

COLOMBIA SHATTER AMERICAN DREAM IN COPA OPENER

SANTA CLARA: Colombia wrecked the United States' hopes of a winning start to the Copa America Centenario as goals from James Rodriguez and Cristian Zapata gave the South Americans a comfortable 2-0 victory here Friday. AC Milan's Zapata and Real Madrid star Rodriguez struck in the first half before a sell-out 67,439 crowd at the Levi's Stadium in northern California to puncture American hopes of emerging from a difficult Group A. US coach Jurgen Klinsmann's side had hoped to score an upset victory to emulate the Americans' famous defeat of Colombia at the 1994 World Cup in the United States.

But for long periods here Friday Klinsmann's men were chasing shadows as the skilful 2014 World Cup quarter-finalists delivered a stinging reality check. Klinsmann sought to put a positive spin on the game, insisting his team had competed as equals. "For our players it's really important that they can see we can beat them," Klinsmann said. "The end result is 2-0. But the players will take a lot out of this game." Klinsmann admitted the defeat left his team with little margin for error in their remaining group games against Costa Rica and Paraguay. "Obviously we have even more hunger in

our second game now," Klinsmann said. "We have our backs against the wall and we need three points against Costa Rica. But there's a lot of positives."

First half woe

A disastrous first half for the host nation saw Colombia take a vice-like grip on the contest. The Colombians took the lead after only eight minutes, when poor marking at a set-piece gifted a chance to the Italy-based Zapata. Stoke City defender Geoff Cameron was caught ball-watching as Edwin Cardona's corner was curled in, and Zapata stole in front of his man to thunder home the finish. The USA struggled to build any sort of momentum after that, with Colombia flooding midfield and pressing the Americans relentlessly.

Colombia dominated territory and possession and carved out the better chances with Sebastian Perez forcing a diving save from Aston Villa's Brad Guzan in the 16th minute with a rasping drive. Monterrey's Cardona proved to be a menace to the USA back four throughout, tormenting Cameron and DeAndre Yedlin in quick succession midway through the half before shooting on goal. The only USA chance of note was a 36th-minute run and shot from Clint Dempsey, whose curl-

ing effort whistled just past Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina's upright. But within minutes of that fleeting US opportunity, the hosts were dealt a killer blow when Yedlin was adjudged to have flicked a hand out to block Farid Diaz's cross.

America's players protested but Mexican referee Roberto Garcia was in no doubt and pointed to the spot. Rodriguez duly stepped up to stroke home the spot-kick and Colombia were in total control. Colombia threatened again early in the first half, with Cardona testing Guzan once more with a fierce shot on 50 minutes. It started to look ominous for the hosts soon after, with Colombia passing the ball between themselves to draw cheers of "Ole" from their large contingent of noisy fans. But home hopes were raised when Dempsey saw his header from a Michael Bradley corner cleared off the line by Perez.

Dempsey went close again on 64 minutes, his curling free-kick parried clear by Ospina diving to his left. Yet the American fightback was shortlived and it was Colombia who came closest to scoring next when AC Milan's Carlos Bacca broke clear and crashed a shot against the underside of the crossbar with Guzan beaten. The introduction of rising teenage



SANTA CLARA: Sebastian Perez #13 of Colombia controls the ball in front of Geoff Cameron #20 of United States during the 2016 Copa America Centenario Group match between the United States and Colombia at Levi's Stadium on June 3, 2016. — AFP

star Christian Pulisic and Darlington Nagbe was unable to turn the tide for Klinsmann's men as Colombia coasted home to victory. The United States must

now regroup in time for their second match against World Cup quarter-finalists Costa Rica on Tuesday. Colombia will play Paraguay in their next match. — AFP



SAN JOSE: Lionel Messi practices during a training session of Argentina's National football team at San Jose State University in preparation for the Copa America 2016 in San Jose, California. — AFP

MESSI IN US FOR COPA

SAN JOSE: Lionel Messi touched down in California on Friday as Argentina prepared for the possibility that the injured Barcelona superstar may not be fit for next week's Copa America Centenario showdown with Chile. Messi arrived in the early hours from Barcelona, where on Thursday he had appeared in court to give evidence in his tax fraud trial which has also embroiled his father. Messi, who suffered a back injury in a friendly victory against Honduras last week, is uncertain to be fit for Monday's crucial Group D game against Chile at the Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara. The 28-year-old playmaker later took to the field during training near Argentina's San Jose base. Messi trained separately from the rest of the squad along with another injured player Lucas Biglia.

Meanwhile team-mates Augusto Fernandez and Nahuel Guzman admitted Friday that Argentina were facing up to the possibility of Messi's absence against the Chileans. "It is logical that being the best player in the world it is clear that we all

want him to be fit," Atletico Madrid midfielder Fernandez said, adding that he was confident the squad would cope against the Chileans if Messi was ruled out. "When you have moments of adversity that's when the team has to step up," Fernandez told a press conference.

Guzman said he hoped Messi could recover, but admitted he had been surprised by the Argentina captain's decision to make a gruelling round trip from Spain just to appear in the Honduras friendly. "It is shocking at some point because it is the captain, it's Leo. He came to play this game, perhaps without much obligation or necessity, and he ends up getting injured," the Mexico-based reserve goalkeeper said. Tomorrow's game is likely to determine the winner of Group D, with Argentina facing further games against Panama and Bolivia. Messi is bidding to end Argentina's 23-year trophy drought after a series of agonizing near-misses in recent years which saw the Albiceleste beaten in both the 2014 World Cup final and 2015 Copa America final. — AFP

WOMEN FOOTBALLERS CANNOT GO ON STRIKE, US JUDGE RULES

CHICAGO: USA Soccer welcomed a court ruling on Friday that women's national team members cannot go on strike over a pay dispute that had top players saying they would consider boycotting the Rio de Janeiro Olympics. Friday's decision from Judge Sharon Johnson Coleman in federal court in Chicago found that the players, represented by the Women's National Team Players Association, remained bound by a collective bargaining agreement that includes a no-strike clause, even though the deal had expired in 2012.

The federation had argued that the terms of the agreement remained effective under a memorandum of understanding signed by both parties in 2013. The decision comes two months before the US women are to defend their Olympic title in Rio. "Today, Judge Coleman ruled in favor of US Soccer and affirmed that the existing CBA with the US Women's National Team Players Association is valid through the end of 2016, including the no-strike, no lockout

provision," USA Soccer said in a statement. "We are pleased with the Court's decision and remain committed to negotiating a new CBA to take effect at the beginning of next year." Friday's decision doesn't affect a separate federal wage discrimination complaint filed by five top players earlier this year with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, arguing they are unfairly compensated compared to men's national team players. The complaint notes that the women earned \$2 million for winning the 2015 World Cup, while the men shared \$9 million after they were eliminated from the 2014 World Cup. "The US men's national team get paid more just to show up than we get paid to win major championships," goalkeeper Hope Solo said in March. The women players have also complained about other conditions, such as having to play on artificial turf. In April, national team member Becky Sauerbrunn told ESPN that players hadn't ruled out boycotting Rio over the matter. — AFP

WARTS AND ALL, FRANCE WILL BE TESTED BY THE EURO 2016

PARIS: As with all modern sporting mega-events and their hosts, Euro 2016 will be a mirror for contemporary France: The reflection could be beautiful, ugly, or - most likely - a mix of both. Befitting the world's sixth-largest economy, the bricks and mortar for a successful tournament have been ready for months. New, refurbished or already magnificent stadiums in 10 host cities stand as advertisements for French engineering and savoir faire.

The same is true of the high-speed rail network and cross-country web of "autoroute" highways that should make it a breeze for fans to travel to the 51 matches, soaking up the country's natural beauty in between. No more sleeping rough on airport floors for overpriced red-eye flights like in World Cup hosts Brazil in 2014 and South Africa in 2010, and Euro 2012 co-hosts Poland and Ukraine. Indeed, these relatively compact Euros will be the last fan-friendly soccer tournament for a while.

The 2018 World Cup, spread across Russia's vast expanses, and Euro 2020, dispersed confetti like across 12 countries from Azerbaijan to Ireland, will be made for television (and, by extension, advertisers), with too many geographic and bureaucratic obstacles to enable herds of fans to easily migrate from one match to another, as they will in France, wining and dining as they go. "Un autre verre, si'il vous plait?" - another glass, please? - should be the only French phrase many of them need from June 10-July 10, if all goes well.

Because in France, there is almost always a but, a "oui, mais" - complications that derive from the fact that despite its generous love of simple pleasures, France is also a complex and quarrelsome place, with social, economic and racial fault lines that often spill into the streets. As ill-luck would have it, the 552 players on 24 teams and their supporters are walking into the latest French fisticuffs. This one, like many before it, is essentially a dispute over the French way of life. It again pits the government - socialist, this time - against unions opposed to efforts to weaken them and liberalize workplaces.

Like their parents and grandparents before them, a new generation of malcontents is using the opportunity to cut its teeth in the art of protest, talking politics through the night, hurling paving stones and inhaling first whiffs of police tear gas. So far, transport strikes and gas shortages over the government's labor reforms have been disruptive rather than crippling. Their impact on Euro 2016 will only become clear as the tournament unfolds and could depend on whether the opposing sides compromise or harden their positions.

Despite their centuries of interaction with the world and long colonial history, their pioneering role in the construction of the European Union and the millions of immigrants from Africa and elsewhere who have put down deep and fruitful roots in France, the French can also be distrustful of outsiders. Not all of them, of course, but enough that 6.8 million voted for the extreme-right, anti-European and anti-immigration National Front when France last went to the polls, in December for regional administrators. The loved-up outpouring of national unity behind France's multi-colored team of "blacks, blancs, beurs" - blacks, whites and Arabs - that won the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 proved short-lived, exposed as veneer by rioting in immigrant neighborhoods in 2005 and the war now being waged on France by homegrown Islamic terrorists.

For spectators, the biggest headache could be unprecedented security. Patience, good humor and common sense will be necessary when navigating multiple rings of body, bag and ticket checks at stadiums. No-fly zones will be in force above venues. Detectors will sniff the air to sound the alarm in case of attack with chemical weapons. Anti-drone technology is available to disable airborne intruders. "Nothing has been left to chance," the tournament's security director, Ziad Khoury, says.

Seemingly, the only thing organizers haven't seriously considered since the Nov 13 terror attacks in Paris that killed 130 people is calling the whole thing off. They argue that heightened security is something we all must become accustomed to: the unfortunate new normal in a dangerous world. "There was never any question of cancelling the Euros," Khoury said in an Associated Press interview. "Canceling big events doesn't cancel the risk of terrorism ... It's more of a signal of defeat if you do that." He added: "It's the whole of democratic society, not



PARIS: Italy's player Simone Zaza warms up during a training session of the Italian national soccer team at the Coverciano training center, near Florence, Italy. Italy is in one of the toughest groups at Euro 2016. — AP

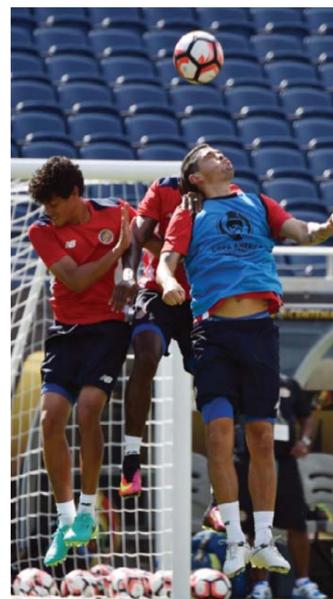
just French society, that must learn to live with the threat of terrorism and limit it as much as possible."

Ultimately, whether France puts on a memorable party or poops on it might depend on its team. Packed with talent in attack and midfield, Les Bleus could go deep into the tournament, despite their shaky-looking defense. France isn't a football-mad country like England or Italy, especially down south in rugby territory, but

people will rally behind players if they don't misbehave and do something ridiculous like go on strike, as they did in South Africa. A thrilling run by the host nation can be a key ingredient for a memorable tournament: Remember the frenzy generated by South Korea's push to the semifinals at the 2002 World Cup it co-hosted with Japan. At the end, all everyone will want is to get home safe, on transport that works, and with a head full of pleasant memories. — AP

PARAGUAY READY TO DEFY FIFA RANKINGS

ORLANDO: Paraguay's veteran goalkeeper Justo Villar says FIFA's rankings undervalue his team and believes they can defy expectations and once again make a real impact in the Copa America Centenario tournament. Paraguay have the lowest FIFA ranking of the four teams in Group A, sitting behind third-ranked Colombia, Costa Rica and the United States. But Villar, about to play in his seventh Copa America tournament, believes that the rankings don't give an accurate reflection of his team's ability. "If we are the worst ranked ... well, we have to show that the rankings are wrong," said the Paraguay keeper, who made his debut for his country in 1999.



ORLANDO: Members of the Costa Rican soccer team train at the Camping World Stadium in Orlando, Florida. — AFP

"In the Copa, the favorites are always Brazil and Argentina but we have shown we can get in there as well. It is a short tournament, resting and good planning, can help us to get through to the next phase - we have really good players," he added. In the 2015 Copa America, Paraguay beat Brazil on penalties in the quarter-final before being crushed 6-1 by Argentina in the semi-final. Four years earlier La Albirroja finished runners-up after losing to Uruguay in the final. Paraguay's Argentine coach Ramon Diaz has brought a squad with plenty of experienced campaigners and he also reads little into the rankings.

"Argentina and Brazil are seen as the best teams with the best players, but from our side we see ourselves as a good team who are growing. The last Copa we weren't considered as a factor but we get to the semis and were super-competitive," he said. "Colombia is a great team, USA has grown a great deal, Mexico look good too, it's a pretty open tournament. It's all about getting off to a good start," he said. Paraguay won the tournament in 1953 and 1979 and while that looks a remote prospect this time, Diaz is happy to have the chance of working with his young squad in a tournament setting.

"We hope the team keeps growing, developing our ideas and mindset. This gives me a chance to work with a team that is growing, I love the players we have and how they are working," he said. But the intense schedule, including long distances between venues, offers a particular challenge says the 56-year-old Diaz. After the game Paraguay will fly to the West Coast to prepare for Tuesday's game with Colombia in Pasadena, California. Four days later they are back in action against the USA in Philadelphia. "It's a very difficult tournament - the trips are really long, we play three games in a week and it will be difficult for trainers and players. The plan is in place, but it will tiring and there will be wear and tear," he said. — AFP