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Will the mystery champion please stand up?

(AP) — The World Cup, its defending champion having skidded off the road like a battered Volkswagen, now poses a few questions: Has Italy run out of miracles? Will Brazil samba or march? Is there life after penalty kicks for Sweden?

And, maybe most important, what's with Bulgaria?

If nothing else, perhaps the rest of the tournament will serve as a cultural primer on Bulgaria, not exactly the North Korea of international sports but nonetheless one of the tournament's mystery teams.

Rakiya, the Bulgarian plum brandy that can line the gut like antifreeze, is not yet being sold at World Cup concession stands. But who knows? If there is a ready market, FIFA's entrepreneurs are certain to meet consumer demand.

With victories over Argentina, Mexico and defending champion Germany, Bulgaria is enjoying a dizzying run through soccer's showcase. Its president and prime minister placed calls to the locker room at Giants Stadium

following Sunday's 2-1 victory over Germany. The streets of Sofia are snarled in gridlock with horn-blowing, flagdraped celebrants touting star striker Hristo Stoitchkov for president.

The actual president, Zhelyu Zhelev, goes on national television to salute the team. He is to leave Tuesday for the United States to attend Wednesday's semifinal against Italy at East Rutherford, N.J.

In Wednesday's other semifinal, Sweden faces Brazil at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif.

Stoitchkov, who has established himself as one of the World Cup's best players, says he has known all along the Bulgarians could play. Now it is the rest of the world finding out.

Amid all the rollicking back home, Stoitchkov received some disquieting news Monday. His mother collapsed while watching the quarterfinal game on television in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city.

It was the third time Penka Stoitchkova, 47, was stricken with heart problems after watch-

ing her son play. She was released from the hospital after several hours.

The player's father, Stoitchko Stoitchkov, said he needed a few tranquilizers before kickoff to make it through the game.

Italian coach Arrigo Sacchi is not quite so anxious, although he is plenty concerned. He is trying to figure out how best to defend Stoitchkov, Emil Kostadinov and Jordan Letchkov.

"It's going to be another battle," he said. "The best way for stopping them would be a pistol. We will have to mark them closely."

Italy, a three-time champion, has been playing a most dangerous game, with perilous escapes against Nigeria and Spain in its last two outings. Roberto Baggio has provided the goal-scoring dramatics both times, and Sacchi must wonder how much more Saint Roberto can provide.

Dino Baggio, Italy's other savior of late, said he initially wanted to play the Bulgarians in the semifinals because he thought them weaker than the Germans.

Not anymore.

"After watching their quarterfinal game on television I must say I changed my mind," he said. "They have a great physical condition and are extremely dangerous in counter-attacks. We can expect another tough game."

As can Sweden and Brazil. They played a 1-1 draw in the first round, and now will play the first rematch in a World Cup since 1982.

The Brazilians are coming off a 3-2 victory over the Netherlands in which all five goals were scored in the second half. The Swedes are still regrouping from their wild 5-4 penalty-kick shootout over Romania after regulation and overtime ended 2-2.

Swedish star forward Martin Dahlin was forced from the game because of leg cramps, and there is a possibility he may not play in the biggest game of his career.

"I think it will be a last-minute decision," said Dahlin, speaking from his team's harbor hotel in Marina del Rey, Calif. "Of course, I want to play. I also have to be able to give 100 percent."

Talk of players' strike shadowing All-Star game

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Ken Griffey Jr. was bopping around, his hat on backwards, by the way. Barry Bonds was laughing, hitting to the hip-hop of Madonna's "Vogue."

While they were having fun getting ready for the All-Star game at Three Rivers Stadium, however, others were getting serious Monday.

Right across the Monongahela River, the players' union was talking about a strike. Though no deadline was set, the union's executive board announced it had the authority to stop the sport at any time.

"It's the attention-getting thing about this game," All-Star shortstop Barry Larkin of Cincinnati admitted. "Anytime you look at the game of baseball as a business, it brings a cloud over the whole thing."

There was no getting away from it, even as much as players and fans wanted to. Not even Frank Thomas hitting 500-foot shots in the home run derby managed to deter talk about a strike that could wipe out the expanded playoffs and World Series.

"It's just kind of looming," San Francisco reliever Rod Beck said, shaking his head. "It takes away from the whole season, not just the All-Star game."

"It's an ugly situation, but it's on everyone's minds."

Owners' negotiator Richard Ravitch was in town, too, talking tough at a time when baseball usually is getting ready to stretch out for

its summer break.

"There's a lot of speculation that because owners have folded every time in the past, they are going to do it this time — all the union has to do is say boo and the owners will fold their tent," Ravitch said. "But that's not going to happen this time."

Back at the ballpark, the All-Stars were preparing for Tuesday night's game, trying to stay loose.

Fred McGriff was playfully rubbing Mike Piazza's biceps for luck. Doug Jones was roaming the outfield with a videocamera. Atlanta's David Justice was talking to some Montreal players about the NL East duel.

There are lots of pennant races this season because of realignment. There are bunches of players on record chases, perhaps because of a juiced-up ball.

So sit back, relax and enjoy the power of Matt Williams, the pitching of Greg Maddux and the panache of Ozzie Smith — because it could be baseball's last big hurrah this year.

The American League, bidding to extend its longest winning streak to seven games, flexed its muscles during batting practice and the home run derby.

Griffey won the derby, but even he was bowing down after Thomas hit a 519-foot drive, the longest ball ever measured at Three Rivers. The AL won the power show for the fourth straight year.

Before they hit, Thomas stretched his black

bat over his head while Griffey got into a long, animated discussion with Reggie Jackson.

Earlier, Bonds talked about the AL's two brightest stars, and what a strike might do to their pursuit of Roger Maris' record of 61 home runs.

"For Junior and Thomas, I'd hate to see it. It may never come again like this for them," Bonds said.

Griffey and Matt Williams are tied for the major league lead with 33 home runs. Thomas is next with 32.

"Junior is still the best," Bonds said. "There's no one in baseball like him."

The job of stopping Griffey, Thomas and the rest of the AL stars will go to Maddux, the NL starter. The Atlanta ace is 11-5 with a 1.80 ERA in his bid to become the first pitcher to win three straight Cy Young Awards.

"They definitely have a lot of power," Maddux said. "I'll just try to keep it down, try to make them hit it at somebody."

The AL, again with Cal Ripken Jr., Kirby Puckett, Roberto Alomar and Wade Boggs in the lineup, has outscored the NL 22-9 over the last two years. Overall, the NL leads the series 37-26-1.

Jimmy Key was picked by his former manager Cito Gaston to start for the AL. The left-hander, 13-2 with a 3.31 ERA for the New York Yankees, will face a lineup that includes lefties Tony Gwynn, David Justice and Bonds.

Harding's bodyguard gets 18 months for Kerrigan incident

PORTLAND (AP) — Shawn Eckardt, the beefy would-be bodyguard to Tonya Harding, was sentenced to 18 months in prison Monday in another strange chapter of the already bizarre Nancy Kerrigan assault case.

"Mr. Eckardt, you have become a very well-known person," Circuit Judge Philip Abraham said. "There are adjectives that can be added to your name, something like infamous, notorious, greedy, dishonest, even stupid."

The sentence already had been worked out as part of Eckardt's agreement to plead guilty to racketeering more than two months ago. The sentencing, though, was anything but routine.

Before he left the courtroom in handcuffs, Eckardt made an unsuccessful attempt to delay

the sentencing, fired his attorney and lashed out verbally at prosecutor Norm Frink.

Eckardt, who turns 27 next Monday, pleaded guilty to racketeering on May 3. At the same time, co-defendants Shane Stant and Derrick Smith pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit second-degree assault.

They and Harding's ex-husband, Jeff Gillooly, have admitted they conspired to injure Kerrigan to knock her out of the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Detroit. The plan was to clear the way for Harding to win the championship and make the Olympic team.

Eckardt told his cohorts he intended to make big money running a bodyguard service for skaters who then would be worried about their safety.

Kerrigan was struck above the right knee with a police baton

on Jan. 6 in Detroit. Two days later, with Kerrigan out of the competition, Harding won the title and went on to finish eighth in the Olympics.

Two weeks ago, Harding was stripped of her title by the U.S. Figure Skating Association.

Stant, the hit man, and Smith, his uncle who drove the getaway car, began their 18-month prison sentences immediately after entering their pleas.

The case will finally come to a conclusion Wednesday when Gillooly is sentenced. He has pleaded guilty to racketeering in exchange for a two-year prison sentence and a \$100,000 fine. But Frink and Gillooly's attorney have indicated that sentence might change.

Abraham said "a terrible, terrible event certainly in the history of sports and the history of this state is coming to a

close."

Abraham rejected Eckardt's motion to delay sentencing for two weeks and reluctantly allowed him to switch attorneys, then let the defendant make a statement.

Eckardt didn't mention Kerrigan. Instead, he turned his wrath on Frink, who negotiated a deal that allowed Harding to stay out of jail in exchange for a guilty plea to conspiracy to hinder prosecution.

"Throughout this entire investigation, it is my opinion that this case, at least the prosecution, has been used as a political football by the district attorney's office," Eckardt said. "Instead of the fair and impartial administration of justice, it has been used in the media and in the political realm to further the career of Norman Frink."