

CZECH REPUBLIC V GHANA

Black Stars look to rebound

AFP, Cologne

Ghana will be looking to transform their stylish play in the 2-0 defeat by Italy into goals when they take on the Czech Republic here on Saturday in their second Group E clash.

Victory would be ideal for the Black Stars but a point might suffice as they will then round off their campaign against the United States, who based on the evidence of their 3-0 defeat by the Czechs don't look like bearing comparison to the 2002 vintage who reached the quarter-finals.

The Czechs will have to face Italy in their final match so victory over Ghana would be a welcome insurance policy in their bid to reach the second round.

While the Czechs looked impressive in their stroll past the Americans, they met little opposition and the Ghanaians will not be so easy to get past as the Italians discovered.

They earned justified praise from Marcello Lippi for providing a stern test for his Azzurri and with the likes of Chelsea's Michael Essien, Udinese's Sulley Muntari and captain Stephen Appiah of Penebace in midfield they have the potential to cause an upset and give African football a welcome boost.

Their shrewd and much-travelled coach Ratomir Djukovic believes that a second round place is not beyond their grasp.

"I was proud of my players in the Italy match except for the left back, but he has been replaced for not doing what he was asked to do," said the 60-year-old Serb, who has also coached Rwanda and Burma among teams he has coached.

"I think nevertheless that while the Czechs are a strong side we can achieve something against them and then make it into the second round," added Djukovic, who was fortunate to survive after Ghana crashed out of the first round of the African Nations Cup earlier this year.

"Teams that lose the first match can still get to the quarter-finals and go far," said captain Stephen Appiah mirroring his coach's comments.

The Czechs looked very smooth

TEAMS

Czech Republic (4-5-1)

1-Petr Cech; 2-Zdenek Grygera, 6-Marek Jankulovski, 22-David Rozehnal, 21-Tomas Ujfalusi; 4-Tomas Galasek (captain), 11-Pavel Nedved, 8-Karel Poborsky, 10-Tomas Rosicky, 20-Jaroslav Plasil; 12-Vratislav Lokvenc.

Ghana (4-4-2)

1-Richard Kingston; 15-John Paintsil, 4-Samuel Kuffour, 5-John Mensah, 6-Emmanuel Pappoe; 11-Sulley Muntari, 8-Michael Essien, 10-Stephen Appiah (captain), 18-Eric Addo; 3-Asamoah Gyan; 14-Matthew Amoah.

against the Americans but they have their own problems with both their first choice strikers Milan Baros and Jan Koller definitely out of the remainder of the first round with the former a major doubt for the whole tournament.

Czech coach Karel Brueckner says he is unconcerned about the unexpected change of plans but will also be looking for plenty of attacking support from Tomas Rosicky, who scored twice on Monday, Pavel Nedved and Jaroslav Plasil, whose performance he raved about all week.

"We will not have the ideal lineup but there is strength in this squad," Brueckner said.

Another of the 30-something veterans will step into the giant Koller's boots as the equally imposing 32-year-old Vratislav Lokvenc will probably play a lone role up front with the double threat of Pavel Nedved and the young gun Rosicky providing goalscoring support from midfield.

The irrepressible Rosicky - scorer of two splendid goals against the Americans - admits that the injuries are a blow but the new Arsenal signing also looked at it positively.

"It is really sad for Milan and Jan, and before we lost Vladimir (Smicer, who was ruled out of the tournament before it had begun) but we have to get on with things and we can use it as an extra motivating factor," said the 25-year-old.



Ghanaian players stretch during training in Warzburg on Thursday.

PHOTO AFP

Jens asks Tomas to relax

INTERNET, undated

Jens Lehmann is delighted to see new Arsenal team-mate Tomas Rosicky prosper in the early stages of the World Cup - but wants the Czech Republic star to save some of his best performances for the Gunners next season.

Rosicky was in superb form for the Czechs in their 3-0 win over the USA yesterday, scoring a goal in each half and flourishing in his attacking midfield role.

Lehmann knows all about Rosicky - he played alongside him for two years when both players were at Borussia Dortmund - and is happy to see him start the World Cup in such good form.

"I watched the match and it is

nice to see that Tomas is in great shape at the beginning of such a tournament," said the Germany goalkeeper.

"But looking ahead, I would love him to scale back a little bit now and relax before playing really well for us (Arsenal)."

Meanwhile, Lehmann fears England have adopted a typically German mentality at the World Cup - by grinding out results with below-par performances.

He claimed last week that unlike his national team, the English do not know "how to get the job done" in major tournaments.

Sven-Goran Eriksson's men looked far from convincing in their opening victory over Paraguay on Saturday, yet they secured the three

points.

That is an ominous sign for Lehmann, who admitted: "That worries me."

The 36-year-old custodian believes the fitness of Wayne Rooney and Michael Owen could determine England's chances of winning the tournament.

"The English are certainly among the favourites," he added.

"They have a good team with good players. The only question mark is the fitness of their strikers."

"Michael Owen and Wayne Rooney have not been healthy for two or three months. It is hard for a player to come back after such a long break."

Ghana still feel the pain

REUTERS, Germany

Ghana's players are still down days after their 2-0 World Cup Group E defeat by Italy in Hanover.

"It's been two days now and I can't go to bed. It's been very bad for me," midfielder Sulley Ali Muntari told a news conference on Thursday.

The World Cup debutants failed to threaten an organised Italian defence and fell behind to a long shot from Andrea Pirlo before a botched back pass from Samuel Osei Kuffour gifted Vincenzo Iaquinta the second goal.

"Kuffour is suffering more than anyone at this moment," said coach Ratomir Djukovic.

"He is very sorry for what happened. We will try to do everything to cheer him up."

Captain Stephen Appiah said Ghana could still reach the later stages.

"Teams that lose the first match can still get to the quarter-finals and go far," Appiah said.

One of Ghana's problems was a failure to convert ample possession in midfield into goalscoring chances.

Djukovic said he was aware his side had problems up front but was not unduly troubled.

"We scored eight goals in friendlies," he said. "It does not mean we have a problem in attack."

"Even Brazil had problems in attack when they removed Ronaldo (in the second half)," he said referring to Brazil's 1-0 victory over Croatia on Tuesday.

"I think they (Ghana) will play much better and score goals against Czech Republic (on Saturday). I am still confident we can pass the group stage and get to the semi-finals."

Djukovic said he had no injuries to report. "We have some kicks but nothing serious," he said.

Injury worries for Czechs

INTERNET, undated

The Czech Republic look to be without two of their top strikers for the game against Ghana's Black Stars in Cologne on Saturday.

Both Milan Baros and Jan Koller missed out on training with the rest of the Czech squad and Koller, who scored in the opening goal against the United States on Monday, but pulled his hamstring during the first-half of the match, is now doubtful for the rest of the group rounds.

Aston Villa's Milan Baros, who has a foot injury, didn't play in the match against the USA and also looks very doubtful for a place in the starting line-up for the match against Ghana and, like Koller looks likely to miss the vital last match in Group E against Italy.

Kaiser tips Ghana

INTERNET, Hanover

German soccer legend Frank Beckenbauer has rated the performance of Ghana in last Monday's Group E world cup game against Italy as high, believing that the Black Stars have what it takes to make the second round.

He says despite the 0-2 defeat to the Italians, the team can bounce back with victory in their next two games against the Czech Republic and the United States.

Beckenbauer was speaking to The Chronicle in Hanover soon after Ghana's game against the Azzurris.

"The performance of the team was impressive," he remarked, adding, "they can build on this and step up a gear in their next two games."

The former world cup winner, as both player and coach, recognises that the Ghanaians suffered from inexperience, especially in attack, and stated that it was this lack of precision upfront that robbed them of goals in Monday's game.

Ghana dominated much of the play but failed to convert any of the chances that came their way into goals, with Addoquaye Pappoe, Michael Essien, Matthew Amoah and Asamoah Gyan all

missing some good opportunities.

There was also a glimpse of an occasional lack of concentration in the last few minutes of the first half, which saw the Italians getting the opener through the impressive Andrea Pirlo who struck from 25 yards after receiving a pass from a corner.

Beckenbauer's comments were re-echoed by former national coach, Sam Arday, who said the team deserves some commendations for their impressive show against a stronger Italian side, who are among the favourites tipped for the title.

He urged the boys to put the defeat behind them and focus on their next assignment against the Czechs on Saturday in Cologne. "This is the only way they can keep their dream of a second round berth alive."

The Czechs, he accepts, are another strong side but believes Ghana can rise to the occasion and shock them.

This is going to be a match of survival for Ghana after the Czechs put up an impressive display in beating the USA 3-0 in the earlier game on Monday in Gelsenkirchen.

Ghana coach, Ratomir

Djukovic, knows this very well and will make changes to his squad for Saturday's game. He acknowledges that there were some shortfalls in the team last Monday and has promised to effect changes.

At a post-match news conference, the Serbian made it known that he recognised a deep hole in defence especially on the left side where Pappoe was given a tough time by Pirlo and co.

The attack was also not potent enough and could not apply the needed pressure on the defence of the Azzurris.

"I have acknowledged these pitfalls and will work on that before our next game on Saturday," he assured, promising a better output from his charges.

After the opening games in Group E, the Czech Republic leads the standing with three points, the same as the Italians but with a better goal difference following their 3-0 win over the USA. Goals by Jan Koller and Tomas Rosicky, who had a brace, secured victory for the Europeans.

They line up against the Black Stars on Saturday at 4:00pm Ghana time in Cologne, with the USA pitching their strength against Italy in Kaiserslautern at 7:00pm Ghana time

Nedved warns teammates

INTERNET, undated

Czech Republic playmaker Pavel Nedved insists Monday's impressive 3-0 World Cup victory over the United States will count for nothing if they fail to qualify from Group E.

The Czechs are in pole position to progress to the next phase ahead of Saturday's second group match against Ghana in Cologne.

The Czechs played a fantastic game and came out of it looking like genuine contenders for the World Cup. They were strong in defence and looked assured in midfield with new recruit Tomas Rosicky catching the eye with two spectacular goals.

Nedved himself was relatively quiet by his own high standards but even then the Czechs showed enough to send warning sirens through to the rest of the contenders.

However, Juventus midfielder Nedved warns the eastern European side cannot afford to be complacent as they have achieved nothing yet.

"I do not think there is any euphoria in the team, we have won one match. It still does not mean anything, because three points do not mean qualification," he said.

"We need three more points. We have to keep saying that promotion (to the second round) is not near, because three points are not enough, we are still at the beginning."



PHOTO AFP

Ecuador supporters celebrate in Quito following their 3-0 win over Costa Rica in the World Cup on Thursday.

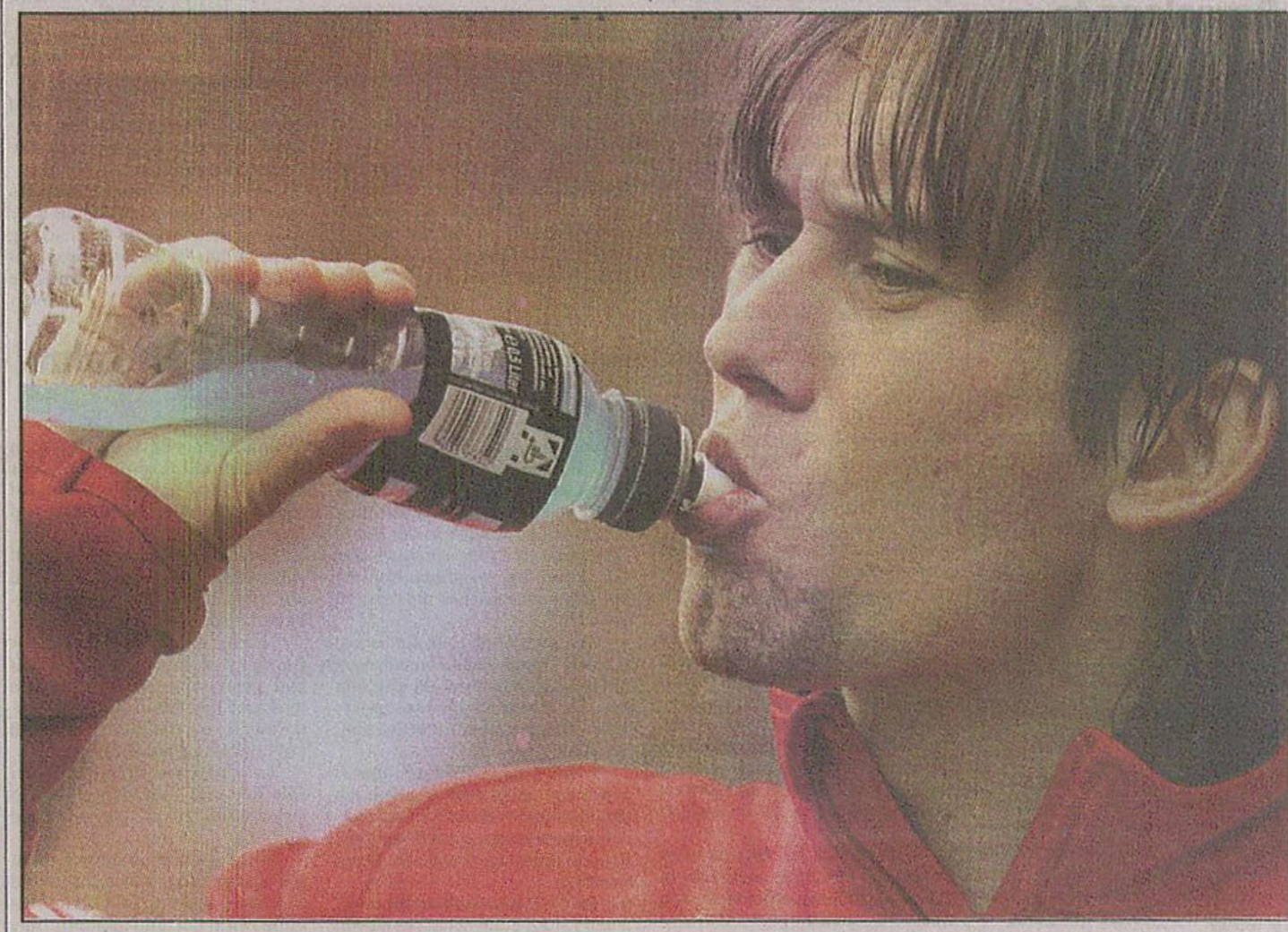


PHOTO AFP

Czech star Tomas Rosicky has a drink at the end of his team's closed practice at a school stadium in Westerburg on Thursday.