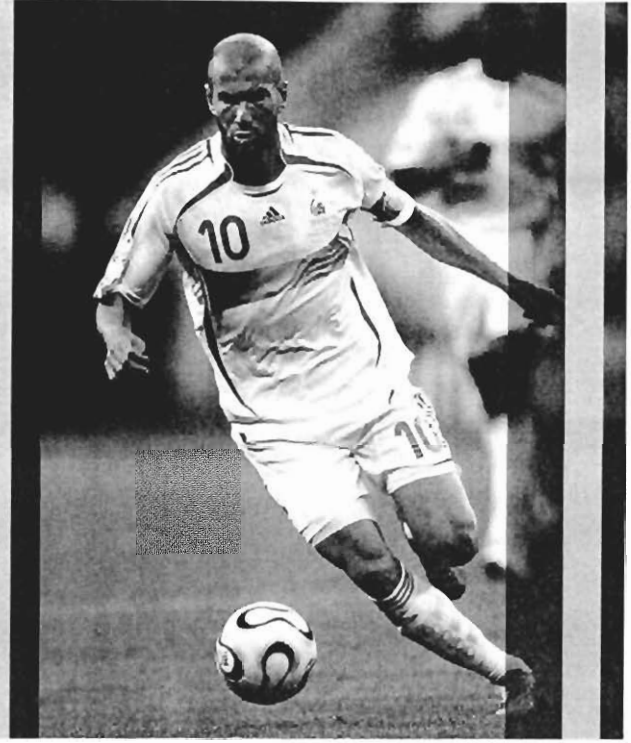




They want to cheer after the final as well: Gianluca Zambrotta (left) and Fabio Grosso.



Hoping to leave with the trophy: Zinedine Zidane wants to crown his great career with the title in the 2006 FIFA World Cup™.

Final game: Italy – France

World champions among themselves

It is not just a duel among neighbours, but a duel of two teams from the elite circle of nations that have won at least one FIFA World Cup: Italy (1934, 1938 and 1982) against France (1998). And it is an encounter of numerous superstars who know each other from the European leagues. The players and teams represent football at the highest level; there is no clear favourite.

For the first time in 12 years, the «Squadra Azzurra» will be competing in a FIFA World Cup final – although its preparations for the tournament were anything but smooth. Italian football is currently caught up in the most serious manipulation scandal to date; several clubs are threatened with forced relegation. News of an attempted suicide by former national team player and current Juventus manager Gianluca Pessotto dealt the team another severe blow. A national team delegation visited Pessotto in hospital in Turin. The team has since considered it as its duty to play for Pessotto and bring home a victory.

Despite the depressing events, they have done rather well so far, with nerves showing only in the group game against the US, which ended 1:1: After an elbow blow against Brian McBride, Daniele de Rossi was shown the red card. The team

also had problems against Australia in the round of sixteen, when referee Medina Cantalejo gave Italy a controversial penalty during injury time. The Italians played first-class football in all other games, as witnessed most clearly in the 2:0 victories against Ghana and the Czech Republic in the preliminary round, in the 3:0 over Ukraine in the quarterfinal and the 2:0 in extra time against host Germany. Now all they need is the title to really get the embattled «Tifosi», the Italian football fans, raving again.

French fans have already done just that as the «Equipe Tricolore» has impressively improved on its performance during the course of the tournament. Ahead of the tournament, experts had considered the team a favourite for the title, but the French failed to live up to this claim at any time during the group games. A meagre 0:0 against

Switzerland was followed by a disappointing 1:1 against South Korea. Only the 2:0 victory over Togo in the final group game secured the French team its place in the round of sixteen.

Suddenly, the aging French players centred around Zinedine Zidane, Lilian Thuram and Claude Makelele played great football. Their victory against the young Spanish team was followed by their best performance so far at the FIFA World Cup when they sent home the defending champion Brazil with a 1:0 victory in the quarterfinal. And the team that dethroned the FIFA Football World Champion™ should be capable of winning the trophy itself. ■