



Ukrainian forward Andriy Shevchenko (L) gestures as he runs with teammates during a training session in Potsdam on Wednesday.

SAUDI ARABIA V SPAIN Time to boost confidence

AFP, Kaiserslautern

Spain's Iker Casillas has called for a confidence-building show of strength when they face Saudi Arabia in their final Group H match here Friday.

Spain, who have notched up two convincing wins over Ukraine (4-0) and Tunisia (3-1), are looking to secure the minimum-required draw to top their group and secure a second round date with the runner-up in Group G.

That could lead to a clash with France, Switzerland or South Korea. And while that prospect holds little fear for Casillas, the 25-year-old Real Madrid keeper is adamant the Saudis' tag as the group's whipping boys should not hold them back.

"We shouldn't be scared of playing either France or South Korea now, but it's important for us to win against Saudi Arabia," he said after Spain overturned their 1-0 first half deficit to Tunisia in style Monday.

While Spain's performances have put them on the road to the quarter-finals, which they have failed to get past in 56 years, the Saudis have only just atoned for their past World Cup disaster.

The Sons of the Desert arrived with the unforgettable memory of their 8-0 defeat to Germany at the last World Cup still lingering.

In their first Group match Marcos Paqueta's side moved quickly to shed their reputation, taking a 2-1 lead over Tunisia in the

second half before Roger Lemerre's side snatched an injury-time equaliser.

Against Ukraine, the Saudis fell victim to a team still smarting from a 4-0 defeat at the hands of Spain - and they paid the price.

Ukraine penetrated the Saudis' leaky defence as early as the fourth minute, and ran out 4-0 winners to relaunch their bid for a place in the second round on their World Cup debut.

Saudi Arabia failed to get a shot on the Ukraine goal.

And for Paqueta, who became the 16th coach to be hired by the whimsical Saudi football authorities in 12 years when he arrived at the start of the year, the writing appears to be on the wall.

TEAMS

Saudi Arabia (4-5-1)

1-Mohamed Al Deayea (181-0); 2-Ahmed Dokki (70-4); 13-Hussein Sulaimani (99-3); 4-Hamad Al Montashari (34-6); 3-Redha Taker (39-6); 14-Saud Al Khaniri (36-12); 6-Omar Al Ghamdi (40-5); 8-Mohamed Noor (65-22); 9-Sami Al Jaber (162-44); 16-Khaled Al Thaker (16-2); 20-Yassir Al Qahitani (45-33)

Spain (4-3-3)

19-Santiago Canizares (45-0); 2-Michel Salgado (50-0); 20-Juanito (15-1); 4-Carlos Marchena (27-1); 12-Antonio Lopez (10-1); 6-David Albelda (34-0); 13-Andres Iniesta (3-0); 18-Cesc Fabregas (6-0); 17-Joaquin (39-4); 10-Jose Antonio Reyes (19-4); 7-Raul (97-44)

Deja vu for Lemerre!

AFP, Berlin

Roger Lemerre and France could both be leaving the World Cup after the group stage for the second successive time on Friday - only this time it won't be the Frenchman's fault.

France have to beat Togo - perhaps by two clear goals if South Korea and Switzerland draw - to be sure of their place in the last 16 while Lemerre's task is simple, to beat Ukraine and book their first ever place in the second round.

All familiar territory for the two protagonists after Lemerre's disastrous stewardship of Les Bleus in 2002 saw them put up the worse ever defence of a World Cup, failing to even score a goal.

This time at least they have scored a goal and have not lost a game, but memories of 2002 will be alive and kicking especially as they face a team from Africa, the continent that started the rot when Senegal beat them 1-0 in the opener in South Korea.

Togo are no Senegal - they are too chaotic for that - but have played good enough football against South Korea and Switzerland to give France's embattled coach Raymond Domenech something to worry about.

However, for Patrick Vieira one of the veterans of the catastrophic 2002 campaign exiting here would be an even worse experience -

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UKRAINE V TUNISIA

Another goal glut?

AFP, Berlin

Ukraine's twins of terror Andriy Shevchenko and Sergiy Rebrov believe they have the necessary firepower to shoot their team past Tunisia here on Friday and into the World Cup second round.

Ukraine, playing in their first finals, need just a point to make sure of second place in Group H and a second round match-up against either Switzerland, South Korea or 1998 champions France.

Shevchenko and Rebrov were once a formidable attacking partnership in their days with Dynamo Kiev, when the team reached the 1998 Champions League quarter-finals, before their careers went off at drastically different tangents.

While Shevchenko became a multi-millionaire with AC Milan, signed for Chelsea and married a model, Rebrov saw his new life turn sour when he failed to make the grade with Tottenham and West Ham before heading home to Kiev.

But in the 4-0 demolition of hapless Saudi Arabia both Shevchenko and Rebrov were on the scoresheet and, in tandem, looked capable of being a handful for most defences here.

"After the first goal against Saudi Arabia we felt we could do anything on the pitch," said Rebrov.

"We gave a good performance and I hope we can do the same in the last game against Tunisia."

"After the first game (which Ukraine lost 4-0) there were a lot of critical words about us in the newspapers but I think we showed against the Saudis we are one of the favourites in the group."

Shevchenko, the Ukraine skip-

per, also believes that national pride is driving the team on.

"The main thing is that the people can see we're playing for them, and that they can believe in us again," said the captain.

Tunisia, who were ahead against mighty Spain before going down 3-1, know that only a win over Ukraine will be good enough to see them through to the knockout round.

But their campaign has been shattered by the injury-enforced absence of star striker and top scorer Santos.

Coach Roger Lemerre insists the 2004 African champions can still make it through.

"We've got 90 minutes to get things right against Ukraine. A win would give us a hope of qualifying," said the Frenchman.

Many of the Tunisia squad ply their trade in the French championship and are desperate to make the second round and come up against many of their club mates.

"Most of us would have loved to play against France, but we still have to do the job by beating Ukraine. It's not finished yet, and we will start working focusing on that," said Ziad Jaziri, who plays for Troyes.

TEAMS

Ukraine (3-5-2)

1-Oleksander Shovkovsky (70-0); 6-Andriy Rusol (25-2); 17-Vladislav Vashchuk (59-1); 2-Andriy Nesmachny (51-0); 9-Oleg Gusev (27-1); 4-Anatoly Tymoshchuk (57-1); 8-Oleg Shelayev (21-0); 19-Maxim Kalnichenko (22-4); 11-Seriy Rebrov (72-15); 7-Andriy Shevchenko (66-30); 10-Andriy Voronin (34-4)

Tunisia (4-5-1)

1-Ali Boumnijel (50-0); 6-Hatem Traabelsi (58-1); 15-Radi Jaldi (91-6); 3-Karim Hagi (28-4); 19-Anis Ayari (26-1); 20-Hamed Namouchi (16-1); 12-Joahar Mnari (41-2); 14-Adel Chedli (42-4); 8-Medhi Nahi (31-1); 13-Riad Bouazzizi (91-4); 5-Ziad Jaziri (36-14)



KUNG FU: Spanish forwards Fernando Torres (R) and Jose Antonio Reyes joke during a training session in Kamen on Wednesday.



A Mexican supporter holds a national flag prior to their match against Portugal at Gelsenkirchen on Wednesday.

'More midfield aggression'

REUTERS, Potsdam

Striker Andriy Shevchenko said Ukraine needed the midfield to drive them to victory over Tunisia on Friday, even though a draw is likely to be enough to seal a place in the last 16 of the World Cup.

"Any positive result will suit us, whereas the Tunisians need to win," Shevchenko told reporters on Wednesday. "But if we're not aggressive in midfield it will be hard for us."

"No way does it mean we'll be playing for a draw. I don't think any player who goes out ever plays for a draw because he knows how that can end up."

"We've got a very tough game ahead," said Shevchenko. Since losing 4-0 to Spain in their first Group H game, Ukraine have recovered their confidence by defeating Saudi Arabia by the same margin.

They looked relaxed in training on a sunny evening at their base in Potsdam, on the outskirts of Berlin, and could even see the funny side of media reports that the Spanish debacle was caused by noisy frogs disturbing their sleep.

"It's not true, it's an invention of journalists," team spokesman Igor Miroshnichenko said. "There are

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Revamped Spanish squad

AFP, Kaiserslautern

Spain coach Luis Aragones is set to prepare for their World Cup second round clash against France, Korea or Switzerland by resting all his key starters against Saudi Arabia here Friday.

The 'Sons of the Desert', who sit bottom of Group H on one point, will be playing mainly for pride having thrown away victory in a 2-2 draw with Tunisia before their crushing 4-0 defeat to Ukraine.

Spain beat Ukraine 4-0 and Tunisia 3-1 and with the added bonus of a significant goals difference will top the group if they manage at least a draw against the desert kingdom side.

And after Wednesday's training session before their trip south to Kaiserslautern, it appears Aragones is ready to relegate the 11 players who started their first two group matches to the substitutes bench.

The wily 67-year-old tactician has steered Spain on a 24-match unbeaten run but after a first-half hiccup he was forced to rejig his recently favoured 4-3-3 formation in the Stuttgart clash

against Tunisia on Monday.

The North Africans had grabbed a shock early lead in the eighth minute, and it took the second-half arrival of Raul, Arsenal's Cesc Fabregas and the strapping Joaquin to outfox the Tunisian defence and relaunch their victory bid.

All three players look set to start their first match of the campaign on Friday, with others on yellow cards set to be replaced because of the threat of suspension if they receive another one.

It means defenders Michel Salgado, Juanito, Carlos Marchena and Antonio Lopez, and midfielders Andres Iniesta and Jose Antonio Reyes should see some World Cup action direct from kick-off.

Midfielder David Albelda should also play in midfield.

The only apparent uncertainty is over who takes Iker Casillas's place - Liverpool's Jose Manuel Reina, considered number two to the Real Madrid keeper - or 36-year-old Valencia keeper Santiago Canizares.

Even with their 'second team', Spain should have the edge over Saudi Arabia, who were opened

up like a tin can by Ukraine's probing midfield and Andriy Shevchenko's nose for goal on Monday.

The presence of 28-year-old Raul for Spain is also a good sign.

Having scored the crucial equaliser against Tunisia the Real Madrid striker is fighting for a first team place and will be keen to show he has regained match form after an injury-plagued season.

However Spain's run of unbeaten form will soon face the acid, or rather the 'quality-opponent' test.

Since November 2004, when Spain beat England 1-0 in a friendly, Spain's last 18 internationals - two at the World Cup, seven friendlies and nine in qualifying including two playoffs - have been against teams not considered 'world beaters'.

Ahead of a likely second round showdown with France, Korea or Switzerland, Spain remain unbeaten against the likes of San Marino, China, Lithuania, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Croatia, African Nations champions Egypt, Uruguay, Canada and Belgium.