



EVENING ECHO ALTERNATIVE WORLD CUP GUIDE



The House of Saud will soon crumble

By ROBERT O'SHEA

NO MATTER how well Saudi Arabia play against the Ukraine today, none of their players will be in contention for the man-of-the-match award.

Saudi Arabian players will boycott the award throughout the World Cup (i.e. for three games) because it is sponsored by Budweiser.

"It's a matter of principle. No special meeting or decision needed to be taken. Saudi players will not accept an award linked to the maker of an alcoholic beverage," said Abdullah al-Dabal, a Saudi soccer federation official.

He said as a Muslim nation, it was unacceptable for any of the Saudi players to accept such an award. Saudi officials told organisers of the decision before Wednesday's 2-2 draw between Saudi Arabia and Tunisia in Munich. The man-of-the-match award was given to Tunisia's Ziad Jaziri.

Alcohol is banned in Saudi Arabia and anyone found in possession of alcohol in the kingdom faces flogging. If that seems harsh, then read on.

A fatwa on football issued by Sheikh Abdallah Al Najdi was printed in a Saudi Arabian newspaper in 2003.

Among its prohibitions were: "don't play football between four lines"; "do not set the number of players according to the number used by non-believers (i.e. eleven)"; do not play in two halves, rather one or three"; "if one of you insert the ball between the posts and then starts to run so that his companions will run after him and hug him, you should spit in his face, for what do joy and hugging and kissing have to do with sports?"

This all sounds a bit daft, right? However, after reading the fatwa in the newspaper, three players from the Al-Rashid club gave up football, one of whom was later arrested



Sami Al Jaber celebrates scoring against Tunisia. He is one of only two Saudi players to have played outside the Arabian peninsula.

while planning a suicide bombing in Iraq.

If you were to choose what country you were going to support at the World Cup on purely moral grounds then surely Saudi Arabia would be lying at the bottom of your list. And I don't say this just because I had €50 resting on them to go down to Tunisia in their first match. Sure, it probably swayed me a little, but let's face it, Saudi Arabia is about as morally corrupt as countries come.

It wasn't always like this for me.

When they took a 1-0 lead over the Dutch at USA '94 I cheered them on like the rest of the world.

They lost 2-1, but they did capture the imagination at that tournament and I have a vivid memory of almost knocking over an ironing board when Saeed Owairan went on a mazy run through the Belgian defence in their final game and scored an individual goal that was better than Maradona's against the same country in 1986, thus securing their place in the second round for the first time.

Four years later in France under reigning World Cup-winning coach Carlos Alberto Parreira they managed only a draw with South Africa. Then four years ago they gave one of the most defensively inept displays of any World Cup when going down 8-0 to Germany. And we beat them for only our second World Cup win.

I guess my dislike of the Saudis began when somebody told me that the country had no rivers. I'm not sure why this annoyed me so much, but it did.

There are plenty of other reasons. No matter what your view on America's "war on terror", you can dislike the Saudis. Not only did it bring us most of the 9/11 hijackers and Osama Bin Laden, it is also the Bush Administration's firmest ally.

Then there's the lack of democracy and treatment of women, capital punishment and poor human rights. All this, and they're stinking rich because of oil.

This wealth means that football is not needed as a sport of the working classes. The game is merely entertainment for the country's elite and the leagues are the playthings of the royalty in the land of 5,000 princes. There is little incentive for the country's top players to test themselves abroad (only two ever have, and none at present) considering the riches showered on them by the clubs' royal backers.

This introversion means very little is known about their players and there are whispers that some national players come from as far away as Sudan and Cameroon.

Every player in the Saudi squad is on a €50,000 bonus to get to the second round, although this, I guess, would make up for all the beer they would be bought for the rest of their lives if they lived in another country.

So let's run through that again: alcohol banned, fatwa on football, Bush-supporting terrorists, no female fans in dental-floss bikinis, no rivers, beheadings, grossly rich and illegally bringing in foreign players for their national team.

Come on Ukraine!

TOP FACTS ABOUT SOME OF THE WORLD CUP COUNTRIES

THE meeting of Switzerland and Togo in this afternoon's game throws together two teams that rarely compete against each other in competitive football.

It also sees the unusual situation of one of the richest nations in the world facing one of the poorest.

But they do have certain things in common, like both being one of the smallest countries on their continents. Here are some facts from today's competing nations:

1. Switzerland's area is 41,000sq km, about 10,000sq km smaller than Togo.

2 There are over 5 million people in Togo compared to 7 million residents in Switzerland.

2.The Swiss are the world's largest consumers of chocolate in the world, with an annual per capita consumption of 10 kilograms per year. Togo's main food export is cocoa and is one of the world's largest exporters of the crop. With the Swiss no doubt buying a favourable if not flavoured slice of it.

3. The Swiss franc bank note CHF 1000, which is the equivalent of 650 euro, is the highest denomination note in the world. It is believed this high denomination is necessary for the copious amounts of chocolate bought each year. For the average Togolese there is no need for such a denomination as he earns less than 1000 euro per annum. Of course they don't need to buy chocolate as it grows on the trees there.

4.The experience of watching the World Cup at home will be quiet different in each nation. In Switzerland there is one television for every two people in the country, which seems pretty dull really.

However, in Togo there will be much more of a party atmosphere as there is only one TV per 76 people in the West African state. Which should make for a great revelry if Togo wins, but a nightmare cleanup the next day for the poor owner of the television set.

5. We've established that the Swiss have more TVs, money, roads, cars, houses, phones and chocolate, but there is one facet of daily life the Togolese have a clear superiority in: they have a navy.

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WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

The person you have to admire the most for keeping upbeat in the face of World Cup adversity has to be Kevin Kuranyi.

The Schalke striker, who has scored 14 times in 35 appearances for Germany, was surprisingly dropped by Jurgen Klinsmann for the 23-man squad in favour of David Odonkor.

Our Kevin, however, was not one to let this get him

down too much.

Having been signed up as one of several players from participating countries to log a World Cup diary during the competition for Microsoft on the internet (Msn.com — Michael Owen, Edgar Davids are others), Kevin didn't let something small like not actually participating himself get in the way of this duty.

No, the day after the bad news he was booting up and logging on to write: "I'm speechless and very disappointed. I surely won't sleep

Quote of the day

"I was asked the other day who is going to be the top scorer. What a stupid question. Me"

Michael Owen

for a few nights."

This actually seems like he took it pretty well, or at least as well as Werder Bremen's Patrick Owomoyela who said on hearing that he would be dropped: "I am not going to become an alcoholic now."

Every couple of days Kevin logs on a new article about the tournament. His latest one is about Bolton's Mexican striker Jared Borgetti.

"Jared Francisco Borgetti Echavarría. A name like music, a name which melts on the tongue," begins Kevin, going on to sing the praises of the Mexican striker, who has started on the bench in both of Mexico's games.

In the article before this, Kevin picks out David Trezeguet to make a big impact on the tournament.

Of course, he could be taking the piss, which will probably be confirmed with the next article when he tells us to watch out for top German striker Kevin Kuranyi.

BRAINTEASER

How many times did the former country of Czechoslovakia reach the World Cup final?

Yesterday's answer: Australia's 32-0 win over American Samoa is the highest score in a World Cup qualifier.

