

ARGENTINA V MEXICO

Battle of the Americas

AFP, Leipzig

Lionel Messi turns 19 on Saturday and is determined to make it a double celebration by outfoxing Barcelona teammate Rafael Marquez and firing Argentina into the World Cup quarterfinals.

Messi, who came into the tournament carrying an injury, started the 0-0 draw with the Netherlands which gave Argentina top spot in Group C and a last 16 clash against Marquez's Mexico.

Now the highly-rated teenager is hoping that he's done enough to convince coach Jose Pekerman that he is worth a place in the starting line-up as Argentina look to take another step closer to a third world title.

"Mexico are a strong team and play good football," said Messi, who revelled alongside Carlos Tevez and in front of playmakers Juan Riquelme and Maxi Rodriguez against the Dutch.

"I feel fit enough to get through

90 minutes because this is when the real World Cup begins."

Argentina captain Roberto Ayala predicted that Mexico would be a tough rival.

"It will not be easy. They are a very complicated opponent, and recently have given us some good games," said the Valencia defender.

Mexico beat Argentina 1-0 in the

2004 Copa America in Peru, while the result in most recent encounter, in last year's Confederations Cup, went the way of Argentina on penalties after it finished 1-1 after extra-time.

"These games are like club classics," said Ayala, whose defensive back four will be without Nicolas Burdisso after he was ruled out with an ankle injury.

Marquez, however, believes that Mexico can tame Messi and his free flowing teammates but knows they have a point to prove after they scraped into the second round with four points from their three group games.

"There is potential in the team, but we must also learn from our mistakes. Now the World Cup is

SEE PAGE 20 COL 5

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Argentina v Mexico head-to-head record (FIFA records)

Argentina lead 5-2; seven draws

1930: Argentina 6 Mexico 3 (Montevideo)

1985: Mexico 1 Argentina 1 (Los Angeles)

1985: Mexico 1 Argentina 1 (Puebla)

1990: Mexico 2 Argentina 0 (Los Angeles)

1991: Argentina 0 Mexico 0 (Buenos Aires)

1993: Argentina 1 Mexico 1 (Suayaquil)

1993: Argentina 2 Mexico 0 (Guayaquil)

1998: Argentina 1 Mexico 0 (Los Angeles)

1998: Mexico 2 Argentina 2 (Chicago)

2000: Mexico 0 Argentina 2 (Los Angeles)

2003: Mexico 0 Argentina 1 (Los Angeles)

2004: Argentina 0 Mexico 1 (Chiclayo)

2005: Argentina 1 Mexico 1 (Los Angeles)

2005: Mexico 1 Argentina 1 aet, Argentina won 6-5 on penalties (Hanover)

TEAMS

Argentina (4-3-3)

1-Roberto Abbondanzieri; 4-Fabrizio Coloccini, 2-Roberto Ayala, 6-Gabriel Heinze, 3-Juan Pablo Sorin; 8-Javier Mascherano, 5-Esteban Cambiasso, 10-Juan Roman Riquelme; 7-Javier Saviola, 18-Maxi Rodriguez, 9-Hernan Crespo

Mexico (5-3-2)

1-Oswaldo Sanchez; 16-Mario Mendez, 4-Rafael Marquez, 5-Ricardo Osorio, 3-Carlos Salcido, 14-Gonzalo Pineda; 6-Gerardo Torrado, 7-Antonio Naelson "Zinha", 8-Pavel Pardo, 9-Jared Borgetti, 17-Jose Francisco Fonseca



PROMISE, YOU'LL SCORE AGAINST MEXICO: Argentinean players gang up on striker Hernan Crespo (grounded) during the team's training session in Leipzig on Thursday. The South Americans will face Mexico today.

PHOTO: AFP

Borgetti is back

AFP, Göttingen

Mexico got a huge boost here on Thursday when leading all-time scorer Jared Borgetti was passed fit for the World Cup second round match with two-time champions Argentina.

The 32-year-old Bolton Wanderers striker suffered a left calf injury, which saw him forced off early in the second half of the opening 3-1 victory over Iran.

However Guillermo Cantu, responsible for team selection for Mexico, said that he was now fully fit for Saturday's clash with Argentina after he missed the 0-0 draw with Angola and the 2-1 defeat by Portugal in the group stage.

"I feel that he is a lot better," said Cantu.

"He is recovering quickly, and after what the doctor told me, he is training normally with the rest of the squad."

"However he (Borgetti) will have the final word."

Mexico badly need a fully fit Borgetti as they have failed to convince in front of goal since the Iran victory and even missed a

SEE PAGE 20 COL 5

Pekerman pleased with squad strength

REUTERS, Frankfurt

Argentine coach Jose Pekerman goes into Saturday's World Cup second round match against Mexico in Leipzig knowing he has a solid first-choice defence with equally reliable back-up.

Making Hernan Crespo and Javier Saviola his first-choice strike partnership also seems a wise choice even when there is great talent on the bench in Carlos Tevez and Lionel Messi.

Pekerman made several changes against the Netherlands in Argentina's final Group C match in Frankfurt on Wednesday, a 0-0 draw which ensured Argentina won the group and will meet the Mexicans in the second round.

"I didn't treat it as a test but rather a solution. We couldn't take risks," Pekerman said of the

his changes for match against the Dutch, eagerly awaited before the tournament but robbed of its edge because both sides had already qualified.

In deciding on his team to play the Dutch, Pekerman was mindful of a very short break before Saturday's second-round match, leaving him little time to manoeuvre his troops.

He rested Crespo and Saviola on Wednesday night, allowing Tevez and Messi to start.

"There are always accidents, like what happened to (Nicolas) Burdisso," Pekerman told the post-match news conference.

Right back Burdisso came off with the leg injury midway through the first half but Pekerman was pleased to note that his substitute Fabricio Coloccini played as well if not better.

"Coloccini going on left me with a very good feeling," Pekerman said.

He might have said the same of playing Gabriel Milito alongside Roberto Ayala in central defence from the start to give Gabriel Heinze a rest and also wipe out his yellow card.

Milito was one of Argentina's best players, keeping Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy in check throughout the match.

"The second round match is being played very soon... There was a lot of energy spent and this is something for trainers to keep in their heads," Pekerman said. It is likely that Pekerman will revert to the Crespo-Saviola partnership against Mexico while his midfield should again remain unchanged after he decided against tinkering with it on Wednesday.

Ayala critical of recovery time

REUTERS, Leipzig

Veteran defender Roberto Ayala complained on Thursday about the short time Argentina had to prepare for their World Cup second-round match with Mexico on Saturday.

The teams played their final group games on Wednesday, the Argentines kicking off at 2100 local time (1900 GMT) against Netherlands in Frankfurt.

"You finish first (in the group), you make an effort and then you don't benefit in the second round," the 33-year-old Ayala told a news conference.

"We've got to overcome this and be as fresh as possible," added Ayala, who captained his country for the 54th time in his 103rd international in the absence of Juan Pablo Sorin, who was rested against the Dutch.

Ayala also complained about the state of the pitches in Germany where temperatures have soared above 30 Celsius (86.00F), making grounds dry and hard.

"Some pitches are not even,"

SEE PAGE 20 COL 5



PHOTO: AFP

KEEP A COOL HEAD IN FRONT OF THE GOAL: Mexico striker Francisco Fonseca (R) affectionately hits his partner in front Omar Bravo (L) immediately after the latter had missed a penalty during a training session at the Jahnsation in Göttingen on Thursday.

'We can beat Argentina'

AFP, Gelsenkirchen

Mexico's coach has talked up their chances against Argentina after booking a second-round meeting with the World Cup favourites.

Ricardo Lavolpe, a member of Argentina's World Cup-winning squad in 1978, said a different Mexico would take the field on Saturday than the one that scrambled into the second round after defeat by Portugal.

"On Saturday I'm going to have a different team. They're going to be much more at ease and that will help them to score goals," Lavolpe said Thursday.

"We start with a clean sheet, it's 0-0 with no advantage to either side and we play for 90 minutes."

The Group D seeds flirted with a shock elimination on Wednesday by slipping to a 2-1 loss to Portugal, but were saved by Angola's failure to beat Iran.

In a chaotic display, Mexico gave away a penalty, missed another and had a player sent off with half-an-hour left.

Mexico had needed to win the match to avoid in-form Argentina, who hammered six past Serbia and Montenegro.

But they may feel pleased not to

be playing the Netherlands. The agile but lightweight Mexicans have won just one of their last 11 World Cup games against European opponents, but beat Argentina 1-0 in 2004.

Lavolpe's biggest worry will be the profligacy of his strikers. He admitted his disbelief after Omar Bravo, a two-goal hero against Iran, wasted a series of good chances including a penalty.

"Our main problem is scoring - we even had a penalty which we missed," Lavolpe said.

"We've got the forwards, we put the opposition goal under pressure but we need to persist and see if we can get more positive results."

Mexico scored three times against Iran but have only managed one goal in their last two games.

They qualified ahead of third-placed Angola, who could only draw with Iran. Portugal topped Group D with maximum points.

Mexico have now reached the second phase at each of the last four World Cups and are hoping to make it past the quarter-finals for the first time in 13 attempts.

Lavolpe's Argentinian nationality have made him a controversial

figure in Mexico, despite his success with the national team which lies fourth in the FIFA rankings.

He also caused an uproar by dropping popular striker Cuauhtemoc Blanco while calling up two foreign-born players, Zinha and Guillermo Franco, and his own son-in-law Rafael Garcia.

Burdisso misses out

AFP, Leipzig

Two-time champions Argentina suffered a blow on Thursday when defender Nicolas Burdisso was ruled out of the World Cup second round clash against Mexico here on Saturday because of an ankle injury.

Burdisso suffered the injury after just 20 minutes in the 0-0 draw against the Netherlands on Wednesday and was replaced by Fabricio Coloccini.

The 25-year-old Inter Milan player has been an ever present at the finals starting all three matches - Coloccini played for Argentina in last year's Confederations Cup final defeat by Brazil and was a member of the 2004 Olympic winning side.



A combo picture shows an Australian fan (L) cheers her national team during the Socceros' do or die battle against Croatia at Stuttgart while a Brazilian supporter enjoys her time in Dortmund during the world champions' clash against Japan on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP