

New coach Blazevic is full of praise

Miroslav Blazevic led Croatia to third place at the '98 World Cup. He's been brought in to turn around an Iranian national team that is loaded with talent but lacks organization.

BY JON HEMMING
in Tehran

New Iran coach Miroslav Blazevic has praised the skill of his players and says with better tactics the team is capable of achieving World Cup success.

Blazevic, who steered his native Croatia to third place at the 1998 World Cup, took over the Iranian national team after signing a two-year contract.

"They are modern players," he said. "They are very technically able, and they are fanatical about this game. They play with all their heart."

Iran has twice won the Asian Cup and twice reached the World Cup finals, in 1978 and 1998.

It beat the United States in France but lost to Germany and Yugoslavia.

"My main goal is to qualify for the World Cup," said Blazevic. "I don't want to make any promises. I want to take things step by step. First, we need to qualify, and then we'll try to take the team as-far as possible."

Iran won Group 2 in the first phase of the Asian qualifying for the 2002 World Cup, setting a tournament record with a 19-0 win over Guam.



TIGHT-ROPE WALKER. The 65-year-old Croat, constantly waving to passing fans and well-wishers in the lobby of his Tehran hotel, acknowledged that both supporters and soccer federations could be fickle.

"A contract can be for a year or two years, but it all depends on results," he said before adding that international soccer coaching is "like being a tight-rope walker."

The exuberant Blazevic said he first noticed Iran's potential in a friendly against Croatia before the 1998 World Cup.

"I found them to be good, skillful players," he said, "so I thought they can achieve more than they have achieved up until now."

But he said Iran lacked a good tactical approach.

"The organization of their game is not rational," added Blazevic.

Iran failed to sparkle at the 2000 Asian Cup in Lebanon, where it fell to

Iranian players celebrate after Hamidreza Estili's goal clinched their historic win over the United States at the '98 World Cup. Iran hopes to return to the World Cup for a third time in 2002.



POPPER/OTO



South Korea in the quarterfinals, prompting the resignation of Jalal Talebi, who coached in France '98.

"I want to support my players and show them that I trust them," Blazevic said, "so I prefer to speak about their qualities. If I mention four names for the squad, the fifth player will feel left out. I don't want to discourage anyone."

Nevertheless, he said Hertha Berlin's stylish striker Ali Daei was a major part of his plans.

"I am very happy to have him in the team," said Blazevic. "He is a world-class player. I hope he will help me instill spirit into the team and lift the play-



POPPER/OTO

MIROSLAV BLAZEVIC

Miroslav Blazevic, 65, got his start in coaching in Switzerland (Vevey, Sion, Lausanne and Grasshoppers) at the conclusion of his playing career there. He coached Croatian teams Rijeka and Dinamo Zagreb in the old Yugoslav First Division before moving abroad again with a second stint at Grasshoppers and stops at Nantes (France) and PAOK (Greece). He returned to Croatia in 1993 after it gained independence and served as Croatian national team coach for seven years (1994-2000).

ers around him. They need a leader."

In Lebanon, there was talk of a split between Iran's veterans from the '98 World Cup team and young players Talebi had developed in the two years since France.

Players such as Daei, Karim Bagheri, Hamidreza Estili and Mehdi Mahdavi remain from the 1998 World Cup team.

The future of Khodadad Azizi, the hero of Iran's '98 qualifying campaign, is in doubt. He was a bust in MLS with the San Jose Earthquakes and has moved to UAE club Al Nasr.

POLITICAL GAFFE. Blazevic stepped down from the Croatia job last October after fierce public criticism sparked by a spate of bad results and a political gaffe.

A supporter of Croatia's late president Franjo Tudjman, Blazevic was widely seen as overstepping his powers when he encouraged players to sign a petition, backed by militant far-right groups, slamming the country's center-left government.

Blazevic will have to be more circumspect about politics in the Islamic Republic.

One Muslim cleric recently criticized the appointment of "drunken" foreign sports coaches, saying that only with true religious faith could Iranian teams succeed.

(Reuters)