



Portugal midfielder Costinha (C) warms up with teammates during a training session in Marienfeld on Thursday ahead of their match against Iran in Frankfurt on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

PORTUGAL V IRAN

# Aiming for improved showing

AGENCIES, Frankfurt

Portugal will aim for a vastly improved performance against Iran after struggling to a win in their opening game against Group D minnows Angola.

Coach Luis Felipe Scolari hit out at "negative" press after the scrappy 1-0 victory but striker Pauleta admitted it had been a below-par performance.

"We have to step it up if we want to go much further in this tournament. We really need to do better," the striker said.

Pauleta's goal was all that separated Portugal's star-studded line-up from Angola, a war-scarred former Portuguese colony making its World Cup debut.

With stars such as Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo and former World Player of the Year Luis Figo, Scolari is targeting the quarterfinals at least.

Portugal are hoping to welcome back influential midfielder Deco, who sat out the Angola game with a leg muscle strain. The Barcelona playmaker returned to training this week but worked out separately from his teammates.

Deco or no Deco, Portugal will expect to sweep aside an injury-hit Iran, who faltered badly to lose 3-1 against Mexico after a promis-

ing first half.

Iran's presence in Germany has been frequently overshadowed by politics, something Ivankovic has repeatedly tried -- and failed -- to deflect. Coupled with poor performances by some of Iran's Bundesliga players, the mood in the camp is far from upbeat.

"The players were not satisfied with the result. Now we have to prepare ourselves mentally against Portugal," Ivankovic said. Coach Branko Ivankovic looks set to make dramatic changes with Team Melll teetering on the brink of elimination.

Veteran captain Ali Daei, who holds the world record for international goals but received harsh media criticism for his performance against Mexico, is likely to miss out with a back problem.

"We will have to see what happens in the next few days with Ali Daei," said Ivankovic.

Goalkeeper Ebrahim Mirzapour, who was also singled out for defensive frailties against Mexico, could also be an uncertain starter.

Injuries to Iran's key Bundesliga players have hit their campaign but Bayern Munich forward Ali Karimi and Hamburg's Mehdi Mahdavi both trained this week.

Kaiserslautern midfielder Ferydoon Zandi, who missed the opening match after suffering a fever and muscle problem, was also back in training.

Iran have conceded at least once in every World Cup finals game they have played. Now in their third tournament, they are still searching for their second victory after beating the United States 2-1 in 1998.

Portugal are more relaxed after their 1-0 win over Angola although, given that their performance against their former colony was distinctly underwhelming, they need another win to avoid a tough showdown with Mexico in their last group game.

**TEAMS**

**Portugal (4-4-2)**  
1-Ricardo; 13-Miguel, 16-Ricardo Carvalho, 5-Fernando Meira, 14-Nuno Valente, 8-Armando Peito, 18-Maniche, 11-Simao Sabrosa, 7-Luis Figo; 17-Cristiano Ronaldo; 9-Pauleta

**Iran (4-2-3-1)**  
1-Ebrahim Mirzapour; 13-Hossein Kaebi, 5-Rahman Rezaei, 4-Yahya Golmohammadi, 20-Mohammad Nosrati; 6-Javan Nekoum, 14-Andranik Teymourian, 2-Mehdi Mahdavi, 9-Vahid Hashemian, 8-Ali Karimi; 15-Arash Borhani

The squad are aware that Iran, eager to salvage something of their reputation, will fight hard in Frankfurt on Saturday.

"I know we always say it but this will be a difficult game. There are no easy games in the World Cup," Figo said.

Surprisingly, Portugal are also playing only their fourth World Cup. They finished third in 1966 with the legendary Eusebio and were knocked out in the group stages in 2002.

But they also finished runners-up in the Euro 2004 championships under Scolari, who has agreed in principle to extend his contract by another two years after the World Cup.

The Angola game gave Scolari a new record for consecutive World Cup wins, which now total eight following his title-winning performance with Brazil in 2002.

Mexico top Group D on goal difference after the first two games with Portugal second, Iran third and Angola bottom.

The top two teams can expect a tough second-round match against the survivors of Group C, the 'Group of Death' which brackets Argentina, the Netherlands, Ivory Coast and Serbia and Montenegro.

## Ivankovic will ring the changes

AFP, Germany

Iran coach Branko Ivankovic will make changes to his line-up as he attempts to keep his team in the World Cup when they face Portugal in Frankfurt on Saturday.

Iran lost their Group D opener 3-1 to Mexico and a defeat against the Portuguese will spell the end of the Iran campaign.

Skipper Ali Daei looks like being the most high profile casualty with the veteran striker, who was roundly criticised in the Iranian press for his lacklustre performance against Mexico, suffering from a back injury.

"We will have to see what happens in the next few days with Ali Daei," said Ivankovic.

The 37-year-old Daei is the world's top international scorer with 109 goals.

Goalkeeper Ebrahim Mirzapour, who was singled out for criticism for his part in the first Mexican goal, could also be an uncertain starter.

But Ivankovic came to the keeper's defence.

"Until he made the mistake, he had had a good game," said the coach.

Meanwhile, injured players Ali Karimi, Mehdi Mahdavi and Ferydoon Zandi all trained on Tuesday.

## Separate training for Deco

REUTERS, Guetersloh

Midfielder Deco, already doubtful after clashing with teammate Costinha last week, trained separately from the rest of the squad on Tuesday.

The playmaker, who missed Sunday's Group D win against Angola, has four days to return to fitness before his side face Iran in Frankfurt on Saturday.

While he warmed up with the squad, in a public session in front of around 5,000, he spent the next hour on the sidelines, practising short runs and receiving physiotherapy.

Nicknamed 'the magic one', Deco is the ideal playmaker with his long, raking passes and is deadly with free kicks. Luis Figo took over his role in Sunday's win over Angola, with Simao Sabrosa filling in for the captain on the left flank.

Earlier on Tuesday, midfielder Armando Petit told reporters that the side were working well and training hard and ready to take three points in the game against Iran.

"We need three points to guarantee progression into the next round," he said. "Our main concern is winning the match."

# 'It will be a final'

REUTERS, Marienfeld

Playmaker Luis Figo said on Thursday that Portugal's World Cup game against Iran would be "like a final" with both teams desperate to get the full three points albeit for different reasons.

"I expect a difficult game because it will be one of the last chances for Iran to try to get through to the next round," the Portuguese captain told a news conference. "Everyone knows that if they get a negative result they will be out."

"In contrast, if we win we will qualify for the next round. It is like a final for both teams," he said of

Saturday's Group D clash in Frankfurt.

Iran lost 3-1 to Mexico in their first Group D game. Portugal beat Angola 1-0 in their opener.

As Portugal's oldest and most-capped player, Figo said he had nothing to prove. The 33-year-old carved open Angola's defence and set up Pauleta's goal, putting paid to pre-tournament doubts that he was past his best.

"I don't have to prove my abilities to anyone as a player," he said. "It will not be at the end of my career that I start proving what I can do. I am here to do my best in a top competition."

Nor did he feel any extra pres-

sure as captain.

"Participation in the World Cup and the national team is already a big responsibility. Being captain, or hearing people say I should have more influence is not part of it," he said.

"I am here to work for my country... and make sure we get as far as we can," he added.

He said the side were training hard and not dwelling on the side's last World Cup in 2002 when they failed to make it past the group phase.

"We are thinking only in terms of the present, only about this World Cup," he said.

## Iran pose more problems

REUTERS, Marienfeld

Portugal midfielder Costinha said Iran will be a tougher challenge than their first Group D opponents Angola, with their determination and strength in midfield and attack requiring special attention.

"It will be a difficult game. We saw the first half against Mexico and we saw Iran playing very well," Costinha told a news conference ahead of Saturday's match in Frankfurt.

Iran lost their opening game against the Mexicans 3-1 but held their own in the first half and reached the break level at 1-1 before two late goals ended their resistance.

"They lost the first game so in this game they will play even harder because if they lose, it will be difficult for them to qualify," added Costinha who was left out of Portugal's starting lineup for Sunday's opening 1-0 win over

Angola.

He said coach Luiz Felipe Scolari was preparing for what he believed would be much tougher opposition from Iran.

"Every game is different. Every team is different and requires different tactics and different players," said Costinha.

"I'm sure Iran will play differently to Angola -- they will be faster and stronger in midfield and in attack."

"Mr Scolari will prepare us. He will do it correctly and we will be ready," he added.

Costinha, who has won 45 caps, was sanguine when asked if he objected to missing out on the starting lineup.

"Being on the bench or playing is part of the game. The most important thing is to be here and help this country to have a good performance," he said.

Angola next play Mexico in Hanover on Friday.

## Ronaldo quarantined

REUTERS, Marienfeld

Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo trained separately on Thursday, casting doubt on whether he would be fit for his country's next World Cup Group D game against Iran.

The player, who appeared upset when he was substituted during Sunday's 1-0 win over Angola and who completed just 15 minutes of training on Wednesday, limited his session to short runs and exercises with a physiotherapist.

Under the leadership of coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, the players have stayed focused on the games, deflecting all questions about clubs and player personalities.

Asked about the situation with Ronaldo, playmaker Luis Figo was tight-lipped.

"You will have to ask the doctor about Ronaldo. I think he's okay, he just didn't train because of a small problem," he said.

The squad travel to Frankfurt later on Thursday ahead of their game against Iran on Saturday.



Iranian midfielder Mehdi Mahdavi (L) and his teammate Ali Karimi fight for the ball during a training session in Friedrichshafen on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP



Sweden fans cheer on their team minutes before the start of their match against Paraguay in Berlin on Thursday. Names of players (L-R) Larsson, Ibrahimovic and Ljunberg are painted on their bodies.

PHOTO: AFP

## Half-nil will do: Scolari

REUTERS, Frankfurt

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari would settle for a half-nil win over Iran in Saturday's Group D match, he said on Friday.

Portugal, who beat Angola 1-0 in their opening game last Sunday, are expecting a tough match against opponents who went down 3-1 to Mexico in their first outing.

"In many ways, this is the most difficult of the three games," said Scolari, whose team face Mexico in their final match.

"There are several details, things which put the Iranians apart, things which Angola and Mexico don't have," added the Brazilian, known back home as Big Phil.

"I sense that there is less nervousness in our team than there was before the first game but I also feel there's a little more respect for Iran. The players expect more difficulties than in the first game."

"I think Iran have an excellent team and, as far as I'm concerned, if we win half-nil, 1-0 or

2-1, that will be enough to reach our target."

Scolari played down talk about the possibility that he will leave his job after the World Cup and remarks by leading players in the Portuguese media that it will be a step back for Portugal if he goes.

"I joked with Costinha and (Luis) Figo that they are crawlers for saying those things," said Scolari, who led Brazil to the world title in 2002.

"What is important is the way we have formed this group and those moments we've been through since 2003," he said. "We've had some excellent moments for Portugal."

He declined to compare his current squad to Brazil in 2002.

"I can't make comparisons," he said. "They are different personalities, different characteristics and different cultures."

"All I can say is that I was very happy to be part of that group and I'm very happy to be part of this one."

## Captain charisma

REUTERS, Marienfeld

Portugal captain Luis Figo commanded respect and admiration from his players despite being the oldest member of the World Cup squad, midfielder Costinha said on Wednesday.

"Figo is captain charisma," Costinha told a news conference. "He is the player who surprised me most when I came into the squad because he is super professional."

"With his age, and he's not that old, having a guy in the form he is in is very good for us."

Figo, who turns 34 in November, demonstrated his value to the side by orchestrating the 1-0 Group D win over Angola in Cologne on Sunday, carving through the defence to set up Pauleta's goal.

The veteran playmaker reconsidered his decision to retire after Portugal were beaten by Greece in the final of Euro 2004.

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari even said Figo had improved as a player in the last two years.

Figo will almost certainly win his 122nd cap in Saturday's match against Iran in Frankfurt.

He showed his versatility against Angola, fitting into the playmaker's role left vacant by the injured Deco.