with the best runner-up to qualify automatically with all group winners leaving the other eight runners-up drawn into pairs to contest the final four European places.

While many of the continents best geared towards the forthcoming European nations finals in England proceedings had already begun in the European section. Group one; brought together an amazing trio of three member states of the former Yugoslavia fresh from the ceasing of hostilities...Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia & Herzegovina. FIFA had taken no measures to keep them apart. It started with Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia for an historic meeting in neutral Italy. The side decreed to be away Croatia showed its neighbours that it had a long way to climb up the international ladder. The European Champions at the time Denmark (later to smart from a first round exit at Euro-96), and Greece (the worst side of the last World Cup) made up the five-team group. The Danes and Europe's newest football power Croatia had been expected to contest the top position. But it would not go all their own way with Croatia to find themselves in the greatest of danger of dropping out of contention for qualification, this following the horrendous performance at home to Slovenia. They had already lost points at home to both Greece and then Denmark. It became a total of six lost home points as neighbouring Slovenia held out for a 3-3 draw. The Danes too had suffered a nightmare that saw them bowled out by three goals in Banaloka by Bosnia & Herzegovina. It surpassed Bosnia's previous best result of defeating Italy 2-1. Peter Schmeichel in his own personal nightmare, as in the 3-0 Croatia defeat at the Euro's, gave away two penalties that were buried by Elivlar Bolic.

After destroying Denmark, Bosnia & Herzegovina almost put paid to Croatia's hopes, this after coming back from two goals down to draw level. Croatia only gained its victory with a winner eight minutes from time through Captain Zvonimir Boban. Croatia then travelled to

Copenhagen for a tie of extreme importance that would go a long way into deciding the final outcome of the group. The Croats would be crushed by half-time as Denmark produced the performance of its campaign with Davor Suker's goal adding respectability to a 3-1 defeat. At the time it would not be known how crucial that goal would be as the Danes finally avenged the humiliation of Euro-96. Denmark, Greece, and Croatia were the teams still in contention for the first two positions. The Danes were in need of only the draw as they paid a visit to the Greek capital with a defeat not necessarily to send them out either. For Greece it was within their own hands, a victory over the Danes would win them the group, while a defeat or a draw would effectively send them out depending on whether or not Croatia failed to beat Slovenia. Nothing less than a Croatian win would be sufficient, even then that might not be enough should the Greeks win. Anyway, Croatia did their job easily enough with the 3-1 victory in the Slovenian capital. In Athens, 70,000 patriotic fans crowded into the Olympic stadium as Denmark, under intense pressure had its keeper Peter Schmeichel to thank for maintaining its grip on the leadership with a series of outstanding saves that would send the Greeks out. The match was held up for seven minutes as Greek frustration within the crowd boiled over with fireworks thrust onto the pitch. Denmark went directly to France while Croatia bundled into the play-off series. It was only now that the Croatians knew how important Davor Suker's consolation in Denmark had become for had he not scored it...

Group two; brought into conflict two of football's world powers; 3-times former winners and 94 runners-up Italy against one-time winner England. The Italians were expected to rid itself of Arrigo Saachi (if all the reports were anything to go by circulating) while England were under a manager Glenn Hoddle. The World Cup would not have been the same without old foes Poland whom they (England) had been grouped with in 1990, 94 and in the 1992 European nations qualifiers. Though England qualified at the expense of Poland on all those occasions (also inflicting a damaging 3-0 1986 World Cup defeat) it had been the Eastern Europeans that inflicted one of England's greatest heartaches by denying them passage into the finals of 74; this when Brian Clough's clown Jan Tomaszewski came to the foe. All three nations were to have first-ever historical confrontations with former Soviet states Georgia and Moldova whom proved to be no pushover in recent qualifying campaigns. They surely wouldn't qualify, but looked well capable of taking a couple of points off the favourites, especially at home.

England versus Italy was to capture the imagination everywhere and promised to be a mouth-watering spectacle; the Italians had not lost competitively to them for 17 years and denied the English a place at the 78 Argentina finals. The Azzurri prolonged its record as they achieved an historic 1-0 victory at Wembley with the home side losing its proud record of never having lost a Wembley World Cup qualifier in 28 games. It was a match to see coach Glenn Hoddle make his first and biggest mistake in a short four-game career by leaving out Lesley Ferdinand in preference to Matthew Le Tissier; the Italians had feared the big striker's aerial ability. As had been expected Italy arrived with a new coach - Cesare Maldini, father of captain Paolo. It was a new signing to the English game, Gianfranco Zola, a four-million pound signing from Parma that fired the visitors ahead on 18 minutes. Italy's performance was a throwback to the old days of Gentile, Sceria, and Cabrini; Shearer stifled out just like Gary Lineker had been in three games against the Azzurri. Unbeaten Italy, from having everything within its own destiny, let it all slip, following consecutive scoreless blanks away from home with Cesare Maldini for the first time in his management to come under fire. It meant that the pendulum could swing England's way should they as expected defeat Moldova at Wembley. It was to be the

first time in fifty years that England achieved three successive World Cup victories. The group concluded with England travelling to Rome for a clash with the Azzuri, requiring just the draw in order to preserve the one point advantage over the Italians. The home side looked for its 16th consecutive World Cup qualifying win in the Roman capital where England's last World Cup visit 20 years earlier had seen them lose a crucial encounter 2-0. Since the loss at home to the Italians the English had become a much improved outfit and gained a morale boosting summer 2-0 win over the Azzuri in neutral France.

On the night; England produced its performance of the campaign as they comfortably kept out the three-man Italian attack of Zola-Inzaghi-Vieri as goalkeeper David Seaman was to remain largely untested as England proceeded while Italy's path remained unclear.

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**WORLD CUP 98**

**KING OF KINGS**

**Led by possibly the greatest football talent since the legendary Diego Maradona, Ronaldo, Brazil went into these finals as the absolute favourites. The 150-million populated South American nation were without doubt the greatest and most celebrated footballing nation of all time; due to its unrivalled record of four footballing triumphs, the last of which was four years ago at America 94, this following a 24-year failure to win the coveted trophy.**

At the helm of this Brazilian challenge was a 21-year-old goal machine and superstar Ronaldo... football's most prized possession and most expensive player, the 'King of Kings' of present day soccer. Twice voted by his fellow professionals as 'world footballer of the year,' this young man had scored goals wherever he had gone and had been a 47-goalscorer in his first season at Barcelona that culminated in a total of 145 goals at four clubs. This was before his then record 19 million pound move to Internazionale in Italy where he would score 25 in his first season, helping the Italians to a UEFA final win and to second place in the Italian league. PSV brought him to Holland from Brazil for four million pounds before transferring him to Barcelona for a then record £13 million. Ronaldo's pedigree was unquestionable with his coach Zagallo rating him as the best in the world...whom would argue?

**Making way for Ronaldmania had been Romario; the absolute star of the 94 triumph and the finest Brazilian striker since Pele and before Ronaldo, and up until now had not lost any of his goalscoring instinct. However, on the eve of the finals, he suffered the traumatising heartbreak of exclusion from the squad, this after failing to recover from a calf injury picked up in the early part of May. Since his pinnacle performances at the 94 finals this gifted 33-year-old had seen his career put on hold at club level as well as at international - by Zagallo. A flurry of international goals, recapturing the old brilliance in the process had seen him get back into favour. With Romario out through injury a string of forwards were given the opportunity of taking over. There was Rivaldo, bought for £16 million to replace Ronaldo at Barcelona, Edmundo and even Bebeto lurking in the shadows.**

For a place in the squad Bebeto had just edged out the challenge from veteran of three World Cup's Muller. Rivaldo's striking partner at Barcelona Sonny Anderson was not even considered, as was Bayern Munich's Giovanni Elber and the home-based Dodo.

Denilson was an old fashioned left-footed player of pure skill and had put in some devastating performances at Le turnoil France 97 earning himself an incredible multi-million pound transfer to Real Betis on the conclusion of these world finals. The midfield battle for places was also intense with players in the calibre of Juninho failing to gain inclusion. He saw himself left out of COPA 97 with it needing a transfer from England to Spain for his re-inclusion into the squad. A broken leg suffered in February would ultimately rule him out. Dunga looked set to captain the side with a bunch from Leonardo, Rai, Cesar Sampaio, and Giovanni to offer back-up. At the back remained Roberto Carlos seen in Spain scoring spectacular goals from his left-back position. Aldair and Cafu from the 1994 triumph made up Brazil's strong defence in the absence of Marcio Santos, forced to pull-out from Brazil's original choice of 22 players. Andre Cruz replaced him while defensive midfielder Emerson took over from Romario; Zagallo to face heavy criticism for the choice. He also had been criticized for a lack of tactical variation.

Brazil came into these finals as the unique world and South American champions; this following the triumph in Bolivia a year earlier, the first time they had won the tournament outside its own country. They also arrived as the victors of the non-prestigious Confederations cup in Saudi Arabia. Zagallo, in his third term as coach filled the void of automatic qualification with the entering of competition after competition and by playing friendly after friendly. They had only lost three times in over 64 matches to Norway, USA, and Argentina. Zagallo had fielded more than 100 players in his four-year term.

Brazil's path to greatness and World Cup supremacy had begun with the 1958 victory in Sweden, a tournament that saw the introduction of the great Pele to world soccer as a youthful 17-year-old. The young talent captivated the world after playing a starring role in the nation's 5-2 final victory over the hosts. World domination continued with victory four years later in Chile before it turned sour in 1966; the year of England's only triumph. Top-draw Pele saw himself butchered out of the finals as his nation crashed out in the first round with the 'Black Panther' Eusebio to steal his limelight. However the 'King' returned to greatness in 1970 to reclaim his Golden-Mantle, as possibly the nation and football's greatest World Cup team swept to victory in Mexico. Italy would be the last of many nations swept aside by this team of masterful brilliance. Pele would be the first and last man to play in 3-World Cup winning teams. 1974 resulted in a premature exit at the second round stage with all the acclaim going to Johan Cryuff's Dutch masters who swept the Samba boys aside 2-0 en-route to a final clash with the Germans. Despite remaining undefeated throughout the 1978 finals elimination came after Argentina crushed Peru 6-0 in a second round clash. Brazil felt a 3-0 victory over Peru would have been enough to take them to a final clash with the Dutch; Brazilians until this day believe Peru contrived with Argentina.

1982 saw the birth and death of the nation's finest team since 1970, this in the blazing sunshine of Spain. There was Junior, Socrates, Falcao, Eder, Zico, Paolo Isidoro, and they delighted the football world, as they looked unbeatable; the magic re-kindled with Soviet Union (2-1), Scotland (4-1), New Zealand (4-0) and Argentina (3-1) swept aside. That was until they crossed paths with Italy, and an in-form Paolo Rossi one sunny afternoon in Barcelona. 1986 in Mexico would again see wins in its four opening games; Spain (1-0), Algeria (1-0), Northern Ireland (3-

0), and Poland (4-0) all failing between themselves to puncture the Brazilian net even once. The thriller in a quarter final with France saw Zico miss a 66th minute penalty with the French to go on and win the dramatics of a penalty shoot-out and yet again end Brazilian dreams for another four years. More tears and heartache followed in 1990 when the coach attempted to win the cup playing the combination of European and South American football. They had started red-hot favourites to relieve Argentina of its World Cup crown, but it did not go accordingly as a rare moment of Maradona brilliance at the finals presented Caniggia with the opportunity to dump the nation out at the second round. The first round had again resulted in three wins over Sweden (2-1), Costa Rica (1-0), and Scotland (1-0). Twenty-four years had now passed without victory, this as America 94 arrived. With the brilliance of its forwards Romario and Bebeto, and of a defence that knew how to defend the nation saw off Russia (2-0), Cameroon (3-0), U.S.A (1-0), Holland (3-2), Sweden (1-0) and Italy in the final following a dramatic penalty shoot-out win. Only Sweden in one of two matches with the favourites survived defeat.

The first two tournaments resulted in failure in 1930 and 1934 before 1950 resulted in a devastating home loss to Uruguay in the final at the Maracana stadium filled by 199,000 people. 1938 resulted in a semi-final third-placed finish while 1954 resulted in an exit at the quarter-final stage.

## FRANCE 98

The wait and hype was over as football's biggest extravaganza was back on.

In keeping with tradition, Brazil as the holders would kick off the greatest, biggest and richest world finals series of all time. The world held its breath as the anticipation and speculation was to come to a close, this with the unprecedented champions of 1994 taking on Scotland in Paris's new Stade de France stadium. It was to be Scotland's biggest test and match of all time with most of the two billion watching audience and the 80,000 crowd expecting them to have two chances - slim and none.

Brazilian coach Mario Zagallo, a World Cup winner twice as a player, once as a coach and once as an assistant coach, had at his disposal a frightening depth of talent, the best of which was a player considered to be the undisputed King of world soccer - Ronaldo. This free-scoring goal machine possessed a God-given brilliance that was to be Brazil's cutting edge in attack. He was blessed with devastating speed and killer finishing instincts combined with an aggression that instilled fear and apprehension through the spines of defenders. He was considered the favourite to become the finals top goals marksman. Only one man, Gregorz Lato had scored more than six goals since 1974.

Such was Brazil's confidence that they had the team picked more than a month earlier.

As ever it did not go to plan following Romario's loss to the finals through injury, leaving Bebeto and Edmundo to contest the vacant striking position. Edmundo, a provocative, immensely popular and talented player was the bad-boy of Brazilian soccer. A player once sent-off five times in one season was to lose the vote as Bebeto, 34-years-old and short of match practice won Zagallo over. There would be no such surprises in the rest of the line-up. Taffarel, competing at his third World Cup was making an eleventh appearance in goal while Aldair,

passed fit after recovering from sore leg muscles, lined-up alongside Junior Bianco, Roberto Carlos, and Cafu in defence. The team with an abundance of midfield talent selected Dunga to again captain the team with the Giovanni-Rivaldo pairing up leaving Denilson on the bench while Cesar Sampaio took the other position.

Scotland, presented with the dubious pleasure of facing Brazil, aimed to make an historical leap into the later stages. Jim Leighton would be the oldest player at the finals at almost 40-years of age. The nation counted heavily on a defence that only conceded eight goals in 24 games; no team had scored more than two goals against them in four and a half years under the reign of the meticulous Craig Brown. Craig Burley, John Collins, and Paul Lambert dominated midfield while Darren Jackson would be handed the vital key role behind the main strikers Gordon Durie and Kevin Gallacher. This came nine months after major brain surgery. Scotland had 14 of the players in the squad that represented the nation at Euro-96. For Scotland to win, it had to produce its greatest performance of all time. However, though facing a mountainous task, unlike in basketball with the 'Dream Team,' upsets were possible in football. Since beating Germany in March, Brazil's form had been in decline with Argentina winning a massive match in the Maracana 1-0 for a first victory in the country for 28 years.

After his mistake prevented Scotland from attaining a draw against Brazil in Turin 1990, Jim Leighton's career had come to a standstill - they would only be minutes away from surviving. Defeat had been more emphatic eight years earlier when Scotland got outplayed by one of the best teams in the last 20 years. Its finest result had been holding the Brazilians 0-0 in Frankfurt 1974. In eight games they had yet to become victorious against their illustrious opponents, six lost while drawing two.

The odds would lengthen considerably in just four minutes following the most awful of starts as disaster struck. Cesar Sampaio, eluding two defenders on the near post, was to head Brazil in front, this with the help of the shoulder. Bebeto had delivered the kick from the left-winged corner as Scotland paid for a basic error. A minute or so earlier the Scottish had cried out for a penalty after Gordon Durie had tumbled over. In truth he did not have the pace to finish the move after seeing the gap. Further near catastrophe followed with a lack of communication in Scotland's defence to almost result in an own goal for Colin Hendry, this after Jim Leighton had failed to make the call. Sampaio caused the confusion with the ball to bounce just the wrong side of the post. Leighton redeemed himself three minutes later when he was forced fully-stretched to push out Roberto Carlos's vicious and powerful drive from the left. In a tense, anxious and slow opening, Scotland had been unable to keep the ball, struggling of all places in the air as they were forced to work really hard; unfortunately, this without the ball. It would be 19 minutes before the world sampled, out of nothing, the brilliance of that genius Ronaldo. Strong, quick he bewitched Scotland's defenders, turning inside, outside and changing direction before seeing his low strike from an acute angle well saved by Leighton diving to the right; the world waited to see Scotland clinically dismantled. An aggressive and over-eager Darren Jackson, after making late contact on the ankle of Dunga, became the first man booked at the finals on 24 minutes. Suddenly, encouraged by their band of 15,000 fans, nervous and outplayed Scotland had its best spell as the contest improved as a spectacle. The long legs of Junior Bianco were needed to prevent Gallacher's cross from reaching the head of Gordon Durie. Within minutes the crowd was brought to its feet after Cesar Sampaio, turning from hero to villain, not only received a yellow card but also conceded a penalty kick. This for

an apparent shove on Kevin Gallacher, it looked rather questionable! John Collins, winning a 50th cap did not complain as he majestically put his country back on level terms with an 11th international goal. A jubilant Scottish team, growing in stature and having showed a lot of character, needed to retain all of its concentration to go in at half-time level. They had been well rewarded for a fine ten minute spell and survived as the miracle was still on. A massive roar from the fans brought a conclusion to the period as Brazil's strolling players looked a far cry from their elevated status as the best team on the planet.

Leonardo replaced the disappointing and confident lacking Giovanni for the start of the second period. It was Giovanni's team-mate at Barcelona, Rivaldo who was to have the period's two opening attempts within five minutes. The first, a fine jinxing run ended with an effort that skidded just past Leighton's post before showing his range from distance with his second attempt - the effort to sizzle just over. Though relatively uninvolved Ronaldo was to show his true class; the running off the ball, the sharpness, the burst of pace and the fine back heel. However, a better pull-back from Gallacher, following a burst into the box, might have given Brazil a real shock as Collins and Durie lay unmarked and in wait for the precise pass. Scotland had continued from where they had left of in the first-half, playing with spirit and courage as Brazil presently did not look like it could score, this as time ticked away. Bebeto, playing largely unnoticed found himself replaced by Denilson, football's most expensive player at 21.5 million. He seemed to move into the second striker's position as Edmundo was overlooked. Within a minute, Leighton easily met his strike along the ground. Then Bang! On 73 minutes, cruelty at its worst appeared with a freak own goal from Tommy Boyd with the ball to cannon into the net off his shoulder after Leighton had seen out Cafu's attempted lob. The man who had won over 50 caps would now suffer heartbreak - he led Celtic to its first Scottish title in ten years. Scotland had been preparing to bring on Tosh McKinley. The goal sparked a confidence within Brazil's play with the ball sprayed around willingly and easily as possession was kept supremely. With Christian Dailly in wait Gordon Durie went for the over-ambitious with his driven attempt sent over as a result. Durie, in a reasonable position, then saw his drive met comfortably by Taffarel while Gallacher, unable to steady himself, saw his own way off target, this while Ronaldo displayed greed when he failed to find the man free in space. The driven effort sizzled over. The concern could be seen spread all over the face of an unsteady looking Zagallo as determined Scotland pushed by its fans poured forward in final hope. Time would not be on their side as the best team shaded it in finest opening game for many a year. It had been the first time that three goals had been scored in an opening encounter since 1958. A special mention should be given for the way a lenient Jose Garcia Aranda managed the contest, this despite making an obvious mistake with the penalty award for Scotland - Brazil were not complaining now as they gained a win in what was an absorbing game, but only just.

## PART FOUR

### A CUP OF NATIONS

### BRAZILIAN!

Brazilian!

That would be the perfect description to Brazil's 'final' and clinical destruction of fellow South American competitors Uruguay. The continent's most exuberant, illustrious and colourful nation had cruised to victory at the COPA –America's 39th gathering, thus casting out the shadow and mystery of the World Cup final debacle a year earlier. World football's oldest continental championships, held irregularly since 1916, produced a variety of incident, drama and excitement in a period of almost three weeks. The tournament held every two years since 1987 was almost 50 years-older than Europe's own equivalent.

Unsurprisingly, the outstanding players of this tournament were to be Brazilians; the enigmatic Rivaldo and the revered Ronaldo, with able assistance coming from Marcel Amoroso playing the biggest roles in the nation retaining a trophy won for the first time outside Brazil only two years earlier. Ronaldo had been the ultimate star of that 97 victory culminating in two splendid goals en-route to finishing off the hosts Bolivia. All four victories before that had been achieved on home territory.

Brazil and world football's most famous current player Ronaldo, along with the future-crowned world and European footballer of the year Rivaldo, jointly shared a total of 10 goals. However, it was the contribution of Rivaldo – sent-off against Mexico - that was to stand out for most observers; Barcelona's superstar taking over the mantle, lost by Ronaldo as the world's best player, thus ending previous doubts on his ability in his homeland. It was the skill, engine, character that mesmerized the watching world, indeed everything about him. It would culminate in two final goals that included one exquisite chip with Ronaldo clinically adding a killer third soon after half- time. Revenge had been taken for Brazil's 1995 penalty shoot-out loss in Montevideo.

Brazil, winners of all six of its games went into these championships, held in Paraguay for the first time ever, with a new man of almost a year in-charge, Wanderley Luxembourgo, a fully strength team and as the mile-long favourites. This was partly due to Argentina leaving a lot of their European-based players behind in a tournament where teams fielded weaker teams while concentrating on qualifying for the forthcoming World Cup. Brazil included eight players from last year's World Cup squad of 22 men, this minus the goal-getting pair of Romario and Edmundo - whom had troubled the manager in the past with ill-discipline - plus Leonardo whom prematurely ended his career when he was told he would not be the captain. Previous coach Mario Zagallo had been fired for only getting Brazil to the World Cup final and not actually winning it.

Luxembourgo outlined his methods beforehand - discipline, unity, hard work, and professionalism. The known and associated style of Brazilian football was hardly noticeable throughout most of the campaign with the close-marking of opponents and fouling added to the Brazilian traits.

All three group games were won, the most clinical a 7-0 destruction of hapless Venezuela in the opening game with Ronaldo 2, Amoroso 2, Emerson, Ronaldinho, and Rivaldo helping themselves to a goal-feast. Mexico (2-1) and Chile (1-0) did not rollover so easily as deadly rivals Argentina were overcome in an eventful quarter-final, but only just as Mexico failed to gain revenge for the group defeat by losing two-zero in a semi-final in which goals came about through Amoroso and Rivaldo.

Losing finalists and inexperienced Uruguay with its appearance in the finale exceeded all previous expectation of success. Many of its youngsters were debutantes in what was virtually a B-team for the continents joint most successful nation ever. The priority for the establishment was geared towards qualifying for the 2002 World Cup rather than overtaking Argentina in the record number of championship wins. The new coach, Argentine Daniel Passarella opted to take 17 of the nation's top men for preparation none of whom would participate at the COPA. In fact the man at the top had little to do with the tournament as Victor Pua took care of team affairs.

Enthusiasm, skill, coupled with a big heart and the famous fighting spirit mixed with some luck had been witnessed in the youngsters march to the penultimate game. It accounted for host Paraguay the victims of a penalty shoot-out defeat following a 1-1 draw that had seen Zalayeta put the nation back on level terms. Chile had been accounted for in the same way by a team that had only qualified out of its group as the second best placed third-team. A single match was won outright at the entire tournament against Ecuador 2-1. Other group games resulted in an opening 1-0 defeat to Colombia before Argentina triumphed 2-0.

Argentina without many of its celebrated and self-excluded stars of the European game - Batistuta, Chamot, Almeyda, and Veron - looked to champions Boca Juniors for the backbone of the national team. The absentees were alleged to have had injuries with the need for rest while some claimed that they had not been asked; this kind of widespread pull-out was dooming the finals to mediocrity. Only Ortega, Crespo and Redondo - recalled after five years in the wilderness - bothered as only six players from the World Cup of 98 remained. Preparation was less than ideal with Bielsa able to pick a strong line-up once in his reign in the 1-1 draw with European's Holland.

The lasting memory of Argentina at these finals would be domestic sensation Martin Palermo's three amazing penalty misses in the 3-0 loss to Colombia. The three misses were included in a batch of seven missed in 11 awards during regulation time - penalty shoot-outs not included. One wonder's had the galaxy of stars been available for Marcelo Bielsa's use that would Brazil, whom had it tough with little to choose, have progressed in the quarter-final duel? Had Ayala's late penalty not been missed to draw the nations level what could have happened at 2-2; instead the game was lost at 2-1. Wins were achieved against Ecuador (3-1) and Uruguay (2-0).

Given home advantage and the players available at their disposal Paraguay were looked upon as possible winners; a vast amount of experience inherent coupled with promising newcomers making a case for a third COPA victory. Of the 98 squad the strongest department, the defence, remained intact with the nation looking for greater firepower. The path to the final looked made after finding themselves grouped in arguably the weakest of the three sections - Bolivia, Peru and Japan.

They went into these championships without its most celebrated star and a symbol of the nation, captain and brilliant goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert whom decided against taking part when an army general - Lino Oviedo - implicated in revolutionary activities and assassination was put in charge as co-coordinator of the organising committee. The awesome keeper also opposed the idea of staging the finals in a country where he thought education and health was more deserving of cash than football. Some others questioned the COPA as its participation was put into doubt, few, even Paraguayans, felt that it was a good decision in awarding the games to such an economically poor nation. The newly installed government at first showed little interest in staging the event and it did not help that few visiting supporters stayed in Paraguay to spend much needed foreign currency; most of the main foreign legion fans of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay coming and going for matches. Chilavert refused to change his mind when the general had to flee the country into exile and they missed him in the shoot-outs with Ricardo Tavealli never coming close to saving a kick. Miguel Benitez's penalty miss costing the nation the chance of becoming the third successive COPA host to reach the final after Uruguay in 95 and Bolivia, favoured by altitude in 97.

## PART FOUR

### A CUP OF NATIONS

#### THE LION KINGS

It could not have been gotten any better as Africa saw its dream final between the continents two greatest football nations of the last 20 years; Cameroon, the team of the 80s against Nigeria, the team of the 90s. It was Cameroon's Indomitable Lions against Nigeria's Super Green Eagles in world football's first international championships of the new century.

By virtue of home advantage, Nigeria, though unconvincing throughout, would be installed as favourites to capture the 22nd African cup of nations.

For the first time ever the African Nations Cup featured more players based in Europe than on the African continent with many of world football's biggest clubs having representatives at these championships. It was to be a spectacle well worthwhile the viewing in terms of the parade of internationally known world stars - Kanu, Kuffour, Okocha, Babayaro just a few to name.

The group stage had seen the co-host Nigeria end up comfortable winners of Group D. Not having played at full strength for almost a year left its mark as they looked a little rusty early on against fellow World Cup finalists of 98 Tunisia - one of the two nations in this group that had appeared at four consecutive tournaments. However, quality shone and once Augustine Okocha had put them ahead they never looked back despite the 80,000 crowd being silenced by a Tunisian equaliser. Okocha re-claimed Nigeria's lead before Victor Ikpeba added two more in quick succession for a comfortable 4-2 win.

A row over match fees had much to do with an inept display in the shock 0-0 draw with Congo whom had the better of the chances. Angry fans were disgusted and decided to head a near riot outside the stadium after the game, breaking team bus windows in protest of the lacklustre display. It was one of two riots inside and outside the stadium at these finals.

Government officials reacted swiftly to pay outstanding match fees to the disgruntled squad and it paid off as Morocco got eliminated in the final match of the group. Finidi George's stunning shot of pure power was added to by debutante Julius Aghahowa who skilfully clipped the ball over the onrushing keeper.

Supreme over-confidence, as in the 98 World Cup clash with Denmark, almost cost the nation as they matched up with outsiders Senegal for a highly dramatic quarter-final. Indeed, they were minutes away from arguably the biggest upset in nation's cup history after Khalilou Fadiga's first international goal early on. It could have become two, or even three, as the Nigerian nation was truly unnerved with substitute Julius Aghahowa to save tie and the tournament with an equaliser (and then a winner in extra-time) that was to set off a pitch invasion from fans that had thought it had been a golden goal. It would cost Nigeria's federation a £3,500 fine with the game brought to a standstill with Senegalese players refusing to play on until adequate order was returned.

A tactical master-stroke, switching Tijani Babangida to the left wing in order to exploit the lack of pace in South Africa's defence paid off within 45 seconds. The contest was over 30 minutes later after the visiting defenders had been caught flat-footed with Babangida to score again. This for a team minus Okocha provoked into elbowing an opponent before being sent-off in the Senegal tie of the quarters.

For Cameroon, passage through the group stage had been less than 100% convincing, though they did let off Ghana, totally outplayed, from an opening day defeat. The visitors missed numerous chances to finish the co-host after Marc Vivien Foe had given his nation the lead. Ghana grabbed a fortunate equaliser for an undeserved share of the spoils. Ivory Coast would not be that lucky as the class of Cameroon shone in an unstoppable and comprehensive roller-coaster victory. Raymond Kalla (of 94 and 98 fame) with a rare early goal put them on their way with his effort multiplied by Samuel Eto'o and Patrick Mboma's driven effort from distance. Resting most of the team for the nothing-match with Togo came without consequence - a 1-0 defeat to a team that needed to win by three goals to proceed.

A quarter-final against Algeria brought the Cameroonians back to full-strength and two goals in the first 30 minutes. It was a display of complete mastery and dominance as goals from Eto'o and Vivien-Foe may well have been added upon before a consolation goal from the North Africans. A strong finish in the semi-final encounter with Tunisia ensured a place in today's final, this following a tightly contested first-half. Two goals from Mboma and a goal from Eto'o, sandwiched in-between gave a comprehensive scoreline margin win of 3-0.

With Ghana eliminated at the quarter-final stage the people of Accra seemed rarely interested in the remainder of the finals. The team short of influential men had on the whole performed abysmally that brought a single win in four matches, and that would be achieved against minnows Togo 2-0. Two years ago little Togo had defeated a mightier Ghana team at the group stage in one of the shocks of the finals. Defeats followed against Ivory Coast (2-0) and South Africa in a quarter-final contest; a goal three minutes from half-time by Siyabonga Nomvete settled the tie. The visitors survived the 48th minute dismissal of Eric Tinkler to take its place in what turned out to be semi-final defeat against Nigeria. The stage had been reached without the top scorer of 1998 Benni McCarthy whom had temporarily quit international football. A replacement would be found in Shaun Bartlett whom went on to win the tournaments golden boot award with 5-goals. Group B had been toppled with victories over Gabon (3-1) and DR Congo (1-0) as only Algeria survived defeat in a meaningless 1-1 draw. In the third-fourth placed contest with Tunisia a penalty shoot-out victory of 4-2 was achieved following the 2-2 scoring draw in normal time. Tunisia scored a last minute equaliser. However, Bapela stepped up to give South Africa victory after Arendse had stopped Zitouni's spot-kick.

Tunisia's final day win over Congo coupled with Morocco's defeat in Lagos had enabled the team to qualify unexpectedly from Group D, especially following the opening day loss in the Nigeria former capital and the drab 0-0 draw with Morocco. Not content with ending Morocco's hopes Tunisia put paid to North African rivals Egypt's bid to hold on to the trophy they won two years ago in Burkina Faso - a record fourth equalling win for the Pharaohs. Out-to-spoil Egypt's rhythm they succeeded perfectly with Khaled Badra's penalty conversion sending the nation into a semi-final Cameroon clash.

Looking the most complete team of the first phase Egypt had seen itself triumphant in all three first phase ties; the defending champions trampling Zambia in Hossan Hassan's 137th international with 2-goals either side of half-time. Zambia had seen themselves thumped 4-0 by the Egyptians just two years ago in Burkina Faso's finals. Hassan's second successive goal, a diving header on 39 minutes, would be enough for a narrow 1-0 victory over an impressive Senegal team. It was to be a goal shrouded in controversy after the linesman had his flag up and another ball had bounced onto the pitch; Senegal's official protest was turned down. In the game of the finals Egypt had overturned a shock 2-0 lead for Burkina Faso to become 4-2 victors. Libero Hany Ramzy from inside the penalty area and on the turn crashed in the best goal. Burkina Faso had been one of the tournaments Gung-Ho and most entertaining teams, perhaps unfortunate to lose an opening contest to the Senegalese - 3-1 the flattering scoreline in favour of a team making its first appearance at the finals since 1994. A scrambled goal from Alassane Ouedraogo had given the Stallions a last gasp equaliser to deny Dennis Lota's overhead 'goal of the finals'. Zambia's final day 2-2 draw with Senegal consigned them along with Faso to the role of also-rans.

Having made such an impression at France 98 Morocco became the biggest casualties of the group stages, this despite winning its opening game against the expected group whipping boys Congo. An uninspired performance on the whole with the team rescued by Bassir's winner five minutes from time, this following a mistake in coming to meet the cross from Brice Samba. Subsequent matches with Tunisia, and then Nigeria produced a point, not nearly enough and they joined Congo out of the finals with Henry Michel to become a sacked Frenchman.

## PART FOUR A CUP OF NATIONS A FRENCH REVOLUTION IN THE YEAR 2000

The new century was to see international football's first major tournament go to the land of the low countries of Belgium and Holland. The title at stake was the eleventh European football championships that featured the best of what the continent had to offer in a tournament thought of by many as harder to win than the more coveted and glamorous World Cup.

**All of Europe's greatest nations were to be participants as were some of football's most talented and celebrated idols and icons; the continent now 'Euro-crazy' looked forward to a highly charged and anticipated festival of football, passion, and skills over a period of three weeks. It had a lot to live up to.**

It would be European football's first co-hosting of any kind at a major tournament and it could not have matched up two greater or bitter rivalries in which there was certainly no love lost.

As ever, Germany, the finals most successful ever nation and current holders, were to be present; one suspected its team were about to be dethroned, with it thought, even at home, that the nation was going into major tournament with its weakest side of all time. However, they would be written off at every team's peril. History suggested that they had been the team to beat to win any major finals.

Co-host Holland, with one of the strongest squads and home advantage, for many, were the undoubted favourites to win a trophy they first lifted 12 years prior. The core of the side that had performed admirably at France 98 remained, though with a new man Frank Rijkaard at the helm; he had won the finals as a player in 1988. Embarrassed of riches they would take some stopping if they found their rhythm.

Spain, under the guidance of one of its former star players Jose Camacho, on current form were expected to prove one of the biggest challengers to the Dutch, this after having lost just once in 17 games. National pride had been restored following the disaster of France 98 and a 3-2 loss in Cyprus. Forty goals in seven qualifying matches were scored. However, for all the success of its club sides and participation at every major tournament, bar Sweden 92, the national team had enjoyed few moments of triumph - under-achievement turned into an art form.

Having gone 12 games unbeaten prior to the finals, world champions France could also not be discounted. They retained 18 of the 22 players that had performed in their World Cup victory of 98.

Italy, a proven tournament team, was to surely have its own say in the outcome of festivities. They were Europe's second greatest performers in world football. However, they had seldom shone at the Euro-tournaments of most recent.

Beaten finalists of 96, Czech Republic swept through European Group 8 to make yet another appearance at the final stages.

Having overcome British rivals Scotland in a tense play-off, England arrived full of expectation, this under the charismatic Kevin Keegan, a former star pupil.

Romania, the nemesis of England at France 98 had proven ability on the international stage, while Portugal had talents in abundance waiting to finally burst onto the world scene.

Yugoslavia came of trumps in the bitter tussle with Croatia to take its place at the finals. It had been the nation's exclusion from the 92 finals that would hand fellow competitors Denmark, present again, the chance to come from nowhere and conquer and go onto folklore and glory.

Once overcoming a poor start Scandinavian rivals Norway steamed through to the finals, its coach may have changed but nothing else.

The finals biggest outsiders would be Turkey, second-time finalists, and little Slovenia whom had overcome the greatest odds to humble Europe's newest power Ukraine.

However it was the 92 hosts Sweden and tournaments co-host Belgium who were to begin these finals; June 10th 2000 was the date set for proceedings for what was certain to be a memorable extravaganza.

BELGIUM under the coaching skills of the cigar-smoking Robert Waseige had seen its fortunes take a dramatic turn for the better - from being virtual no-hoper's to a team with a genuine chance of success on home territory. He would become the first French-speaker to be in charge of the Belgian team.

An embarrassing 4-3 home loss to Finland had been the last straw with the end to come for Georges Leekens whom had lost the respect of leading players, infuriating some whom then refused to play for him. Shock first round elimination at the 98 World Cup finals was followed by a tragic sequence of five consecutive one-zero friendly losses in just under three months that included losses in Romania and in neutral Cyprus at the hands of Greece; the defeats at home to Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and then Egypt were the most damaging.

Omens had been there in the nation's first match post-France 98 with a drab 0-0 draw in Luxembourg - of all places. The following single goal victory over Cyprus had been nothing to shout about.

Leekens thought the tide had been turned when they halted the five game losing streak with a two-game unbeaten run in the little known Kirin cup with draws against Peru (1-1) and Japan (0-0).

A 2-1 victory away in Seoul against the home nation enabled Leekens to declare that the team was back on track. But then came Finland and then the end for a man whom used 70 players during his 30-month, 29-match stay.

With Waseige newly installed players clamoured for inclusion into the national team. He was a man that had an unquestionable belief in tried and trusted players, a policy in stark contrast to his predecessor.

Game One could not have come up against a more ferocious opponent - Holland. Taking into account the negativity in which Belgium combated the Dutch in the 0-0 Stade de France World Cup draw, the final score made amazing reading of Holland 5-5 Belgium in a match anything but friendly that saw ten yellow cards and one red issued to Wilmots. Belgium went 2-0 and then 4-3 ahead before grabbing a late equaliser through Emile Mpenza. Improvement continued as Waseige set about changing the fortunes of the national team with the 4-0 Liege crushing of Morocco to follow. The only blight would be a 2-1 loss in Sunderland against England. Both Italy in Lecce (3-1) and Norway in Oslo (2-0) saw themselves overturned by Belgium's resurgent team. In between Portugal (1-1) and Holland (2-2) escaped with late equalizers in Belgium with the final warm up game ending in a 2-2 Copenhagen draw against those Danes.

Belgium's proudest achievement at these championships had been its performance of the 1980 games in Italy. After outplaying the former West Germany for long periods the team saw itself defeated by a final minute header from Horst Hrubesch in Rome's Olympic stadium. A fortuitously given penalty had seen Rene Vandereycken equalise Hrubesch's original opener. The team had stunned Italy by reaching the final after gaining the 0-0 draw.

The English had seen themselves pegged-back by Jan Ceuleman's equalising goal in a 1-1 Turin opening game draw. The nation's attainment of a final place would be secured by virtue of the second game 2-1 win over Spain with goals from the defensive Julian Cools and Eric Gerets defeating a nation that had held the host and favourites to a scoreless draw.

Home territory in 1972 had seen a third-placed finish with the stumbling block those Germans again - the eventual winners. A quarter-final appearance came about four years later while a squad-breaking scandal involving bribes rocked the nation's high hopes going into the finals of 1984. Deficiencies in the defensive department proved decisive as first round elimination came despite having won its opening game 2-0 against also-rans Yugoslavia. It signalled the start of

a young and promising career of a talented 18-year-old called Vincenzo Scifo whom would be the nation's best player for almost the next 15 years. European championship demise continued with failure to qualify for the 88, 92, and 96 finals. Its pre-1972 years had been just as unfruitful.

Sweden reached these finals with an exemplary record, this following a clean sweep through European Group five undefeated. Only a single goal had been conceded, and that was in their opening game when they fell behind to England after just two minutes. From then onwards it was just a long spiral going up with England overcome 2-1 in Stockholm. It was the team's outstanding away form that was to catch the eye and give them a cutting edge above the rest; one-zero wins behind the Iron curtains of Bulgaria and Poland gave them a stranglehold on the group. A less than impressive 2-0 home banker win at the expense of Luxembourg had been sandwiched in-between the wins with the conclusion of the group brought to an end with the 0-0 Wembley draw against England - this in terms of whom would win it. Victories followed over Bulgaria (1-0) and Luxembourg (1-0) before Poland's qualification hopes were ended following a 2-0 Stockholm defeat.

Experienced Sweden, under the co-coaching skills of Tommy Soderberg and previous assistant Lars Lagerback, based itself, as with previous strong Swedish teams, upon teamwork, collective spirit and mentality, not to mention good organisation. The workmanlike style, unlikely to win friends was sure to prove highly efficient and effective.

The nation's greatest adventure had come on home soil eight years earlier with a semi-final appearance with only the tournament masters Germany thwarting an appearance in the final with a 3-2 win. Qualification had been achieved by topping a group involving France (1-1), Denmark (1-0) and England (2-1) with a new star to emerge from the finals - Tomas Brolin. The nation's only other campaign in 1964 had been dealt a quarter-final eliminating blow with failure to qualify as result of seven other unsuccessful attempts, this after a non-entry in 1960.

There was a high rising level of expectancy and a sense of bulgeoning optimism and belief in the country that a major surprise was possible at the finals. An enthusiastic crowd full at a 50,000 capacity packed into the King Baudoin stadium, the former Heysel now totally rebuilt. As host Belgium knew they had to take the challenge forward to a side with football's meanest defence that had not conceded a competitive goal for 751 minutes. The Belgians needed to be a better side than that which had sent FIFA delegates to sleep at their last World Cup game of the 1998 finals.

Belgium's most inventive and talented player of the last 15 years Enzo Scifo was no more (discarded at 34-years-old) with there to be no Franky Van-der Elst (lost to retirement and old age), nor Luis Oliviera (lost touch) as Tanghe and Genaux were lost through injury. Of the 22 players selected 11 had been part of the World Cup squad of 98; the backbone of the last few years, De Wilde, Staelens, and Wilmots still to remain. They had been in squads as far back as 1990. After witnessing the birth of his child Philippe Leonard made a return to barracks to take his place in a Belgium side starting with six home-based players in a line-up of no surprises - the same that had started against the Danes a week earlier in a friendly. Blessed with a wider-range of forward talent the coach decided on Branko Strupar, with 6-goals in eight starts, to partner star in the making Lokonda Emile Mpenza - checked out by some big clubs in Europe and a sensation with Schalke 04. This left Luc Nilis, a former player of year in Holland and Belgium, and Gilles De Bilde (having won back the hearts of the Belgian people) to wait

patiently on the bench. Luc Nilis ended his exile from the 98 World Cup side in November 99 and had scored 18 goals as PSV reclaimed the Dutch title. His inclusion at the expense of Toni Brogno, top-goalscorer of the domestic league, caused some uproar in the country. Though he would not start Johan Walem, the only doubt with an ankle injury, took his place in the squad - veteran Danny Boffin had been on standby. Besides home advantage Belgium believed the lack of expectation would work in their favour.

With a fully fit squad to choose from Sweden included several of the side that finished fourth at the World Cup of 94. For the sake of team unity the managers, with little time for superstars, sacrificed its most talented player, the Belgian-based Per Zetterberg. Three stars of the 94 finals had been lost to injury, two temporary and the other permanent - Stefan Schwartz, Pontus Kamark, and Martin Dahlin (retired who had long since been discarded by the Swedish establishment). There was also no Anders Anderson or Jesper Blomqvist with the biggest casualty the loss of Tomas Brodin a player that had long since lost the appetite to play football after being unable to give up his appetite for food. As with both Norway and Denmark the nation had a strong contingent of British-based men, its two most talented plied their trade at Celtic and Arsenal. Henrik Larsson at Celtic was to make the most remarkable of recoveries and make the squad after a serious leg fracture last year. Brazilian legend Pele urged the Swedish management to show more courage and take a chance and play the striker from the onset against Belgium, this despite having played little competitive football; they ultimately resisted the temptation to play a man that had scored around 70 goals in two years at Celtic. Freddie Ljungberg at Arsenal was the other Swede that the nation looked towards. Kennet Anderson a 5-goal star of 94 was to lead the attack as Roland Nilsson remained and scored the equaliser against Spain (1-1) in his 111th international.

After a low-keyed and brief but puzzling opening ceremony we got down to the real business of these finals.

The nerves, pressure, and expectations of the home nation were in evidence as Sweden settled and exerted the early significant pressure with possibilities to arise of a breakthrough that included the first after 13 seconds from Kennet Anderson. Patrick Anderson's drive, Staelens's goal-saving clearance and Kennet Anderson's header 6-yards-out sent wide, unnerved the host nation even further. Domination of the air by K. Anderson (a focal-point) was to totally leave Staelens (a serial foul offender) and Valgaeren (not inspiring confidence) unhinged in a fragile looking defence as fears of a sterile opening did not materialise.

Backed by the support of its enthusiastic fans that included the Royal Family, Belgium, slowly but surely found its feet with Strupar, Wilmots, and Verheyen threatening slightly with efforts while Deflandre, having space on the right was a constant threat with his thrusts forward.

With Belgium's best chance, after Sweden's defence had fallen asleep, Mpenaza sent the ball over from Verheyen's quick and accurate free-kick; Wilmots had been better placed for an attempt on target. De Wilde then got down well to deny Freddie Ljungberg before an uncharacteristic loss of concentration from the 112-capped Roland Nilsson - dispossessed in the process and then substituted at half-time - enabled Bart Goor accelerating away from Bjorklund to steer Belgium into a lead just before the break. It was Goor's third international goal as Brussels went even madder 40 seconds into the restart with the tie looking all but over. After surviving a suspicion of controlling the ball with his hand Emile Mpenza emphatically

crashed the ball decisively into the roof of the net, this after Strupar had played him on goal with an exquisite flick of the ball. However, a catastrophe among catastrophes would fall upon a bewildered but otherwise impressive Phillip de Wide after making a foolhardily attempt to control a needlessly ball played back from Leonard; he trod on the ball stumbled over losing control with the ball to fall for Mjjaby to walk the ball into an unguarded net. Henrik Larsson had made his expected appearance a minute earlier in the place of Peterrsen. De Wilde atoned for the error after Ljungberg sprinting clear through the middle saw his point-blank attempt deflected as the keeper stood his ground. The tension in the stands replaced the buoyancy as it was backs-to-the-wall for Belgium. Attempting to come back in on his right foot Mjjalby saw the chance go for a strike on goal with Valgaeren to get the important block. Deflandre's well driven effort tried to bring the buoyancy back to the stadium as Anderson's free-kick was close without worrying De Wilde. After losing control of the ball Hedman was to get the protective decision from the official while a poor late lunging two-footed tackle made by Patrick Anderson on Bart Goor, a second bookable offence, led to his unarguable dismissal; he had earned an earlier card for a chop on Mpenza. It was getting all too frantic with Belgium introducing substitutes in order to steady the boat. De Wilde touched over Mjjalby's headed attempt as Nilis, a substitute, made an impression by stretching Sweden; adding class and craft with a touch of greediness after attempting to curl an indirect free-kick into the net before an audacious chip over Hedman and under the bar. He got himself booked in the process as Goor and Wilmots looked to end it. Belgium survived bumps to Deflandre and Verheyen to become victorious with the former so dazed that he tried to return to the field, this after not realising that he had already been substituted.

## INTRODUCTION

# PART FIVE WORLD CUP 2002 THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

For the first time ever a World Cup finals was to be co-hosted with the East Asian countries of Japan and South Korea chosen to administer. The award of finals to Asia was not the most popular of decisions throughout the rest of the world as neither had made any impression at any previous world finals series; whilst at the time of the award Japan had never even reached a World Cup tournament.

It was to be the first time that the finals were to be staged outside of Europe and the Americas by two nations that had an historical rivalry like no other, this after being almost the worst of enemies for most of the past 500 years. The Koreans had suffered under brutal occupation from 1910 to 1945 by oppressors Japan. A row between the nations had even erupted over the word order to be printed on finals tickets and related literature.

The decision by world governing body FIFA to share the event was a kind of an arranged marriage met by a contrast of reactions - horror in Japan, favourites to win, while Korea, who had the deeper football roots celebrated with victory. In its bids both nations had spent hundreds of millions of dollars in their campaigns with running costs for each country to be as much as £350 million, more than twice as much as in France 98, and this not including total costs. The possibility of some of World Cup matches being played in North Korea were spurned by the government of that country. Anyway, the finals would have a setting worthy of any science fiction fantasy as each nation submitted 10 venues to stage the finals as three million tickets would be made available for the 64 matches, the host nations to receive about half the allocations. A sell-out crowd of 70,718 and a global TV audience of nearly 2 billion were expected to watch the final in Yokohama on June 30th 2002.

A new record number of 198 countries (FIFA had a 203 membership) had entered from far and wide to vie for the remaining 29 places available for football's Promised Land. Defending champions France, co-hosts Korea and Japan were exempt and pre-qualified as Sepp Blatter shocked the world with his announcement that the holders would no longer qualify automatically after 2002. The tournament had kicked off in the Port of Spain, Trinidad, in view of 8,000 fans that watched Trinidad and Tobago trash the Dutch Antilles 5-0, the first match of the longest qualifying competition of the most complex of the regional preliminary rounds. The March 4th contest saw the start of six different continental qualification systems (some 806 games) lasting until the end of November 2001.

Only nine of the 32 coaches that led their nations at the 98 finals had managed to keep their jobs, this with all seven previous winners present.

The countdown to the finals would begin with the unveiling of a special board in Japan on Thursday June 1st 2000 with the message on the board at Tokyo station to read '730 days to go'

the time remaining until the opening game of the finals in Seoul. Japan's organizing committee vice-president and FA president Shunichiro Okano pledged to stage a successful tournament, as did his Korean counterpart.

## In The Land of the Rising Sun

And to Seoul where 69,000 expectant fans packed the national arena - the new glittering stadium - to see France, the big favourites from Group A entertain 2002 African Nations Cup runners-up Senegal. The opening ceremony had featured the usual fireworks and lasers, together with traditional Korean dancing and music. Senegal, expected to be swallowed up in the cauldron included 11 French-based players, while the current world champions included several members from the World Cup winning team, including one Patrick Viera born and raised in Senegal, but now the cornerstone of the French team. They believed they could become the first Europeans to win outside their continent and heavily featured high on everybody's list of pre-tournament favourites. Given the attention of over 2 billion people, Senegal was set to perform in front of its biggest audience of all time.

France, without Zinedine Zidane (who 5-days earlier had torn a thigh muscle against South Korea) and Robert Pires, lacked the ideas, inspiration and played with a trepidation that the Africans - efficient, determined, and composed whilst showing no lack of talent and ambition - were to exploit and record its greatest moment in international football by defeating its former colonial ruler. All the components for a sensational story had been in place beforehand, the stuff that dreams and legends are made of, one the romantics among us might have suggested an outrageous script. The World and Euro champs were never able to find its rhythm and were on its way to dethronement, harried-rocked-humbled by the so-called minnows from West Africa, masterminded by a Frenchman Bruno Metsu. Midfield powerhouse Papa Bouba Dioup would be the name on everybody's lips after scrambling home the 34th minute winner. He was one of a number of heroes on the night with El-Hadji Diouf, playing alone up front, but far from isolated a constant threat showing pace and mobility. Goalkeeper Tony Sylva made brilliant saves as the towering Salif Diaou was a presence in midfield with Papa Diop. For shock value it matched Cameroon's win over the then reigning champions Argentina at Italia 90, evoking memories in more ways than one as they overturned the odds. The best France could muster was hitting the post and bar through Trezeguet and Henry

With the French humbled, Uruguay and Denmark probably felt a win in its own clash would go a long way in securing its own progression at these finals. This game was never likely to produce a repeat of the 1986 clash when Sepp Piontek's Danish side of dynamite ran out 6-1 winners; this current team for a start did not possess the players, style or swagger of their predecessors. Sixteen years on the Danes looked to be the ones in the ascendancy, efficient in every way with its teamwork the fore as defensive deficiencies were taken advantage of with South Americans Uruguay falling to the goals in the final minutes of each half of Tomasson. Alvaro Recoba offered glimpses of 'individual talent' but ultimately was let down by his teammates. Left-back Dario Rodriguez had seen his sweetly struck thunderbolt effort fly past Sorensen for an equaliser.

Defeated France of the opening game, already struggling and staring elimination in the face, looked further in trouble as the match with Uruguay exploded following a 25th minute dismissal of star striker Thierry Henry, this following a 2-footed high challenge on Marcelo Romero. Without its star talisman and injured Zinedine Zidane they were devoid of leadership and inspiration - his injury and absence had seemingly ripped the heart and soul out of the French challenge. Zidane's deputy Djorkaeff, who made little impression against Senegal, found himself ousted as Lemerre made the one change. Uruguay's disciplined defence remained unbreached in a duel fast and tense built on a war of attrition the sort of breathless ferocity from which legends are constructed. The tournament's first 0-0 scoreline had been full of drama and excitement, chances, near misses and fine saves. Under a Uruguayan second-half onslaught France stayed alive, thanks largely to the brilliance of Barthez, not to make any characteristic erratic blunders. Recoba again was outstanding and could have had a treble as France came within a whisker of victory themselves. Senegal's disciplined and resolute intelligent approach of the France game, altered to a gung-ho free-wheeling daring roller-coaster in a highly thrilling and heated contest with the impressive Danes. Having surprised many with an attacking performance against Uruguay, Denmark played its part in a contest that had everything as temperatures soared on and off the pitch that included an 18-man brawl with Senegal outstanding despite often lacking the cutting edge. Salif Diao was the hero and villain in the bad tempered match, giving away the penalty (a shove on Tomasson) for Denmark's goal, converted by Tomasson, his third goal. Diao equalised soon after the break in a sweeping move before eventually getting himself sent off for a bone-shaking foul on Henriksen's kneecap, as tempers boiled over. Senegal pressed home as the Danes tired in the sweltering heat, but Fadiga and Souleymane Camara both missed chances to win it. France without a point or a goal went into the finale with those thrilling Danes with Zidane back, a gamble, however minus Henry and Petit (lost to indiscipline) and needing to win by two clear goals. As in the Senegal clash of the previous match Denmark, despite altering its normal tactics, playing an extra midfielder, were resolute and threatening, disciplined in its defensive display - simple but effective. As it progressed frustration piled on for France, with it very apparent that Zidane was well below fitness as his team were denied the room to breathe and space to manoeuvre with the burly Danish midfield pairing of Tofting and Gravesen running the show; and then the unthinkable happened... Denmark scored, not only once, but twice through Dennis Rommedahl and Jon Dahl Tomasson on 67 minutes. France were never going to score, the defending champions were out, bottom of the group, humiliated, deprived of a clearly unfit Zidane and left with the shame of becoming the first holders eliminated at the first stage since Brazil in 1966; without a win, without a goal, without honour, a comical-bad joke, leaving the finals without creating anything of a storm, in fact leaving in a whimper. They departed with the worst record of any previous winners. The team is the star may be the mantra of the modern-day coach, but here was proof that an individual such as Zidane can carry a whole team, just as Diego Maradona had at three World Cups. The absence of Zidane (and Pires) told only half the story of France's disastrous tournament with talk of rifts between the older players (marshalled around Desailly) and younger (led by Trezeguet). With France gone and Denmark in Senegal looked to be joining them after storming into a 3-goal half-time lead in the Uruguay finale - attributed to more mistakes. Complacency crept in and it started to go wrong as Uruguay 3-goals down in 38 minutes somehow, after a reshuffle from coach Victor Pua, found the drive and passion to not only draw level in astonishing second-half comeback, but almost steal it at the end through Morales and put the Africans out. Senegal lost

its discipline, resolution and almost its status as participants at these finals. However, they clung on, but only just. Uruguay showed ambition when it was too late and left early, as, many had expected. The last team to qualify for the finals would become the first team to depart, despite a significant contribution to a remarkable match. Its coach who had much publicised run-ins with the players before the finals, quit. France woes should not detract from the achievements of both Denmark and Senegal's progression.

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In Daejeon it was 1966 revisited for the Italians who under a shroud of controversy, conspiracy theories here and there, exited against the host nation, just as they had against its neighbours from the north all those years ago. The South in the end prevailed in the most dramatic and controversial of circumstances. The Azzuri had been desperately lucky not to have joined the big-name casualty list of the first round and paid the price for crawling into its familiar shell of trying to defend a slender lead given by Christian Vieri's headed effort in the 18th minute; this despite starting with its most attack-minded formation of the finals - Alessandro del Piero alongside Vieri in attack, with Totti operating in the space behind them. They missed a hateful including one in extra-time when Vieri inexplicably side-footed over an open goal from 2-yards, and Gattuso did no better soon after. Italy had been three minutes away from a quarter-final appearance against Latin rivals Spain, Korea on their way to joining Japan. But whereas Japan surrendered meekly to Turkey, the lively and physically resilient Koreans, made of sterner stuff drawing strength from the noise and colour of another extraordinary crowd, displayed extra-ordinary stamina and energy as they hassled and harried Italy at every turn. Hiddink again made bold substitutions bringing on three extra attacking players. Eventually in the 88th minute, Seol Ki-Hyeon latched onto a Christian Panucci error to slam the loose ball into the right-hand bottom corner for a last-gasp equaliser that set up the grandstand finish. However, it was the name Ahn Jung-Hwan that will forever live in the memory of Korean folklore with his sudden death sensational winner 3-minutes before a penalty shootout rising above Maldini before a turn and swing of the head glanced the ball past Buffon for a golden winner and condemning Italy - powerless to prevent the ghosts of history returning to haunt them. The Korean striker had gone from villain-to-hero and had recovered from his 5th minute penalty miss as Italy were poised to return from Japan to the sort of tomato-led reception that greeted the class of 66s humiliation, who were eliminated, of course, by North Korea. The bitterness of defeat for the Italians was for all to see and did not take defeat with good grace aggrieved at two decisions they felt had deprived them of victory. Damiano Tommasi was ruled marginally offside when through on goal before golden boy Francesco Totti, 13 minutes into extra-time received a second yellow card for apparently diving in the area; it looked harsh and more like a tumble as a vain appeal for a penalty to Ecuadorian referee Byron Moreno, to become an unpopular and figure of hate in Italy, sealed his fate. Perugia, Ahn's Italian employers, through colourful chief Luciano Gaucci, sacked him immediately for his act of treason, saying: "That gentleman will never set foot in Perugia again. He was a phenomenon only against Italy, and I have no intention of paying a salary to someone who has ruined Italian football."

Reaching the last 16 had become the yardstick by which Koreans were to measure the success of its World Cup campaign, but now they could dream on further. Over a million people poured out onto the streets of Seoul alone, but it was not long before more face-paint and fireworks were required - again, in some part, thanks to a benevolent official. All buses, planes and trains

to Gwanju from just about any destination south of the demilitarised zone had been booked within 24 hours of the Koreans seeing off Italy as it was left to them to fly the region's flag.

A mouth-watering contest between two of football's most imperious nations, Brazil and England, awaited a 47,436 crowd in the city of Shizouka, traditionally Japan's most soccer mad city. After seeing who were considered their biggest rivals, France and Argentina, both exit, the winner of today's game had a window of opportunity in its quest for World Cup glory - should of course they win today. The individual match ups were equally intriguing as the finals 'best attack pitted against the tightest defence.' Early English pressure forced the Brazilian defence into an all familiar defensive mistake, this following a long speculative ball 'a gift' for Michael Owen pouncing on a rebound off the thigh off Lucio. He delayed and then subtly lifted the ball past a deceived Marcos. Three minutes into first-half injury time, Beckham jumped out of a challenge, Rivaldo and Ronaldinho (running at high speed through a defensive unit that had been up until then well-marshalled by Campbell-Ferdinand) combined drawing Ashley Cole out of position with Rivaldo finishing the exquisite move with a precise shot past Seaman. England never seemingly recovered from that setback as the South Americans showed they would want it more. A tired looking England, though having a man advantage from the 57th minute, failed to conjure the spirit and tempo to take advantage. The game brought one to the fore and attention of the world and another to his perilous end; Brazil's Ronaldinho against England's David Seaman. The Brazilian was to see the speculative free-kick effort 30-yards-out, seemingly too far and at an angle too acute for a direct shot, sail, soar and dip over a badly positioned Englishman, no more than 3-yards-out, and high into the net just under the crossbar. Whether he meant it or not, only he knew? England had gone from being in control and a goal up to chasing the game. Though Ronaldinho had left the field, harshly dismissed by the Mexican referee with still half-an-hour left, for a high tackle on Danny Mills, his team (comfortable in possession, passing the ball with ease and confidence) survived as unemotional England, unable to use the numerical advantage and bowed out with barely a whimper an anti-climactic end to the quarter-final - Eriksson to sit dumb on the bench, devoid of ideas.

## PART SIX

### A CUP OF NATIONS: 2004

### CLASH OF THE TITANS

South America could not have asked for a greater pairing for its COPA final - the continent prepared for its own version of THE CLASH OF THE TITANS, Argentina versus Brazil; a deadly rivalry that bordered on the boundaries of pure hate for each other.

It could not have ended in a more dramatic fashion, high in the mountains of Peru's capital Lima.

Argentina could have been forgiven for thinking the game had been won, especially after Cesar Delgado had put them ahead with so little time remaining. Their superiority had been so great that they looked set for their first major honour since back-to-back COPA victories in 91 and 93. However, Adriano's last gasp, last second equaliser on the spin finished with a shot left the seeming victors in a state of shock, leaving them in a sleepwalk nightmare and totally unprepared psychologically for any penalty shoot-out with its most competitive neighbour.

Form at the group stage had seen glimpses of brilliance, skill, awesome finishing power but unlikely defeats for both finalists. However, a feature for Brazil throughout was how they consistently scored important goals at vital moments too frequently to write it off as luck - proof of character and immense belief. It had been the second occasion that Brazil had pulled themselves level in the tie; Luisao had equalised Kily Gonzlalez's opener 24 minutes earlier.

In June the nations had contested a World Cup qualifier in Belo Horizonte, and despite Argentina dictating play they were crushed by a treble of penalties from Ronaldo - a mesmerising super show.

Brazil, the kings of the global game, certainly did not play the football of dreams of some of its predecessors. There were few intricate moves, little creation of space, no artistic elaboration with the purists disappointed maybe with the lack of magic. They were strong, efficient and made of sterner stuff in many ways as physical preparation seemed an important part in its successes now and had taken on a higher significance; perhaps at the cost of traditional values, a sign by some of Brazil losing in identity. They had shown the ominous strength in depth that would put them good shape in the build-up to Germany 2006.

For Argentina, it was a triumph for the philosophy of Bielsa; the style wonderful to watch, but lacking somewhat the knockout punch in attack, especially in the final. New talented players such as Boca Junior's Carlos Tevez came through and were sure to add to his 2-appearances before the tournament and become a regular feature in years to come. There was the individual brilliance, the constant pressure on the opposition and precision passing at speed that culminated in a high quantity and quality of goals with outstanding individual strikes. There were also fine memorable collective moves such as the four-man move rounded off by Luis Gonzalez in the game with Colombia, not to forget the slalom dribbles of Carlos Tevez, and his clever free-kicks.



Brazil's passage to this July 25th Lima meeting could afford a last day group defeat at the hands of Paraguay 2-1, and relegation into a 2nd position. The world champs had found it extremely hard to deal with the conditions at Arequipa, 2,300 metres above sea level. Altitude had become a kind of trauma for Brazil, unable to find the correct rhythm due to the effects of playing at that atmosphere which took away the lung power that has become increasingly important to their style of play.

They started off slowly against Chile and survived a penalty miss by its opponents before Luis Fabiano's last minute opening goal brought victory. In a second match with Costa Rica they yet again survived another penalty miss in another game in which they looked troubled, only for Alex and Adriano, to conjure his first goal, and open the floodgates; Costa Rica seeing itself swamped in a glut of 3-goals from sharp-shooter Adriano - 2 years after a 5-2 meeting in a Group C World Cup duel.

Argentina, with a record identical to that of Brazil's, suffered defeat once in its second game against Mexico. Ecuador had been annihilated 6-1 in Chiclayo with Saviola helping himself to a sublime treble - seemingly marking his coming as Argentina's leading striker. After failing to impress in the Mexico defeat he picked up an injury and took no further part in the knockout stages. A crucial final ten minute 2-goal spree ensured a 4-2 victory over Uruguay in the group's final game, this after Argentina did not look probable winners at 2-2; not until the Uruguayan dismissal following an over-zealous challenge.

As the competition headed back to Lima the consensus was that Argentina faced a very difficult semi-final (against Colombia) while Brazil's task was easy in comparison against Uruguay; quite the reverse as Argentina's splendid form continued with current holders and 2001 winners Colombia swept by three goals in a crushing Lima encounter. They had produced one of their most convincing performances of the post-Maradona era; Tevez's free-kick put them ahead, Gonzalez got the second rounding off a memorable move with Sorin finishing it on 80 minutes.

Colombia coach Rueda admitted that his side never had the ball and had not put any kind of pressure on Argentina.

The second semi-final was seen as a triumph for Uruguayan coach Jorge Fossati, this despite losing on penalties. The only one-way attack Brazil policy worked to a tee as Uruguay, taking risks with its offside trap, applied constant early pressure, continually hitting the space behind Brazil's full-backs.

Uruguay, far superior in the first-half, were the first to strike on 22 minutes, Marcelo Sosa's weak header somehow evading keeper Julio Cesar. It should have been two; instead Dario Silva from 2-yards-out blasted against the bar for one of the all-time great misses.

Adriano equalised straight after the restart when the offside trap let Uruguay down, this as they began to tire allowing Alex more room to slip passes to his strikers. Brazil would be largely on top for second-half, though either could have snatched a winner. So the competitions first shootout ensued, and Brazil, the 5-3 winners over the joint 14-times winners. They had been seen practising penalties at training and took nothing for granted - test of technique and nerve.

The quarter-finals had seen match ups for Argentina with hosts Peru and for Brazil against the conquerors of Argentina at the group stage, Mexico.



Peru's plan to face Argentina (or Brazil) in the final came unstuck and earlier than had been hoped due to a failure to win its group. The Peruvian players were very unhappy about tabloid papers having suggested they had been involved in drinking sessions; and coach Autori unwisely decided not to speak to the entire media. He was down to one striker with Claudio Pizarro and Flavio Maestri out injured, while Jefferson Farfan was suspended.

Facing the Argies in Chiclayo, Peru's play had been shaped by a lack of attacking options. They defended sufficiently well without the personnel to go gung-ho as in the first-stage, with Argentina largely restricted in a tight and tense game of few chances. Argentine substitute Carlos Tevez, with almost his first touch, curled over the wall (for the winner) and in. Peru's Nolberto Solano hit the bar with one free-kick, and then in injury time with the entire nation holding its breath, stuck another a yard too high - the hosts were gone.

And Brazil the next day, in total contrast, confounded predictions of an even match by producing its finest and most blistering performance brushing aside Mexico 4-0, quiet emphatically. Brazil were awarded a dubious penalty, heavily contested by Mexico and justified in their complaints. Relishing the escape from altitude, Brazilian superiority was never in doubt as they played with a pace, power and dynamism with Adriano scorer of 2-goals in unstoppable form.

Colombia had cruised past Costa Rica 2-0 in Trujillo, while in the other an exhilarating contest in Tacna, Uruguay came back from a goal down to beat Paraguay 3-1, despite being a man down. The pendulum seemed to have swung Paraguay's way when Gustavo Varela was dismissed just after the hour with the score at one-one. Dario Silva put Uruguay ahead with the aid of a cruel deflection on 65 minutes, and made the semi-final place secure with another goal in injury time. Paraguay seemed to make a tactical error by employing the same system that had worked to perfection against Brazil - three centre backs when a back four would have worked far better against Uruguay's three strikers. Paraguay was unlucky not to have won at least one penalty, and Uruguay keeper Mario Sebastian Viera had made an inspired debut.

For the final in the Peruvian capital, Argentine coach Marcelo Bielsa selected an extra defender and Argentina, not Brazil played most of the football, the possession, the fantasy, weaving pretty patterns with their high tempo passing-move game. Unfortunately lacking the punch needed to knock out their opponents; an Adriano, the saviour of the normal period, and converter of his sides first penalty in the shoot-out. The man nicknamed the 'emperor' was now an awesome alternative to Ronaldo and had made the most decisive individual contribution to the tournament, displaying great power and skill. There hadn't been a lot of interplay between Luis Fabiano and Adriano with one at times left with the impression that the strikers were competing against each other for the right to a place alongside Ronaldo 'a man' that had a guaranteed place in the team.

Goalkeeper Julio Cesar, a hero in the semi-final penalty shoot win over Uruguay again made an important save to deny Luis Gonzalez, denying Argentina the chance to taking complete control. When Heinze missed Argentina's fourth spot kick Juan stepped up to give Brazil a 4-2 victory and its seventh COPA title.

Alex was supposed to be playmaker and had great intelligence and good left foot, but he lacked strength and speed, seemingly needing to be surrounded with pace, and the constant support of full backs and a dynamic midfield. He had been unable to impose on the final as Mascherano did not let him have a kick.



## PART SIX A CUP OF NATIONS THE NORTHERN GIANTS

West Africa's dominance of the Nations cup had come to its end, Cameroon the champions of 2000 and 2002 were no more (dispelled by fellow West Africans in a quarter-final duel) as Africa was to see the shifting of power from the west to the great north of the continent. A nation from sub-sahara would have the opportunity to re-claim the coveted crown some six years after Egypt last claimed the prize in Burkina Faso 1998, and Algeria in 1990. The giants from the region had made a comeback and had taken over for this 24th edition; the hosts, the Carthage Eagles of Tunisia to line-up against its neighbours from Morocco, the Atlas Lions, last crowned champs in 1976 at the Tunis stadium for the first ever all-North African final.

Tunisia had sought to successfully ride a tidal wave of expectation and optimism as they searched for their first African nations triumph; they were the only major North Africans yet to win the continents big prize and were hosting the tournament for a third time. The last occasion exactly 10 years ago proved to be a disaster after they lost their opening match against minnows Mali - they sacked their coach and were eliminated before the second stage.

There was nervous anticipation before the finals started, expectations high given the resources ploughed into the side with pressure on Tunisia to finally deliver an African nations victory immense. Roger Lemerre, the high profile former France coach, had been roped in to conduct the campaign and the preparation which was a model of professionalism and thoroughness. Undeterred by history he made many changes during his short reign, but most gradual and measured as he took steps to building a side opponents would find hard to beat. He chased a unique distinction of his own of successive continental championship wins on different continents - it would be a first after winning Euro 2000, with France. He warned Tunisians not to expect a comfortable ride in the group stage, recalling what happened to France at 2002. The last Frenchman to coach the side, Henri Michel, was sacked after Tunisia's poor performance in Mali at the 2002 African Cup of Nations. Slim Benachour was expected to provide the creativity while recently naturalised Brazilian Francileudo dos Santos the goals.

The tournament had a fresher look about it beforehand, new faces, but ultimately the older faces had been expected to dominate the three-week event with primary focus on Cameroon, Nigeria and Senegal - the three favourites.

Ivory Coast and Ghana failed to qualify and could have expected to have been among the serious contenders.

Cameroon and Egypt with four wins had the opportunity to extend the record of all-time African Nations Cup wins to an unprecedented five.

The Indomitable Lions had been seen as the bright image of African football ever since the Roger Milla-led assault on glory at 90 finals of Italy; the colourful kit, flowing dreadlocks, cavalier defence and pacey attack that make them eminently watchable - these days with an arrogance, fuelled by a strong belief and refusal to be intimidated by major powers in world football. Commonly agreed that they was the continents No.1 team they were also chasing a

unique feat of victory in three successive African Nations Cups - Lagos 2000, Bamako 2002; achieved after penalty shootouts.

Cameroon's qualification as holders left them without much competitive match practice, limited to a series of friendlies and training camps under coach Schafer. The death of Marc Vivien Foe, at the Confederations cup the previous June, had robbed the side of a midfield engine. Patrick Mboma returned after being ignored for a year and was originally left out of Winfried Shafer's squad but was recalled after President Paul Biya intervened. He has had his differences with the national association in the past and refused to play in the Confederations cup last June citing poor administration of the team. The former African footballer of year was expected to form a potent partnership with Samuel Eto'o.

Mboma made his debut for the Indomitable Lions in 1994 and became a key figure, helping his side to two cup of Nations wins in 2000 and 2002 and an Olympic gold medal also in 2000. The 34-year-old had scored 30 goals in his 57 appearances for the national team. There were concerns over eccentricity of Rigobert Song in a defence without Lauren, who brought a premature end to his international career as stalwarts Raymond Kalla and Pierre Wome remained.

Egypt were the last North African winners in Burkina Faso 98; comfortable 2-0 victory over South Africa. They had the most experienced side on view, also the oldest in a solid if not awe-inspiring team. Though they had won it 4-times, the same number as Cameroon and Ghana, no side could match their record since this was their 19th nations tournament appearance, the most of any country.

Coach Salah kept faith with old guard, counting on the experience of around five players from the last triumph, but looked to Ahmed 'Mido' Hossam for inspiration. The team scored 13 goals in last two qualifiers after a shock defeat by Madagascar. Senegal was runners-up at the last event and six matches later reached the World Cup quarter-finals. Eighteen months later half of the squad returned but without the magnetic personality of coach Bruno Metsu, who did much to mould the side into a winning combination. His successor Stephan Guy came from the top structure of the French federation, but had been unable to emerge from the shadow of his predecessor and had not got the spark going during a period far from comfortable for the Lions of Teranga. The form of Diouf and Camara had been indifferent, while Fadiga's absence because of a potentially life threatening heart defect was a major blow - he had been the driving force at the last nations finals assault. Gone was Senegal's surprise element, since the core of the World Cup team was still in place, despite qualification being easy.

Nigeria, under enormous pressure to succeed, had wanted to dispense with the services of Christian Chukwu in the months leading up to the finals, but changed their mind after the choice of Bryan Robson drew much criticism. Chukwu remained in the hot seat, only after having fought long and hard to stay, and he was one of three coaches at the finals that had won the nations cup as a player; captain of the victorious side of 1980. With all the talent at their disposal Nigeria had been expected to make a strong challenge but uncertainty over the coaching position, administrative incompetence and inconsistent team selections (a squad subject to intense speculation) could become a thorn in their challenge. Okocha returned to the county where he first emerged as an international star a decade ago, and was the only remaining member of the Nigeria team that won the nations cup in 94, the last time the Super

Eagles were winners.

Mali's progress to the last Nations cup semi had much to do with their hosting the event, but they had the ability to reach the knockout phase and had reached at least the semi-finals in all their three previous finals appearances of 72, 94, and 2002. There had been two coaching changes since 2002, but most of the best players remained. Spurs's French striker, Frederic Kanoute, after stating that he wanted to play for the country of his father's birth, caused a row with club, desperate for him to stay to help their battle to avoid relegation. Coach Henri Stambouli, no stranger to the African coaching circuit had replaced French compatriot Christian Dagler - who had steered them through qualifiers - shortly before finals got underway.

Since winning the African cup of Nations at their first attempt on home soil in 1996, South Africa's fortunes have been on a steady but gradual decline - having fallen behind the pace a great deal.

Reduced by a lack of forwards and having no strike force of note, Bafana Bafana, a team desperate of firepower, had been expected to struggle from their group. The club versus country battle led to a major rupture in South Africa's plans ahead for the finals. Coach Ephraim Mashaba's uncompromising attitude - backed by federation - had insisted on players attending a-finals training camp, promoting Fish to withdraw; Quinton Fortune already no contact with football association since the previous April while Bartlett and McCarthy announced their retirements last year - a group of players with 200 cap and 50 goals. The coach was promptly dismissed on the eve of the finals as April 'Styles' Phumo took charge of a team that he didn't choose.

South Africa had employed 10 coaches in the past eleven years; three of those coaches - namely, Clive Barker, who led the side to the 1996 title, Mozambique-born Carlos Quieroz and Ephraim 'Shakes' Mashaba - had all been sacked on the eve of major tournaments.

Benin, Rwanda and Zimbabwe would be making long awaited debuts, while Guinea and Kenya returned after a long time out of the limelight.

The 'Squirrels' of Benin had finished top of their qualifying group and proved to be quite an ambitious outfit in the last 2 years, despite having played no significant football because of suspension. The discovery of a host of new expatriate players also boosted the cause.

Rwanda's qualification was particularly poignant given less than a decade ago the tiny east African country was embroiled and torn apart in unprecedented bloodshed and brutal genocide that killed close to a million. The success of the national team has done much to heal divisions between the warring Hutu and Tutsi tribes, with Rwandan patriotism coming to the fore. Their shock defeat of 4-times winner Ghana in the final qualifiers was arguably the biggest upset in Nations cup history. It ended the almost automatic rite of passage of the Black stars and sent in their place a team of unknowns who until a decade ago barely played international football - Rwanda among the elite. The transformation has had much to do with the enthusiastic support of the game of state president Paul Kagame, who used government money to get the team going. Serb coach Ratomir Djukovic, who formerly worked with the Yugoslav federation, was brought in to develop the side and has surpassed even his own expectations in getting them this far. The team included only a handful of overseas-based players, mainly in Belgium.

Zimbabwe, a country on the brink of economic and political collapse, saw its team finally come good, qualifying for its first nations cup having sealed its place as best runner-up after

a stuttering campaign that saw them lose to Seychelles. Zimbabwe's ability to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat in its campaign has been well documented. Stout defence and Peter Ndlovu's huge influence upfield had been the key to their hopes in Tunisia. One still was not clear whether the administrative turmoil had been finally resolved or not, players had not been paid promised bonuses and match fees for months.

The 'Harambee Stars' of Kenya brought East African back into the continental footballing mainstream for the first-time since 1992, when they last made an appearance. Inspirational coach Jacob Mulee oversaw an impressive qualifying campaign, topping the group ahead of Togo. Off-field fighting and back-stabbing was what the team had to contend with as government and federation clashed - threatening to derail the campaign in the qualifiers. The coach also clashed with federation over the issue of overseas players.

There had not been too much ambition around the current Morocco team, with coach Badou Zaki preferring to talk about building a team capable of winning a place at the 2006 World Cup. After their early exits in 2000 and 2002, the country's confidence in the team was at an all-time low. Since Zaki took charge two years ago many fans were now looking at his young team as possible successors to the legendary side of the 1980s and restore the lost glory of the Atlas Lions. No side had been able to emulate the achievements or reach the standards set by former stars Mohammed Timoumi, Merry Krimau, Aziz Bouderbala and Zaki himself. A new look side was drawn from all over Europe, where Zaki spent much more time seeking out players with an emphasis on second generation Moroccans born abroad. This had brought the coach much criticism back home, where fans were angry at his exclusion of locally-based players. They made light work of the qualifying group - Sierra Leone, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea - dropping only 2 points in six games and without conceding a goal.

Burkina Faso, once unable to put a side together for Nations cup qualifiers, were now participating at a fifth successive finals. Only once had they progressed from the first round, during the era of Philippe Troussier that remains the glory period of Burkinabe football, when as host they rode a tidal wave of support. French coach Jean Paul Rabier was confident his side could qualify from group.

In the mid-1970s Guinea was a powerhouse of African football, though its time at the top did not last too long, they were low-key profile but still had talent and 'Syli Nationale' topped Group 2 and will fancy chances of progression under Frenchman Michel Dussuyer. Formerly known as Zaire (the leopards), the DR Congo had an identity change and, these days, were known as the Simbas (lions). Once the standard bearers of African football (robust, strong, highly motivated players), the country has been wrecked by civil strife and horrible atrocities in recent years. The chaotic nature of their football, particularly the administration and preparations, persisted, retarding the vast country ever living up to its enormous potential. A complete lack of money after decades of corruption meant the federation was dependant on the government; planning or keeping a consistent team was difficult and as always the Congolese scrambled to get everything ready at the last minute. Unheralded Englishman Mick Wadsworth was appointed just two months before kick-off, this as new players with Congolese connections were sought out from leagues of Europe to bolster the side. There was no disguising the loss of leading striker Shabani Nonda to a long term injury. With the Monaco man out the nation looked to Newcastle's striker Lomana Tresor Lua Lua for goalscoring inspiration.

Despite depressing conditions within the country, Algeria was a nation desperate to regain past glories. Algeria's image as a force to be reckoned with has progressively diminished during the 14 years since their only triumph under Rabah Saadane, back for a second spell as coach. He was less inclined to ignore local talent than his predecessor, Rabah Madjer, who coached the team at the last African nations. Algeria were one of the several countries actively seeking players born in Europe to African families to take advantage of the better coaching and footballing infrastructure that the players had been exposed to. There were doubts however about whether the squad had enough strength to get out the tough group.

## PART SIX A CUP OF NATIONS MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

As it was at the beginning, so it was to be at the end; the hosts shocked and tearful and the Greeks left in raptures. It saw the rise of the smaller nation, to the detriment of the big guns, just as it had at the 2002 World Cup.

Not even from the deepest realms or archives of Greek mythology and folklore could one have invented let alone forecast of what lay in store at the 2004 European championship in Portugal. The 80/1 rank outsiders - with no previous tournament pedigree - in a space of three weeks from virtual no-hopers, had become the **KINGS** of European Football in a modern day version of **MISSION IMPOSSIBLE**; completed in a manner that only one could describe as done with tactical acumen, good organisation, team strength, fitness, mental strength and discipline, and not the familiar attributes associated with Champions, namely, great technique, class or individual brilliance. But it had been a highly efficient, effective, well-oiled, and well-programmed machine, something the continents best could not come to terms with. This magnificent feat achieved with a tireless band of footballers considered not good enough for Roma, Sheffield Utd, and Werder Bremen, comprised of honest hardworking, industrious players, but no world-beaters and no stars of any great note.

The man behind it all, the greatest upset in the history of the international game was a German, an authoritarian, A **WORLD-CLASS COACH**, Otto Rehhagel an astute tactician that mastered-marshalled the downfall of the European football hierarchy and had taken Greece to the European summit and become the first foreign coach to win this crown at a finals. He was largely thought by most Greeks to be after one last pay cheque before retiring. More remarkable was the fact that they had never achieved a solitary victory in tournament history - well not until now. Ahead of the tournament Greece's record in international competition was poor to say the least, in fact their last outing, at the 1994 World Cup, was an unmitigated disaster as they lost all three games, conceding 10 goals and scoring none. From European qualifying Group 6 they had even lost its two opening games, until a remarkable run of six consecutive victories including its best result (at the time) of all-time a 1-0 win in Spain; enabled them to topple their group with just eight goals in eight games.

They had a cohesive system which no one ever lacked support whether falling back or pushing forward scoring more than most had predicted. But it was its defence and midfield organisation that took them to its first ever major triumph. Though, in eyes of most, the achievement was

achieved in the most mundane of ways with tactics that were among the most negative, as only Latvia showed less attacking ambition than Greece. As the tournament progressed pundits and fans were left reeling as they tried to grasp time and again that Greece had somehow managed to traverse the considerable footballing obstacles before them.

They beat the hosts twice, they held group favourites Spain, they lost a match that did not matter (Russia), they knocked the holders and favourites (France) and they toppled the best-balanced footballing outfit Czech Republic. Any team who can do that deserved to be crowned champions. Greece marked the year of the Athens Olympics with a sporting achievement that may be remembered longer than whatever the games had brought the nation.

The climatic game was in Lisbon, 62,865 attended as history beckoned for the Portuguese and its golden generation. Portugal had the advantage of being the host nation and, unlike their Greek counterparts, had a side boasting some of European football's most gifted players; from the ageing, yet still supreme Luis Figo, to the exciting youngster Cristiano Ronaldo - intent on claiming their due; the onus was on them as the Greeks would be more than delighted to concede possession. Ahead of the final there were concerns that the naturally attacking and expressive Portuguese game would be stymied by Greece, who would attempt to suffocate the game.

Greece were without the suspended Giorgis Karagounis, as Figo was earning his record equalling 110th cap, Theo Zagorakis was also making his, a record equalling 95th cap. It was Portugal, who had hardly dared hope they would be there, against Greece, who had never dared to imagine it.

As always, the Greeks were well-organised, and worked hard, the superb Georgios Seitaridis, Konstantinos Katsouranis, Traianos Dellas and Angelos Haristeads - the man who headed home the game's only goal - typified the work ethic instilled by Rehnhagel, who to his eternal credit managed to create an exceptionally efficient team, far greater than the sum of its technically-limited parts. The goal arrived on 57 minutes, Haristeads rose high above Jorge Andrade to score his third goal of the finals, this from Basinas's arrowed corner to the edge of the 6-yard box. It had been a virtual carbon-copy goal of the semi-final against the Czechs. The remainder was largely about Portuguese desperation, the host side using a lone striker - and hopelessly ineffective one, Pauleta. Greece balanced the history books with its win in 12 games - four wins each and four draws against Portugal who could only blame themselves for their failure. Deco, Figo and Ronaldo froze, much as they had done on the opening day, and Greece capitalised on their stage fright.

It had started on June 10th at the new magnificent home stadium of FC Porto in which Greece were supposed to be nothing but cannon-fodder for the expectant hosts Portugal, and the third favourites, led by the so-called golden generation of Figo, Rui Costa and Fernando Couto. Without the stars of the Champions league, Scolari preferring the veterans, it was to be a mistake-ridden performance with the nervous, jittery and rattled home side all at sea. They looked like a team that had played friendlies for two years and allowed the defence-minded visitors - who could not believe their luck - to take advantage; with a seventh minute goal following a mistake from Paulo Ferreira, hailed as Europe's finest full-back, gifting the ball for Giorgis Karagounis to strike low past the outstretched Ricardo. Then early in the second-half Angelos Basinas converted a spot-kick after Ronaldo, who had lost the ball, tripped Seitaridis -

the best right-back at the finals by a long way. Half-time substitutes Deco and Ronaldo, despite the added threat could not save the home team. So as the two sets of players left the pitch at the Estadio do Drago on June 10, it was a shock of seismic proportions that Portugal did so as losers after a 2-1 humbling. After falling behind to Morientees's opener and staring defeat in the face (Raul somehow headed inexplicably wide when Greece's defeat should have been confirmed) Greece rallied back and caught Spain unguarded; with an equaliser from Angelos Haristeadas, which was not entirely deserved, was not entirely unexpected. The Greek bandwagon, carefully steered by Otto Rehhagel, rolled onto an improbable quarter-final despite a defeat to Russia, who had already been knocked out after two games. Zisis Vryzas's goal was to prove crucial in sending his team forward by the virtue of scoring more goals than Spain, with whom they were tied on points, head-to-head record and goal difference. Vassilis Tsiartas summed it up when saying: "We knocked on the door of hell; no one was there." Finding France a shadow of its great self, Greece, who set out to contain, were ready for the challenge. Missing Viera, broken-arm victim Willy Sagnol, France played without conviction, no feeling nor effort and without a shot on target in the entire first-half. Greece pressed hard in midfield, sat back soaking up pressure with far more space, time and possession than they could have imagined. In one of its carefully planned attacks would they counter with a killer blow - French defensive weaknesses seen in previous matches to make a re-appearance. Haristeadas was left unmarked to head past Barthez from Zagorakis's - the driving force and captain - delivery. The fairytale continued following a 'silver goal' victory over favourites and snuffed out Czech Republic. In extra-time, the Greeks had finally come out to play, after having defended to the death with a formation designed to stifle the attacking qualities of Czechs. Traianos Dellas headed in the goal with just seconds of the first 15 minutes left. There was no time to restart as Czech players fell to the ground in despair - clever tactical approach from Greece. A fairytale rematch beckoned with hosts Portugal as Greece added the scalp of the tournaments best footballing side. They had completed an unprecedented treble of victories over the hosts Portugal, holders France and now the favourites, the Czechs.

Only three managers, Rudi Voller, Giovanni Trapattoni and Kobi Kuhn, when asked to predict a surprise team, gave them any hope.

If the Greeks were rank outsiders then by contrast the Portuguese were amongst the very favourites. They were coached by the much-vaunted Brazilian Felipe 'Big Phil' Scolari, who amongst other successes, had won South America's Libertadores Cup with two different Brazilian clubs and in 2002 coached Brazil to their fifth World Cup victory. From the ashes of defeat in its opening game - perhaps a blessing in disguise as its under-performing veterans Rui Costa and Fernando Couto were replaced by Porto pair Deco and Ricardo Carvalho, the outstanding defender of finals - Portugal needed to dispel of Russia. They were in danger of becoming only the second European championship host, after Belgium in 2000, to fail to reach the quarter-finals. When they lost to outsiders Greece in Oporto coach Scolari admitted that the team faced an uphill struggle.

A game-of-death clash (with badly frayed nerves) in Lisbon four days later against Russia determined whether its participation would continue. It did with a much needed morale-boost ending Russia's own involvement before another-do-or-die clash, this time with Spain at the same stadium. Portugal had never beaten the Spanish in a competitive match, and it was 23 years since their last friendly victory over its neighbours. There was a ferocious atmosphere

as the hosts, more ambitious and determined turned on the fighting spirit and performance, Cristiano Ronaldo - to outshine his senior Figo largely in tournament - was to make his first start in a match of few chances but entertaining football charged with nervous energy. A disaster for Portugal, and the for the tournament was averted when substitute Nuno Gomez on 57 minute dispatched the ball low past Casillas condemning the favoured Spanish of Raul fame to an early exit and tumbling out of the competition, and it was unfancied Greece, who took second place. League holders Porto provided the spine of the team in the second and third games, with Costinha and Maniche providing a steel edge to midfield that had been lacking previously, the new players adding movement and pace.

A quarter-final clash with the English at Lisbon's magnificent Estadio da Luz proved emotional, nerve-jangling, heart stopping as well as dramatic with a bit of controversy - a sense of injustice for the visitors. After surviving a contentiously ruled out goal from Solomon Campbell in the final minute of regular time - apparently for a John Terry challenge on the keeper - Portugal won football's version of Russian roulette in a never-to-be forgotten penalty shoot-out. Trailing to Michael Owen's 3rd minute opportunistic strike - a swivelling flick home - the hosts had only drawn level through Helder Postiga's header (ridiculed at Tottenham) with 10 minutes remaining; after Scolari had taken the brave decision to take off the under-performing Luis figo with the striker - a questionable choice at time. It had been Portugal's sixth goal, and five had been scored by subs. And in extra-time, Lampard turned sharply before shooting low to equalise Rui Costa's stunner. Beckham wildly skied the ball over for the first - repeating his dreadful miss against Turkey in the qualifiers by scuffing sky-high - and Vassell did no better for the crucial sudden death kick leaving the unsung goalkeeper of Sporting Lisbon Ricardo to blast the decisive penalty, the 14th kick hard and low past the much-maligned James for an end to an emotionally-draining contest. Having aroused from the slumbers, a semi-final meeting with the Dutch for a place in its own final was next on the agenda. Interestingly, ever since France triumphed on home soil in 1984 the trend had been for the hosts to fall at the semi-final stage - Germany 88, Sweden 92, England 96, and Holland in 2000. Not so Portugal, the momentum that had been building through the tournament carried them past Holland and through into their first final at a senior major tournament. This on a date that 2 years earlier coach Scolari had led Brazil to triumph at the World Cup, significantly, it was 13 years also to the day that Portugal had won under 20 world youth cup - Luis Figo, Rui Costa fame. Figo the outstanding player of the night had watched his side's quarter-final victory from the isolation of the dressing room. Cristiano Ronaldo rose unmarked to power home Deco's corner before Van Nistelrooy thought he had equalised, but was ruled offside. Maniche all-action-all-rounder and a star of finals then collected Deco's short corner ran unchallenged before blasting an unstoppable shot just inside far post. Looking dead and buried Holland got a slice of luck when Jorge Andrade sent the ball looping over Ricardo for an own goal. They held on despite desperate efforts from Holland, who threw on an extra striker Pierre van Hooijdonk. Then it was its bogey team Greece as Portugal failed to emulate Spain (1964), Italy (1968) and France (1984) by winning as host. On the whole they had performed credibly, this considering they had been the first host nation to lose an opening tie.



## PART SEVEN

### THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

#### WORLD CUP 2006

Four years following its ignominious, damaging and crushing defeat to co-host South Korea at the second stage of World Cup finals and the debacle that followed (accusations of cheating, conspiracy theories and biasedness) Italy stood on the threshold of a fourth World Cup finals triumph; unprecedented for any European nation, even greater than that of host nation Germany - A penalty kick away.

This was amidst a major scandal within the national game with four clubs and 26 individuals to stand trial on charges of sporting fraud relating to alleged match fixing. Thirteen of Italy's 23-man World Cup squad played for the four clubs on trial. Comparisons with 1982 were inevitable, as the Azzurri rose above the unfolding match-fixing scandal back home to scale new heights - any investigation clearly did not inhibit the team's progress on the pitch as the squad-players understandably adopted a siege mentality, in regard to happenings back home.

Standing in the way of this history was French goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, as the person that had glory within his sight was left-back Fabio Grosso.

Italy displayed a confidence in the shoot-out they had not displayed in painful exits from the 1990, 1994 and 1998 tournaments with a Frenchman plying his trade in Serie A, David Trezeguet, missing the key spot-kick, France's second that flew up past Juventus clubmate Gigi Buffon and ricocheted off the crossbar and away; the only one of eight missed, and had left the Azurri with one remaining kick and 4-3 ahead. Nemesis thus caught up with Trezeguet: he had scored one of the penalties with which France beat Italy in the 1998 quarter-finals and had scored the golden goal that beat Italy in Euro 2000 final. Sagnol had already completed his nations final spot kick in the spectacular arena of Berlin's Olympic stadium.

It seemed an eternity since Italy - only conceding its second goal - had fallen behind for the first time and to Zinedine Zidane's outrageously cheeky chipped 7th minute audacious penalty spot kick, sending the world's best keeper, Gianluigi Buffon, the wrong way before clipping the underside of bar and bouncing just behind the goalline. The effort was since equalised by Marco Materazzi's powering header from Andrea Pirlo's corner just 12 minutes later - the 147th goal of the finals. The Italian defender, only playing at centre-half because Alessandro Nesta had succumbed to injury, had himself righted his wrong after conceding the penalty (for Zidane's goal) by tripping Florent Malouda after a clumsy intended interception. It had been an anti-climactic finish to a tense, eventful and dramatic contest (the sides locked at 1-1) in which a fully-strength Italy or France had appeared like finalists after the first round - stumbling through the groups. The contest descended into a scruffy and gloomy chess match between two sides who offered only the tactical shapes and shifts to cancel one another out and lack the nerve for the grand occasion - with it no surprise that a shoot-out was the final outcome. Italy had faded physically in the second-half and were looking towards a penalty shoot conclusion. France made most of the running, showing movement, spirit and creativity - but Italy stood firm and



did not concede, showing a determination and conviction to survive a penalty shootout; Fabio Canavaro immense in defence, Pirlo and Gennaro Gattuso dynamic in midfield.

As it turned out, the pendulum got swung by perhaps the World Cup's most incendiary moment, as the French suffered the dismissal of its super talisman and a rejuvenated Zidane who, in the tragic final moments of a brilliant career, inexplicably in the style of a charging bull head-butted Italian defender and goalscorer Materazzi, sinking-plunging his forehead deeply into the chest of the defender, who crashed to the floor, this following a 110th minute altercation. The world looked on in confusion only for TV replays to show that the Frenchman had knocked the Italian from his feet, and that this was no dive in a tournament besmirched by play-acting.

Zidane had continued to push for an opening but began to be frustrated by the flagging efforts of both his team-mates and his own body. Then suddenly, off the ball, the Frenchman retaliated to provocation with Argentine referee Horacio Elizondo, on the evidence of the fourth official Luis Medina Cantalejo, left with little choice on a stage where one of the greatest players of his generation should have bowed out in a blaze of glory instead he was to depart humiliated, in tears and ignominy, his image (to some) tarnished by his hot-headed and shocking antics-actions, memories of the final forever blighted by the incident. Zidane, whose quiet demeanour always shadowed a hot temper, left the field wordlessly, passing the trophy with a rueful glance and sloping into football history. He had already done enough to earn the golden ball award as the tournaments best player. There were a record-breaking 345 yellow cards and 28 red cards issued at these finals.

France, who had already substituted the somewhat misused lone striker Thierry Henry, its most impressive player of the final, thus would miss their two finest exponents for the shootout.

Italy's appearance in this final seemed the more remarkable considering its performance at the most recent major tournaments of 2002 and Euro 2004, suffering humiliating first round eliminations, Italians say, contrived by Nordic nations, Sweden and Denmark conveniently drawing 2-2.

France would fair no better since the 2000 triumph over the Italians in Rotterdam. Humiliation at the 2002 World Cup of Japan/Korea was followed by a lacklustre performance in 2004 ultimately leading to a premature exit at the hands of eventual winners Greece. Zizou duly announced his retirement, only to be persuaded to return by a mysterious "voice in the night" - later revealed to have been his brother's. Its performance in the original qualifying section saw them fail to defeat Israel (twice), Switzerland (twice), and Republic of Ireland (on one occasion).

Historically and notoriously slow starters Italy broke with tradition with a masterful opening display in Hanover, its tournament experience the telling factor in taming the spirited debutantes from Africa, Ghana. Its performance was ultra-professional and solid before the decisive and superior finishing in attack was to cut through an outfit that lacked the cutting edge possessed by its European opponent. Pirlo's brilliant goal settled the nerves five minutes off half-time before Samuel Kuffour's under-hit back pass was finished off by substitute Vincenzo Iaquinta. An eventful and controversial topsy-turvy duel followed with the USA, rich in incident but poor in quality ending in a hard fought share of the spoils. Daniele De Rossi for elbowing United States striker Brian McBride picked up a four game ban. Czech Republic, still shell-shocked



by the Ghana loss and fighting for its own survival wouldn't find the Azzuri, despite dropping Luca Toni, in any charitable mood, fully taking advantage of a Czech side weakened by injuries and suspensions; Italy duly winning 2-0. A second round victory over the courageous plucky Aussies owed more to fortune than any craft and a dive from Grosso (falling over a legitimate challenge) to win the late penalty after facing extra-time; Ten-man Italy showed organisation and spirit following the controversial dismissal of Materazzi. Substitute Francesco Totti expertly dispatched the gift past Schwarzer as Italy gained its revenge for a painful loss to Guus Hiddink's South Korea at same stage four years earlier in 2002. Ukraine would be bowled over by a 2-goal spree in a 10-minute second-half spell, Luca Toni (though not in Paolo Rossi mould) adding to Zambrotta's opener on 6 minutes. It was all too easy as bar a spell early in second-half Blokhin's side was never in the game, Italy displaying attacking ambitions considered alien by some of their previous teams. The confrontation with host Germany in Dortmund promised to be a contest of a totally different kind in front of 60,000 mostly partisan fans now rapt by a belief of ultimate victory with the chant "Berlin, Berlin, wir fahren nach Berlin (we're going to Berlin)" now sung in full voice. The German side were unlike so many of its predecessors in so many ways. Though not the classic of the 1970 semi-final (Italy 4-3 victors a.e.t) it proved a tense ferocious-fast-paced hard fought battle and looked to be heading towards a penalties shoot out conclusion. That was until left back Fabio Grosso on 119 minutes stationed on the edge of the area curled and executed exquisitely past Germany's floundering keeper Lehmann. A minute later Italy, who had edged the balance of play, broke clear with a masterful counter-attack with Del Piero putting the finishing touch to end the dream of 80,000,000 populated Germany and send the small band of Italian fans into raptures. The snap had gone out of Germany's legs as the emotional weight of domestic expectation took its toll - tearful players collapsed to the ground. Lippi's positive substitutions were to prove vital as Germany's suffered its first defeat in Dortmund after having played there 13 times.



Reaching the final was remarkable and totally unexpected for France with the turnaround in fortunes and brilliance of Zinedine Zidane (whom his team over-depended on) unlikely as it had been brilliant, written off by so many people as being too old too slow. Domenech faced heavy criticism for sticking with the ageing Zidane with his berators insisting that his languid style inhibited French moves. Only the recall of the veterans edged France through the qualifying campaign and kept Domenech in his job. Frank Ribery added a new dimension to the attacking armoury, and Henry finally raised his game when it mattered - he had a recent tendency to under-perform at the highest level. They were particularly strong at the back, with central defender Lilian Thuram immense as were Claude Makelele and combative Patrick Viera powerful influences in midfield.

France's progress to the last 16 had been anything but spectacular or the finished product, lack of finesse, highlighted by traditional French weaknesses, performances distinctly underwhelming, and managed only poor displays in draws against Switzerland and South Korea. The drab 0-0 draw with Swiss meant France had equalled the World Cup record of going four games without a goal, though lone front-runner Henry ended the drought against South Korea. But a late equaliser by the Koreans meant France had to beat Togo by two clear goals to make sure of progress. Zidane picked up a booking in both, meaning he had to sit out the final game against Togo on June 23, his 34th birthday. France had to win, but their inability to score raised the possibility that Zizou, who had announced that he would retire from football completely at the end of France's campaign, could have already played his final game. However, France did just



enough winning 2-0 and were dragged back from the brink. Patrick Viera, captain in absence of Zidane, scored the first goal and then helped create the second for Henry - assisted with the presence of a second striker for first time - Trezegeut.

Controversy shrouded the contest with the Spanish after Thierry Henry feigned a blow to the head by Spain's Carlos Puyol which led directly to the free-kick from which the French scored the second, decisive goal - the Spanish overpowered. France played with fantastic spirit against Brazil, Zidane, silencing the doubters and back to his best was fantastic, controlling play demanding the ball, his team-mates playing with a great sense of purpose. Henry evaded the attention of the entire Brazil defence volleying home Zidane's floated free-kick from close-range at the far post. The momentum continued as France marched into the World Cup final with Portugal defeated by yet another Zidane penalty, as they had six years earlier in Brussels. France showing desire and commitment were the more cohesive of teams and defended like lions as put by Thierry Henry who won the decisive penalty hit perfectly past Ricardo.

## PART EIGHT

### A CUP OF NATIONS

#### COPACABANERED

World football's most illustrious and celebrated team Brazil, with a ruthlessly performance of great efficiency had overcome its most feared arch-rival Argentina to win the COPA -America for the second time in succession, and this time more emphatically than the 2004 Lima confrontation. This, the 42nd addition, was held in the land of baseball and beauty contestants, Venezuela, the last in the list of nations to hold a COPA finals; the idea for hosting this tournament first came about 20 years earlier. The COPA had briefly been loaned to Colombia in 2001 following victories in 1997 and 1999 for Brazil. It was a bitter pill for Argentina, carrying the burden of 14 years without a trophy, (plus a 4-1 trashing by Brazil in 2005 Confederations Cup and 3-0 at Arsenal's new stadium in 2006) who lost on penalties to a second string Brazil in a memorable 2004 final, but were favourites to win this time against a Brazilian team missing Kaka and Ronaldinho, who asked to be rested. With the need to win (for Argentina) there was no experimenting as happened at previous COPA 's of late; no players excused because they needed a holiday, as in case of some Brazilians, as the squad was mostly drawn from Europe-based contingent. The 64-year-old manager Alfio Basile, between 1991 until 1993, oversaw a 31 match unbeaten run.

South America's top trophy - in a match very untypical in itself - had once again been captured by a combination of attributes not immediately associated with the Brazil team, namely strength and power, mixed with traditional elements of attacking full-backs and flashes of individual talent. Brazil, also bigger and stronger had huge imposing players, battlers with the look of a basketball team; the extra strength at no cost of speed or skill. Brazil sat back soaked up the pressure and broke with pace on the break as Argentina's shaky defence was exposed by the sheer athleticism of Brazil's counter-attacks and constantly played into their hands.

Argentina's artistry and passing game had been repeatedly blunted by Brazil's ruggedness and superior physical power; their usual flowing game (best moves) continually interrupted by systematic Brazilian fouling in midfield. Brazil gave away a total of 37 free-kicks as they won most of the 50-50 balls - artistry crushed by efficiency.

The purists hoped for an Argie win, but the favourites in sweltering Maracaibo (a steamy oil city) beforehand found themselves swept off its feet by a side that had survived an early Juan Roman Riquelme shot (for a quick reply to Brazil's opener) rifled against the post - further evidence it was Brazil's afternoon. With the temperature at kick-off time around 32 Celsius and the tropical sun still burning (Argentina coach Alfio Basile has criticised organisers of the COPA America over the kick-off time), a cagey slow opening had been expected - certainly not end-to-end; but instead Brazil stung Argentina by snatching a quick lead in the 4th minute; Julio Baptista's goal setting them on their way. The long crossfield ball by Elano found Julio Baptista on the left and, as Ayala held off, the player known as 'the Beast' advanced menacingly and unleashed a shot into the top right-hand corner. The number ten (Riquelme) was close again in the 35th minute but his shot was brilliantly turned away by Brazil goalkeeper Doni. Instead of Robinho, a potent goalscorer at these championships, one could look at the hulking

Baptista, the symbol of Brazil's physical strength from this current set up as the player of the tournament, scoring and assisting in goals. He may not have started had Kaka, the world's leading player or Ronaldinho, his predecessor answered the call for inclusion. The contest was effectively over when Roberto Ayala, making his 115th appearance inadvertently slid the ball past his keeper and into his own goal from vicious in-swinging cross from Daniel Alves, just on for the injured Elano - five minutes before half-time.

Although Argentina had more possession they struggled to impose their style and Brazil produced the killer punch and ended the contest on 69 minutes. Vagner Love broke down the left and fed Daniel Alves, who scored with a clinical shot into the bottom right-hand corner. A 15th COPA victory was out of reach as Argentina coach Alfio Basile, who won the 1991 and 1993 tournaments in a previous stint, lost a COPA America match for the first time in a run spanning 19 games. Argentina scored 16 goals in five games before the final while Brazil lost to Mexico in the group stage and needed a penalty shoot-out to beat Uruguay in the semi-finals.

After only 11 months in charge, and with no previous coaching experience beforehand, former World Cup winning player of 1994 turned coach Dunga had won his first title. He prepared for his first competitive internationals by resisting the temptation to clear out the old, but gave chances to youngsters and those overlooked by predecessors in countries like Ukraine and Russia. Leadership was the main requirements here after replacing Carlos Alberto Parreira. Fiery Dunga took over with Brazil at a low ebb after their lacklustre performances at the World Cup the previous year, when they lost to France in the quarter-finals. He stated the team had rescued the self-esteem of their supporters by winning the COPA America. 'The worker leaves home early in the morning and comes back at late night and whose only satisfaction is when Brazil wins,' said Dunga. He then paid tribute to his players, who he said had come from adversity to triumph. 'They are winners, they come from families who financially are not so well off, nobody has given them anything, they've worked hard for this and so they deserve it,' he said. He also warned that Ronaldinho and Kaka, who asked to be rested from the tournament, would have to fight to get their places back in the team. Of future team selections, he said: 'Obviously, the player who comes is ahead of the player who doesn't. Players are picked on merit and their capabilities. 'If a player comes and he does well, how can I take him out of the team?' Although he was criticised in the earlier stages of the tournament, especially after a 2-0 defeat to Mexico, Dunga said he had nothing to say to his detractors. 'If my team wins, then I have nothing to explain,' he said.

It had started so horribly wrong for the Samba boys with an unexpected 2-0 opening day loss at the hands of Mexico, just three days after they had lost to USA in the Concacaf Gold Cup final.

However, they benefited from dubious refereeing decisions (one of two) given in the qualifiers when they had looked unlikely to break Chile's defences. Chile dominated the second-half but failed to take its chances and became tired chasing the game, leaving Robinho to grab two more goals (adding to his opener) in the last 10 minutes to give the scoreline a flattering look. Robinho was in the headlines again after a supposed foul when no contact appeared to be made for a penalty award which the forward scored for his 4th tournament goal in 2-0 win against Ecuador.

Robinho, once dubbed the new Pele, had finally been given the chance to lead attack- He had been sidelined by the Ronaldo-Adriano partnership at 2006 World Cup.

An astonishing sequence of one-sided games greeted the quarter-finals, Brazil one of two nations to crash six goals. This was amidst reports opponents Chile going on a drinking spree and causing damage at the team hotel in Puerto Ordaz; 6-1 was the crushing scoreline with Juan, Baptista, Robinho either side of half-time, Josue and Wagner Love all scoring. Brazil found it harder going against a somewhat superior Uruguay team following a 2-2 draw. Only the fortune of penalties to go in their favour, 5-4 victors ensured a final date with Argentina.

Luck followed them again with a third dubious decision in their favour when keeper Doni 3-4 metres off his line, made the sudden death penalty save kick; in a match halted by a 14 minute floodlight failure. Brazil had failed to defeat Uruguay in 90 minutes since the 3-0 final victory of 1999.

Argentina had played their way through teams en route to the final in Venezuelan capital, and along with Paraguay qualified for the last eight with a game to spare after winning the first two matches. Despite falling behind to USA they ran out comfortable 4-1 winners after taking the lead on the hour. Old habits died-hard as they fell behind again against Colombia only to be gifted an equaliser before ending the game 4-2 victors; not before Hernan Crespo in scoring a penalty for 2-1 pulled a muscle that would keep him out for rest of the finals. He would be sorely missed. With Paraguay cracking in goals, Argentina needed victory to overtake them in the standings; they did it with Javier Mascherano's first goal for his country. Peru held on up until half-time before a change involving Carlos Tevez for Diego Milito in attack. Argentina swept to a storming 4-0 romp. Mexico too suffered a similar fate despite putting up a fight for long periods in a 3-0 loss. Lionel Messi scored the goal of tournament with a stunning chip over Oswaldo Sanchez.

## **PART EIGHT**

### **A CUP OF NATIONS**

### **AFRICAN NATIONS 2008**

**L**ightning had struck twice the Pharaohs of Egypt in the 26th edition of the finals had cemented its position as the dominant team on the continent and become the most successful nation in African history, a sixth in total. They were Kings of Africa, again, even exceeding their own expectations, this in a hemisphere, south of the sahara, where North African sides traditionally played poorly.

The Defending champions, far from being the most spectacular side, retained the crown won two years earlier on home soil, with a depth of quality, adapting tactics from game to game, playing with a combination of resolute determined defending with the pace and flair of its effective strikers that possessed a ruthlessness in front of goal. Mohammed Zidan was the jewel in the crown and stand-out player of a star trio; Mohamed Aboutrika was scorer of 77th minute winner in the final against Cameroon, while Ahmed Hassan became the first player to win three nations cup titles.

This combined with the tactical astuteness of its manager Hassan Shehata made them invincible.

It would be Egypt's third success in the last 10 years quashing any hopes of the dream final between Ghana and neighbours Ivory Coast; instead left to contest the 3rd/4th placed game won 4-2 by Ghana.

The feat achieved was more amazing considering the poor form shown since winning in 2006 with doubts raised about their credentials, especially having made hard work of a far-from-tough qualifying group against Burundi, Botswana, and Mauritania, embarrassingly not sealing their finals place until the final round of games. They had looked a side in transition and by their own admission had not set their sights beyond the semi-final, certainly overlooked by most pundits as eventual champions.

The mixed colours of supporting uniforms made this the world's most colourful tournament just as would the nicknames of its participants - from the boastful Cameroon's Indomitable Lions, Benin's Squirrels, the Desert Hawks of Sudan, the Elephants of Ivory Coast, to the Black Stars from Ghana.

The bi-annual festival, a three-week extravaganza, witnessed by a million travelling fans, had seen a remarkable evolution and rise into a true world event with a growing world focus, importance and significance; also sadly an inconvenience to the European game. The showcase now attracted a big TV worldwide audience, this as more and more internationally recognised players from Europe's leading clubs participated at this event - third biggest football event. It meant so much to the continent for these players to represent their respected countries; players such as Drogba, Essien, Martins, Yakubu, Toure, and Diouf. The strength in depth was a reflection of the rising importance. Traditional continental superpowers (Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon) and the North African triumvirate were joined by Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Mali as serious contenders. An array of high profiled coaches, German, Berti Vogts, Henri Michel, Frenchman Roger Lemerre, and Brazilian Carlos Alberto Parreira.

This event took place, more than ever, to the discontent of the European giants who pay their wages. Thirty-five had come from the Premier League alone with many bemoaning and voicing the concerns at the timing of the event and how it clashed through the midway period of its own leagues. Teams were angered by the prospect of losing its men for possibly as long as six weeks at a crucial time of the season. Many star players actually wanted a switch to the European summer.

The Confederations African Football (CAF) had consistently ignored calls, pleas for a crescendo of complaints from Europe to change to a summer schedule which in itself would have its problems, such as scorching high temperatures. It perhaps showed a little disrespect that the Europeans would have for the African game by asking a top-quality international tournament (held three years before the first Euro finals in 1957) to be moved in favour of their domestic leagues. Ghana invested in four new stadiums in what was generally regarded as a poorly run disorganised Tournament.

Cameroon were to be the final cog in this remarkable sweeping run to victory for Egypt. The Indomitable Lions had also been the opening day opponents of the Pharaoh and were emphatically crushed, stunned by the sheer incisiveness of Egypt in Kumasi; who fielded an

uncharacteristic 3-man attack and had raced into a comprehensive half-time lead, Zidan scoring arguably the best of 99 goals at the finals; Cameroon seemingly a spent force.

The final in Ghana's capital Accra was to be a kind of anti-climax, the Pharaohs in total control, in a second gear, never in danger of losing its grip of its crown. Victory was fully deserved, having most of chances on goal and should have wrapped up the contest earlier. Cameroon's 31-year-old captain Rigobert Song, the most experienced and capped player (not missing a single game in 33 games over seven tournaments) was an accident waiting to happen and gifted Egypt the goal with a sloppy error. He panicked then slipped and got caught in possession by Zidan, whose pass invitingly in the path across goal gave Aboutrika the chance to shot accurately past keeper Kameni. Cameroon's 5-goal star man and goalscorer Samuel Eto'o - tally at 16 goals - had been dogged by a hamstring strain that rendered him ineffective. Angola had proved sterner opposition in a quarter-final contest for Egypt.

A semi-final duel with the highly talented and fancied Ivory Coast had brought about a stunning 4-1 triumph; the Elephants had crushed and trampled all rivals before them previously, reigning supreme in the so-called Group of Death, qualification secured after only two matches, looking pretty imperious and unstoppable in the process. The Elephants, totally outplayed, overrun and outfought by their intelligent North African opponents were expertly picked off seemingly with every attack. It was yet another tactical triumph after a five-man midfield throttled the Ivory Coast's supply line to its danger men. No revenge for its 2006 final penalty shoot-out lost to host nation Egypt.

Ivory Coast on paper had the most complete team of all competing nations, a tremendous strength in depth and balanced squad. Most of the focus had been on the star-studded renowned star players plying their trade at some of Europe's top clubs; the iconic inspirational leader Didier Drogba, now possibly the continents top striker. Only Barcelona's 3-time African footballer of the year, twice Nations cup winner Samuel Eto'o stood in his way or could rival him. Cameroon's best footballing export had eclipsed his boyhood hero Roger Milla.

The tournament quickly burst into light with a fiercely contested Group B victory in Sekondi over Nigeria which set the Elephants on the way to the leadership - Salomon Kalou scoring a brilliant individual goal with a mazy run that took him past three defenders. A bundle and avalanche of goals followed in the matches against Benin (4) and Mali (3) as Ivory sounded out they would be the team to beat. It did not end there as it was followed with a 5-0 demolition of plucky Guinea, who collapsed during the last quarter of the game. The team had overcome a blow less than a fortnight before the finals, with the decision of German coach Uli Stielike to step aside due to personnel reasons; Gerardi Gili an assistant to Henri Michel in 2006 took over the reins.

As for Egypt, the group leadership had been secured following a deft display in the outstanding dismantling of Cameroon, Mohammed Zidan, a focal-point and the shiny armour in a virtuoso display capped with two stunning goals. Sudan would also be no match and were crushed 3-0, however, a relaxed display allowed Zambia to escape with a 1-1 scoring draw. They profited from two defensive errors to beat Angola, but were still well worth the 2-1 victory.

Perennial candidates for success at the Nations cup, Cameroon, were a team in transition, a new generation to replace the stalwarts and had a much younger side than at previous tournaments. As always, a bizarre and erratic air surrounded the team as they had taken an

unconventional path to success with preparation characteristically chaotic, a failure to organise warm-up matches and a last minute change of training camp, plus customary hitches with luggage and hotels.

A change of coach two months before the finals did nothing for cohesion; veteran globe-trotting German Otto Pfister took over the reins (10th national team - took Ghana to 1992 finals) from caretaker coach Jules Nyongha.

The crushing loss to Egypt gave an over-confident Cameroon, a kind of reality check and they fixed up for Zambia clash four days later and hauled themselves back into contention with a crushing 5-1 win, easing pressure on coach Pfister who completely reshuffled his line-up. The opportunity did not slip them by against the minnows of Sudan in Tamale (3-0) before an extra-time defeat of Tunisia 3-2 - serving up a feast for the crowd in a bruising battle. Journeyman Alain Nkong, with only one previous substitute appearance at the finals - in fact a surprise inclusion to the squad - replaced Joseph-Desire Job on the hour before scoring the winner on 72 minutes in the semi-final clash with the hosts.

## PART EIGHT

### A CUP OF NATIONS

#### THE END OF THE PAIN IN SPAIN

Spanish football stood on the threshold of a new beginning as years of pain in Spain had finally come to its end. Years of unfulfilled potential, underachieving and under-performing was now a thing of the past. The Class of 2008 was to banish the past torment, heartache and self-destruction to the midst of the deepest outer realms; the team finally breaking through the glass ceiling that had held them back. It would take them to the pinnacle of the European game on the international arena, to the top of their trade, so long overdue for a fully deserved triumph in every sense of the word; finally the best team had won in what was a model way to play football.

This was Spain 2008, the New Spain, who had finally found the attributes to finally realise the country's potential. It was a Spain that added a new mental grittiness-strength, steel, resilience, heart, teamwork and tactical discipline to its arsenal of weapon to compliment traditional traits of speed, technique and skill. The real battle was won not on the pitch but their minds. This under the willy guidance of coach Luis Arangones, a controversial character, but an astute and top leader, finally bringing home Spain's first trophy after a wait of 44 years - their only previous title success. Interestingly, he would be one of the 10 managerial departees after the finals.

It had been Spain's first final since its glorious 1984 defeat to France. The 40-million populated nation gloried in victory, revelled in its new found status as clearly Europe's best team. A nation that had relied on the glories of Real Madrid and Barcelona had finally got rid of the notion to accommodate the stars of just these two Spanish giants.

Spain's final triumph was a just reward for their superiority at some of the most basic aspects of the game - accurate passing, instant control and sharp movement. The backbone to this was Spain's cluster of talented midfielders; Xavi, Andreas Iniesta, Cesc Fabregas and David Silva (most consistent performer) plus anchor man Marcos Senna - who held his side together, providing the defensive base that allowed others to support the forwards that possessed blistering pace and had a sharp eye for goal.

It would end in the magnificent arena of Vienna's Ernst Happel stadium on June 29th. Opponents Germany, a pre-tournament favourite, had been second best throughout this finale to a team that seemingly had not moved out of second gear. Spain carefully dictated events and could certainly have inflicted a heavier margin of defeat on the tournament's most successful ever nation. They had never previously beaten the Germans in a tournament match. Iker Casillas, in his 82nd international had not been forced into one serious save, such was Spain's dominance. He cemented his status as the world's top keeper having been outstanding in the quarter-final with Italy with two penalty saves.

In the final, it was Spain's cutting edge; technically excellent, fine touch, accuracy of passing and a top-notch finish by Fernando Torres, (his 36th of the season) rather than Germany's powerful running that fittingly secured the trophy. Man-of-the-match Torres had scored 24 premier league goals but had only scored once before the final, the opening goal in 2-1 win over Sweden - substituted in both games against Russia as well as against Italy. The goal wiped away concerns about the absence of injured David Villa, Spain's top goalscorer with 5-goals who limped out of semi. It was only fitting that Euro 2008 signed off with a classic final after three weeks of consistently high-quality, attacking, entertaining football that helped make it one of the best tournaments for years.

From trouncing neat Russia in the first game, where the goals rained in on the opponent's goal in Innsbruck from David Villa - chief tormentor; the Spain bandwagon had started to roll. Even resting nine first-teamers for the final match against Greece could not deny them maintaining a 100% record. History had been made in beating Italy on penalties after a desperately poor goalless draw; in a contest strangled by fear of failure and in Spain's case, having lost so regularly at that stage, so that was understandable. It was a landmark first victory over opponents in nine competitive meetings since the first in 1920. Cesc Fabregas rammed in the decisive penalty in Vienna. Interestingly Spain had lost penalty shoot-outs on June 22nd at tournaments in 1986, 1996, 2002 - June 22nd used to be a dark date for them. Second-half goals from Xavi, Daniel Guiza and David Silva nailed Russia, a ghost of the team that had clinically dismantled and magnificently outplayed the Dutch - Hiddink's third defeat in a major semi-final, after Holland 98, Korea 2002 respectively.

Germany, the beaten finalist and third-placed finishers of its own World Cup of two years earlier had put on a credible performance at these finals. This a marked improvement on the first round exits in 2000 and 2004. Germany's high point was the thrilling 3-2 quarter-final win over Portugal when the advanced midfield role of Michael Ballack - possibly their only true world class player - inspired them to one of their best performances for years. This despite getting away with a blatant push on Portugal Paulo Ferreira when he scored Germany's second. Joachim Low, one of 6 of 16 coaches to stay on was satisfied with the finals as a whole, and acknowledged defeat, citing a great performance in reaching the final. Spain deserved to win no arguments. He had the foresight half way through the tournament to change the system

after defeat against Croatia in second game that left them requiring a point against Austria. The new 4-2-3-1 system gave Ballack the freedom to roam and stamp his authority. Despite being outplayed by Croatia in group stage and riding its luck against Turkey - displaying a sheer will to win saw them proceed – as a place at the Ernst Happel stadium beckoned.

The tournaments biggest casualties and flops came from the so-called Group of death - Italy and France finalist of 2006 final. As with its performance at the 2002 World Cup, a total shambles, France proved to be a bunch of talented individuals that played with little direction and left the tournament like a flash of lighting with Italy doing no better, leaving without so much as a stir.

The very unpopular Domenech - especially with French media because of insistence that access to his squad be kept to a minimum - had put too much reliance on the class of 98 and 2000, leaving no space for youngsters who could have helped; tensions to simmer in the camp between young and older generations as the untouchables became immovable as age had taken its withering toll, especially catching up with the French back line, while others were disinterested on the pitch. Many were openly critical of boss's nonsensical decisions, questioning his tactics, selections and substitutions. Lilian Thuram, the sole survivor from the 98 winning team, and Claude Makekele called time on their international careers as the campaign descended into a farce with Domenech's post-exit marriage proposal. The strikers starved of service were usually not on the same wavelength in a side that played at a stately pace showing a lack of urgency and enterprise. A tameless woeful draw against theoretically the weakest link of the group Romania was followed by a crushing devastating loss to Holland; the French (like the Italians before against the Dutch) suffering their worst tournament defeat - 4-1. This was despite Domenech having made a number of changes including the return of Henry. France, along with Italy left scrambling for second place.

Italy capitalised on French misfortune in the form of a serious injury to Ribery and Eric Abidal's early dismissal. Donadoni lived to fight another day longer as Italy ripped France apart - in a contest fast and furious - more decisively than the scoreline suggested. Luca Toni should have completed his hat-trick in a five-minute spell.

The Azzuri, aiming to add to their World Cup win of 2006, in its opening game had been blown out by a devastating five-minute first-half period during which Holland scored twice. In one match, Italy had conceded more goals than in their entire World Cup campaign in Germany. Their last comparable defeat was 4-1 to Brazil in the 1970 final. Only a fortuitous 80th minute penalty save from by Luigi Buffon saved Italy from elimination against Romania in Zurich - a thrilling pulsating game. Italy only scored three goals at the finals and none was by a forward. Too many long balls were pinned over to misfiring Luca Toni while injured captain Fabio Cannavaro was badly missed as was the suspended Pirlo in quarter-finals against Spain - a lack of creativity stifled the contest. The sacking of Roberto Donadoni, (4 days later by the Italian federation) and replacement World Cup winning coach Marcello Lippi was no surprise. Donadoni's tenure seemed very much like that of France's Domenech and seemed to be experimenting from match to match, a recipe for disaster.

PART NINE  
A RAINBOW WORLD CUP  
SOUTH AFRICA 2010

A ROUND THE WORLD TRIP  
THE QUALIFYING ROUNDS

October 10th 2009 was a date that was to be of great importance and significance within the calendar of World Cup qualifying. An arduous and long qualifying campaign had come full circle; the penultimate gripping climax to a marathon process was nearing its end. This some two years and four months later - qualifying was completed on November 18, 2009. Now was a period in which the world's elite nations would finally realise its ultimate goal of reaching Africa's first World Cup of all time. Again there was to be 32 participating nations, South Africa being joined by five other African nations, plus 13 from Europe, five from South America, four from Asia, three from Concacaf and one from Oceania.

Some had already attained this goal, most had already fallen by the wayside, many were still in a perilous or precarious state with its position in the balance; wondering will it go there way or not?

Until now 11 nations had reached the holy grail of the finals the following year.

This was from the giants of world football Brazil those wonderful and loved magicians to the most secretive nation on earth North Korea, re-appearing on the world stage after an absence of 44 years.

It could not have gotten any better for Brazil, qualification secured with three games to spare, within the backyard of its fiercest rivals Argentina; now managed by the GREATEST of them all Diego Maradona, whose own qualification was on a knife-threaded edge. This followed a campaign thwart with squad in-balances and indecision that bordered on the shambolic. However, they were still in the last of the automatic qualifying positions; a group of players blessed with superstar individuals that in no way resembled any kind of neither competent nor coherent team, 78 players used in 15 qualifiers culminating in the indignation of a capitulation in the cloud city of La Paz 3,600 metres above sea level. The team had been criminally unprepared to combat the breathless heights at the top of the Bolivian capital. All had gone well until that fateful and calamitous day. It did not get any better, at altitude again in Quito; Tevez missed a penalty, the team lost its legs and succumbed 2-0. It had been a roller-coaster year under Diego Maradona, who had replaced Alfio Basile who quit after their defeat against Chile in the tenth game. With his appointment as national coach many felt his mere presence on the bench would be enough to drive the players to new heights.

Already seeing a decline in form the Argentine team in the compact Rosario Central ground saw itself two goals down within just 25 minutes. This followed an all-out attack which left them exposed at the back playing into Brazil's hands with two set-pieces being converted by

Luisao and Luis Fabiano. A thunderous left-footed Jesus Datolo strike from distance looked for a moment like a saviour as Argentina saw temporary reprieve, this before Luis Fabiano expertly ended the contest with exceptional finishing by chipping over Andujar - mission accomplished as they beat Argentina 3-1 away for the first time in 14 years.

The only team ever present at the finals had reached its 19th World Cup finals. Its coach and former World Cup winner Dunga would hope to emulate a band of players as double player-manager World Cup winners - Franz Beckenbauer, Carlos Alberto Parriera.

The team was moulded within his own image, much to the great displeasure of many of his country's inhabitants; being constantly in the spotlight with much debate on his future - press and public wanting his head, body and soul. There were the highlights as well as the debacles, described as possibly some of the lowest points in the nations proud history; none more so than three consecutive home non-goalscoring draws with Colombia, Argentina (fortunate not to lose) and humiliatingly Bolivia - who themselves had their moments defeating both Brazil (2-1) and Argentina (6-1). This had seen the former lose its 11-match winning streak in a 19 match unbeaten run in which defeat had been tasted merely once (up until the Bolivia loss) in the cauldron of Ascuncion against the then rampant Paraguay, whose own qualification had since been confirmed - sealed with a win over Argentina - with two games to spare. Coached by Gerardo Martino, Paraguay in an impressive first-half qualifying campaign had begun like a steam-train on fire building a commanding lead and ended the year 2008 six points ahead of Brazil and threatened to not only be the runaway leaders of the section but the first qualifiers of these finals, bar the host - winning seven, drawing two of first 10 games. As well as the convincing defeat of Brazil, Uruguay and many others saw themselves conquered in one way or another. A slight blip occurred in early 2009 in which one point taken out of the possible 12 that saw their advantage eroded by Brazil, and a 2-0 home loss to Bielsa's Chile handed Dunga's team, who won 4-0 in Uruguay, the leadership. Normality was eventually restored despite an unimpressive 1-0 (Salvador Cabanas goal) home win over Bolivia ending their interest mathematically - setting up for a deciding clash with Argentina. Rediscovering their form would be bad news for lacklustre Argentina in Ascuncion (four days after mauling from Brazil) with a goal through Nelson Haedo Valdez to seal a damaging defeat for Diego's boys; could have been more with Para hitting the woodwork twice, Messi a forlorn figure.

Having not qualified since France 98, Chile had the opportunity to become South America's third qualifiers. A surprising 2-2 home draw with Venezuela had postponed their virtually assured place as did a 4-2 loss in Brazil. This was in a section were six out of the remaining eight nations had a realistic (some more than others) chance of reaching the promised land of South Africa. The table read, Chile 27, Ecuador 23, Argentina, in the play-off position 22, Uruguay outside 21, level on points with Venezuela, aiming to reach a first ever finals. Right up until Colombia on 20 points, Chile's opponents today in Medellin. The big game today was in Rosario, Argentina-Peru. The visitors had lost six qualifiers in a row and had been at Argentina's crossroads more than once; they were the team that caused heartache for the Argentine nation when they denied them the right to participate at the 70 finals, the last time Argentina failed to appear at a World Cup tournament. Its most famous clash had seen Peru capitulate, some say intentionally, at the 78 world finals. A Peruvian equaliser in 93 kept Argentina in competition for a place at the America finals of 94. Peru, non-participants at seven consecutive World Cups, the whipping boys at the very bottom on 10 points with just two wins and 10 defeats, aimed

to be the party poopers and contribute to Diego Maradona's end as manager of the national team. However, a nervous and disjointed Argentina still looked on course for a straightforward routine win when Gonzalo Higuain fired the team ahead. Instead of galvanising the team it sent them into a shell leaving Peru to not only dominate, control and pile on the pressure but threaten to send Argentina closer to World Cup elimination - again. An equaliser on 90 minutes from Hernan Rengifo left Maradona, his followers and berators stunned into silence. However with all hope seemingly lost, the contest approaching four minutes of injury time, 48th minute substitute Martin Palermo (recently back into the international fold after a 10 year absence) at close-range and unmarked saw his outstretched leg (within a goalmouth scramble) in downpour of driving rain divert the ball into the net and send Maradona sliding across the rain-soaked surface - elevating Palermo to the status of a saint. It reminded one of Argentina's flirtation with elimination in 1985 when they snatched a late draw against Peru at River Plate's Monumental stadium. Less than a year later they became world champions. Argentina were out of jail, their dream intact for now anyhow. Only 30 seconds had remained from possible elimination.

And now it was to third-placed Chile looking for the win over eighth placed Colombia, seven points behind. A resounding win in Medellin, despite falling behind twice secured their finals appearance. Super substitute Jorge Valdivia's incredible effort led Chile to a 4-2 victory over Colombia and its first appearance in the World Cup since 1998. They had won more games than any other team in the section - 10 games. The result would end Colombia's hopes, a play-off possibility now even beyond them. Venezuela, aiming for their first World Cup appearance, saw its own slim opportunity of automatic qualification vanish following a 2-1 home defeat to Paraguay.

Two points separated, 4th placed Ecuador and 6th placed Uruguay, this as they paired off in Quito. A win for the home side would virtually seal qualification, at the very least a play-off face off with Concacaf opponents, likely to be Honduras or Costa Rica. It looked to be going accordingly when Manchester Utd's new acquisition Antonio Valencia headed in from close-range on 69 minutes. The team were still celebrating when Uruguay equalised within a minute and with the contest looking to end in a stalemate, a swift break upfield led to a Uruguayan being upended for a resulting penalty. This was one of two penalty claims, with a super cool Diego Forlan to crash high and send Uruguay into at least a guaranteed play-off berth above Ecuador.

The final business of this group was set with three sides, Argentina, Uruguay and Ecuador left in contention for automatic qualification, Venezuela left with an outside chance of a play-off, requiring defeats for both Ecuador and Uruguay as well as the being left with the tumultuous task of defeating current South American champions Brazil on away territory; a swing in their favour somewhere in the region of 14-0. It looked a very improbable sequence of results.

Argentina themselves needed to avoid defeat in a daunting Montevideo finale while Ecuador required victory at all-ready qualified Chile, coupled with a stalemate in Uruguay. Argentina had handed Brazil and then Paraguay their tickets to South Africa, would Uruguay be a third? Maradona and his band of nervous troops attempted to hold their nerve. It had been two years and a day since their last and only group win in Venezuela on October 17th 2007; they had suffered four straight away losses (Bolivia 6-1, Paraguay 1-0, Ecuador 2-0, Chile 1-0) conceding 10 scoring one.

Any Uruguay-Argentina contest would be an occasion in itself, but added with the spice of World Cup qualification this was something else – Nery Argentina entered the Centenario stadium on tender hooks; a short journey across the River de Plata to Montevideo for the ‘battle of the river plate.’ History weighed heavier at a venue they had only scored a single goal since winning last in 1976, failing to even register, a point. Football held its breath as one of the greatest exponents battled for managerial survival - fighting to be spared of the ignominy.

In an amazing change of fortunes on its travels Argentina stood firm and counted as a performance of grit, full of spirit, resolution and resilience frustrated its hosts, surviving scares before striking a blow from Mario Bolatti in the 85th minute in what was a nerve shredded night. Argentina, against the tide of most predictions, had done it, surviving a turbulent campaign. Maradona wept and hugged his coaching staff and then insulted the media in a post-match news conference. The remaining fourth automatic place had now gone with a cluster of nations vying for the play-off final chance. A win for Ecuador in Chile would knock Uruguay out of the reckoning. Fortunately for them it was being played in Santiago and not Quito. Ecuador finalists of the last two World Cups would fall 1-0 to Humberto Suazo’s goal. He was the continent’s top scorer in this campaign with ten goals. Venezuela, despite possibly producing its best ever away performance by holding Brazil 0-0 - an historic result, withered out of contention. It had been the first time that Brazil had failed to beat their northern neighbours in 19 competitive internationals. In 2008 Brazil had suffered a black June with an historic defeat by Venezuela in a friendly. A 2-0 home defeat for Paraguay at the hands of Colombia was detrimental in an attempt to overtake Brazil in the final group standings. So Uruguay in the final equation went on to meet with the fourth-placed nation of the Concacaf region in what was a third consecutive play-off.

## OUT IN AFRICA

June 11th 2010 could not have come soon enough and before we knew it Africa’s first World Cup had finally descended upon us. The wait had become unbearable, the anticipation overwhelming, the vibrancy in total evidence, whilst the tension had now reached fever pitch. The vision was no more, the reality had hit the entire continent, South Africa; the dream had come true.

The Rainbow Nation as with the recent tradition as host, were to start festivities, for which one hoped, was to become the start of the most memorable of extravaganzas. The weight of expectation on the team was immense with the odds firmly stacked against them as they tried to avoid the ignominy of becoming the first host nation to fail at the first hurdle. They certainly had the support of the watching world as most hoped that Concacaf kings Mexico would be swallowed up in a wave of national fever and emotion within the gigantic arena of Johannesburg’s Soccer City.

The country had come to a standstill and 91,000 fans jam-packed into an already sold out arena while a worldwide audience of billions were swept off their feet by 3 hours of entertainment beforehand in an opening ceremony with dignitaries that included state president Jacob Zuma, FIFA’s own Sepp Blatter, though Nelson Mandela was absent due to personal reasons. Vibrancy flooded and swept all those around.

As for the football, Mexico did not heed to the world’s demands or wishes and very much aimed

to be party-poopers with the hosts, understandably under the weight of heavy expectation, being nervy, shaken and unable to find a foothold, and may well have been out of the contest by half-time. In what was a brighter and more entertaining game than most observers expected, South Africa dug deep and somehow managed to stay in the contest, largely thanks to the saves of Itu Khune from Dos Santos and Guillermo Franco and a correctly given offside against Vela - such was fluent Mexico's superiority. And to compound things, after barely surviving, the hosts gradually a more confident outfit had the temerity to take an unlikely lead. A thunderous and rapturous drive from Siphiwe Tshabalala, racing onto a superb through ball, brought the roof off the Johannesburg's super stadium and sent the world dancing into raptures.

South African tails were up, but Mexico proved to be a dangerous foe, and unsurprisingly and rather deservedly drew them-selves level through Rafael Marquez on 79 minutes. Even then the hosts could and should have snatched the game right at the death with only a deflection onto the frame of the post denying Ktlego Mphela who should have given the host and the most of the rest of the world for what they craved. But on reflection it was a fair scoreline in a game described by Mexico boss Javier Aguirre as the most important he had ever coached.

Next on the agenda was a Cape Town duel between two former Champs and group favourites Uruguay and France. This was a repeat of their group A clash of the 2002 finals, but it proved to be anything but in terms of being a spectacle, if not a replica result. Where the contest in Korea was a thunderous end-to-end spectacle, this Cape Town repeat was an anti-climactic drab bore of very limited chances created in which France failed to make the breakthrough against a team reduced to 10-men after Nicolas Lodeiro became the first man dismissed in the tournament following a nasty challenge on Bacany Sagna.

Semi-finalists of its own World Cup in 2002 South Korea, aiming to proceed from the first round for only its second time in eight attempts, matched up in Port Elizabeth's Nelson Mandela stadium, only two-thirds full, against the dethroned European champions of 2004 Greece.

What was expected to be a heatedly, hard-to-predict contest turned out to be nothing more than a stroll in the park for Korea - bright, incisive and tenacious. The one-paced, slow and impotent Greeks were never in the game and were bowled over by goals from Lee Jung Soo and Park Ji Sung.

A few hours later at Ellis Park the stage was set for the now undisputed baddest player on the planet Lionel Messi. Where the crown for this title had been in widespread dispute for most, overnight it became unanimous in his favour following a virtuoso one-man show against Arsenal in the Champions League.

Most predicted that he was set to follow in the steps of his manager, the greatest of them all as Argentina quickly showed their attacking intentions. It was all Messi, linking well; roaming freely into space behind the strikers, rotating in a moving triangle, in what was all one-way traffic against Africans Nigeria. It could have been all over just after Gabriel Heinze, making a late run, laundered himself to power a header into the top corner on just 5 minutes. They could have had three goals in the opening 20 minutes as it was Argentina against Vincent Enyeama - a one-man show consistently denying the rampant South Americans with save after save, at least three world class ones. Nigeria, lacking belief and boldness, despite wasting a clear opportunity through Chinedu Obasi (twice) never deserved to get anything with Argentina worthy winners, in a repeat scoreline of their Ibaragi encounter of 2002.

Steven Gerrard's 4th minute opener, after darting through the heart of the USA defence before stabbing the ball past Tim Howard, looked to be putting England, backed by 20,000 fans in Rustenburg's Royal Bafokeng, on its way to victory.

But they failed to capitalise as the US controlled the majority of the possession and came unstuck when goalkeeper Robert Green inexplicably miscued a virtual back-pass from Clint Dempsey's left-footed shot that crept into the net. It was a boob to rank alongside the greatest and infamous of them all. The team never recovered and looked unlikely to regain its lead, puncturing all the pre-tournament hype and expectation. A draw was no more than the USA deserved after fighting back with spirit following the early setback.

Howlers were the name of the game with another soon to follow hot on the heels the very next day with Algeria's Faouzi Chaouchi somehow allowing Robert Koren's speculative tame looking effort to bounce onto his chest before squirming into the net for the only goal of the match on 79 minutes. This in a game they were well in despite being reduced to 10-men when substitute Abdelkader Ghezzal (already booked) was dismissed for handling the ball in the 73rd minute. It was a contest dominated by cautious defensive play as both midfields were packed in a game of very few opportunities with Slovenia gift wrapped their first ever World Cup victory.

One-zero scorelines were the order of the day with another to follow in Pretoria in what was the opening to group D. Africa at third attempt was to finally gain its much coveted win, Serbia the victims. A pretty average perhaps dour contest came to life in the final 20 minutes as the Africans became increasingly dangerous. The outstretched arm of substitute Zdravko Kuzmanovic punched away a left-wing cross and presented Ghana with a chance to steal it from the penalty spot with only five minutes remaining. Aleksandar Lukovic's 74th minute dismissal for a second yellow card offence had already left the Serbs down to 10-men. Asamoah Gyan accepted, placing the ball well to send virtually the entire Loftus Versveld stadium - the heartland of South Africa's Springbok Rugby team - into raptures and delight. He almost added a second, but screwed a stoppage time effort against the post.

But later on in Durban free-wheeling Germany sounded a warning to its rivals that was very ominous, for not only its group opponents but for all countries. The ageing legs of Australia were certainly no match for a relatively young German players (their youngest World Cup team since 1934 with an average age of 25.4 years) led by the mercurial talent Mesut Ozil. They showed all the fluency, verve and freshness and clinically swept away their opponents by four goals for a sixth consecutive opening day win. Trailing to Lukas Poldolski's 6th minute opener Australia did well to keep them-selves in the contest until Tim Cahill's unfortunate-unjustly 56th minute dismissal, a clumsy challenge that opened up the floodgates for decisive and slick Germany through Klose, Muller and sub Cacau.

Group E's opening encounter was a sea of orange and red at Johannesburg's arena, Holland pairing off with those Danes. A cagey, tense and nervy affair was brought to life when Simon Poulsen inadvertently conceded a luckless own goal at the start of the second period. The Dutch, largely dominating possession, comfortably went on to record a 2-0 win following a clinical second goal from Dirk Kuyt in the 85th minute.

Bloemfontein was the venue where Japan recorded an historic first ever victory outside of Asia / on foreign soil. Opponents Cameroon, lacking cohesion and quality or attacking threat, were a pale shadow of their former prowess, and did not pick up the tempo and rally until it was too late. They were a side evidently in the midst of internal conflict between coach Paul Le Guen and some players. The Japanese, who made several surprise choices to their line-up and playing without no recognised striker, rarely had to break sweat and held on relatively comfortably after taking a surprising lead just before half-time through Keisuke Honda - poking the ball in from close-range - following poor defending from the Africans. It was a pivotal win in that it guaranteed Japan stayed alive in the competition no matter the result against the Dutch. Everything was in total contrast to what they had experienced pre-tournament when morale was at an all-time low, having come into the finals in total disarray. Coach Takeshi Okada had offered to step down in the aftermath of a friendly defeat by South Korea just days before departure.