

ITALY V AUSTRALIA

Goliath v David

AFP, Kaiserslautern

The last 16 of the World Cup has thrown up a potential giant killing with three-time champions Italy taking on fancied Australia here on Monday.

The Italians have been present at every World Cup since 1962 and are among the favourites to win the trophy, despite their recent failures in major tournaments.

They are unbeaten in their last 21 international matches; a run, which includes friendly wins against World Cup hosts Germany and Holland.

The Australians are appearing at their first World Cup for 32 years, but their stirring first round performances suggest they could cause an upset.

And their coach, Guus Hiddink, knows what it takes to beat Italy

having masterminded South Korea's shock 2-1 victory over the Azzurri in the second round of the 2002 World Cup.

"It's going to be fantastic," said Australia winger Harry Kewell.

"We weren't even supposed to get this far. A lot of people wrote us off, but we were quietly confident and we don't fear anybody."

"Against Italy we've got to get out there and play our football and not worry about the opposition."

Italy keeper Gianluigi Buffon is full of admiration for Hiddink, but predicted that this time the Dutchman's motivational skills will fall short.

"He's a great coach, we know that, and the results he has achieved speak for themselves," Buffon said.

"He's achieved historic results with mediocre teams. But I believe that on our part many things have changed in the past four years. We are confident of going through."

Italy is trying to cope with the distraction of the Serie A match-fixing scandal.

Four clubs - Juventus, AC Milan, Lazio and Fiorentina, have been charged with match fixing and could face relegation if found

directly guilty of sporting fraud.

Thirteen of the Italy squad play for the clubs involved, but nobody in the 23-man group, or coach Marcello Lippi, is implicated.

Buffon insisted the scandal would not distract them from the tournament.

"It's the maximum for a player to play at the World Cup and we won't let anything spoil it," he said.

Australia is expecting Italy to be difficult to break down with the Azzurri conceding just one goal in the group stage, an own goal at that.

"Italy won't be giving a lot away and they're the kind of team that can protect a 1-0 lead well," said Blackburn Rovers defender Lucas Neill

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TEAMS

Italy (4-4-1-1)

1-Gianluigi Buffon; 19-Gianluca Zambrotta, 23-Marco Materazzi, 5-Fabio Cannavaro, 3-Fabio Grosso, 20-Simone Perrotta, 21-Andrea Pirlo, 8-Gennaro Gattuso, 16-Mauro Camoranesi, 10-Francesco Totti, 11-Alberto Gilardino.

Australia (4-5-1)

1-Mark Schwarzer; 23-Marco Bresciano, 2-Lucas Neill, 3-Craig Moore, 14-Scott Chipperfield, 13-Vince Grella, 5-Jason Culina, 4-Tim Cahill, 21-Mile Sterjovski, 10-Harry Kewell, 9-Mark Viduka.

KEY QUOTES

Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon:

"They are very strong physically and are an enterprising side who have a lot of confidence in themselves. They have scored five goals in their three games and we need to be very careful because they have nothing to lose against us."

Australia defender Lucas Neill: "We're the underdogs but everyone loves the underdog. Why should we fear them? We've got as many strengths as they do, we're playing with plenty of confidence and we've got nothing to lose."

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Italy v Australia head-to-head record (FIFA records)
First meeting



ALLES DEUTSCHLAND: A German fan clad in the national colours hold up a banner reading 'Germany' before the start of the second round match against Sweden at Munich's World Cup Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Haunted by Guus?

INTERNET, undated

So it's Guus Hiddink trying to plot Italy's downfall in the last sixteen of the World Cup. Ring any bells does it? Italian fans won't want to be reminded that Hiddink's fit, fearless South Korean side accounted for the Azzurri's elimination at this same stage four years ago. Is it unreasonable to think the resourceful Dutchman can repeat the trick with an Australian team, similarly pre-disposed to work their socks off, and perhaps technically superior to the 2002 co-hosts.

The Italians will be foolish indeed if they underestimate the mental fortitude of the Socceroos. Italy might have classier players, but are not generally greater than the sum of these gifted individual parts. Australia, on the other hand, have demonstrated that they can play above themselves, and even more importantly, respond positively to pressure-packed situations, such as against Uruguay in the qualifying decider, as well as against Japan and Croatia here in Germany.

The Hiddink factor can't be ignored. The Australian manager will have his players thoroughly prepared ahead of Monday's match in Kaiserslautern. A DVD of Italy's 1-1 draw against the USA will surely figure prominently during team gatherings at the Socceroos' plush Friedrichsruhe headquarters this weekend. It could be especially instructive.

Nervous, sloppy and totally devoid of a cutting edge against the Americans, Marcello Lippi's team allowed their battling opponents to get under their skin.

Australia, who for me, have

more overall quality about them than the current US side, can be counted on to get in amongst their Italian opponents and perhaps sow seeds of doubt in Azzurri minds.

We've given up guessing what sort of team Hiddink will name. It would be a surprise indeed were Zeljko Kalac, jittery and clanger-prone the other night, to be retained. Mark Schwarzer might have his weaknesses, but he has been inspirational for Australia in recent times.

With Brett Emerton suspended, Hiddink might contemplate recalling Luke Wilkshire, who was used at right wing back in the opener against the Japanese. Other than that switch, it's hard to envisage wholesale changes. Marco Bresciano might justifiably have felt aggrieved to be left on the bench in the 2-2 draw with Croatia, yet there's strong evidence that the Parma man carries considerable punch as a second half substitute. The same thing possibly applies to John Aloisi and Josh Kennedy, both used to superb effect by Hiddink in the competition to date.

While Australia deservedly finished second in Group F - they outplayed Croatia for long spells in Stuttgart - the fact that silly mistakes were made is not lost on the urbane Hiddink.

Mark Viduka wasn't mentioned by name in the post-match media conference, but the Aussie boss was clearly unhappy with the negligence shown by his captain: a poor touch on the ball, was followed by the crude concession of a free-kick, which was majestically converted by Darijo Srna.

Similarly, Kalac's howler, falling

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Kewell in doubt

AFP, Ohringen

Australia's goal hero Harry Kewell missed training here Sunday as he continues to battle a groin injury ahead of Monday's knockout second round match with Italy.

Coach Guus Hiddink said Kewell, whose 79th-minute equaliser against Croatia in Stuttgart last Thursday put Australia into the last sixteen for the first time, was being assessed by the team's medical staff.

"We'll see how Harry recovers, he will not participate with the team at training this morning and we will see how his situation is tomorrow," Hiddink told his pre-match press conference here Sunday.

"It's the same procedure we did (with him) before the Croatian game."

Kewell has been playing on at the World Cup since coming off injured for Liverpool in last month's FA Cup final against West Ham United in Cardiff.

Assistant coach Graham Arnold last week gave an insight into how hard Kewell has worked to get him fit for Australia's games at the World Cup.

"Harry has struggled in the last few weeks with fitness but it's a testament to the guy," he said. "He wakes up at seven in the morning, he goes to the gym, he works hard, he trains hard, he eats well, he does everything to be fit."

"If you talk to him he'll probably say he shouldn't be here with the injury he's had and it's testament to the guy he's given everything he can give physically to get here."

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Perrotta wanted Brazil

REUTERS, Duisburg

Italy midfielder Simone Perrotta would rather have faced Brazil in the second round than Monday's opponents Australia, he said on Saturday.

The Azzurri finished top of Group E and now have to take on Guus Hiddink's Australia side, who finished second in Group F behind the world champions.

"Personally, I would have preferred to play Brazil," said Perrotta, "It would have been a fascinating game with all those stars on the pitch," added the Roma midfielder.

The Italians are wary of Australia since Hiddink eliminated them at the World Cup four years ago in charge of South Korea and the Azzurri struggled against less fancied opponents here when they drew 1-1 with the United States in the group stage.

"They are a similar side to the United States that is true," said Perrotta, "But I think they are stronger in terms of technique. Up front they have a very strong player in Mark Viduka and then there is Harry Kewell who spins off him and is also very dangerous," he said.

"I heard someone describe Italy v Australia as like Juventus v (minor Serie A side) Atalanta but I'd say it is more like Juventus v Milan," added Perrotta.

"I know that the fans have high expectations of us and that many

Italians think we will go through easily but we need to be very careful," he said.

Striker Alberto Gilardino said it was vital the Italians took the right psychological approach to the game.

"We need to be as solid and determined as possible. They are a strong, physical side and we'll be studying their approach more closely with the gaffer (coach) in the coming days," said Gilardino.

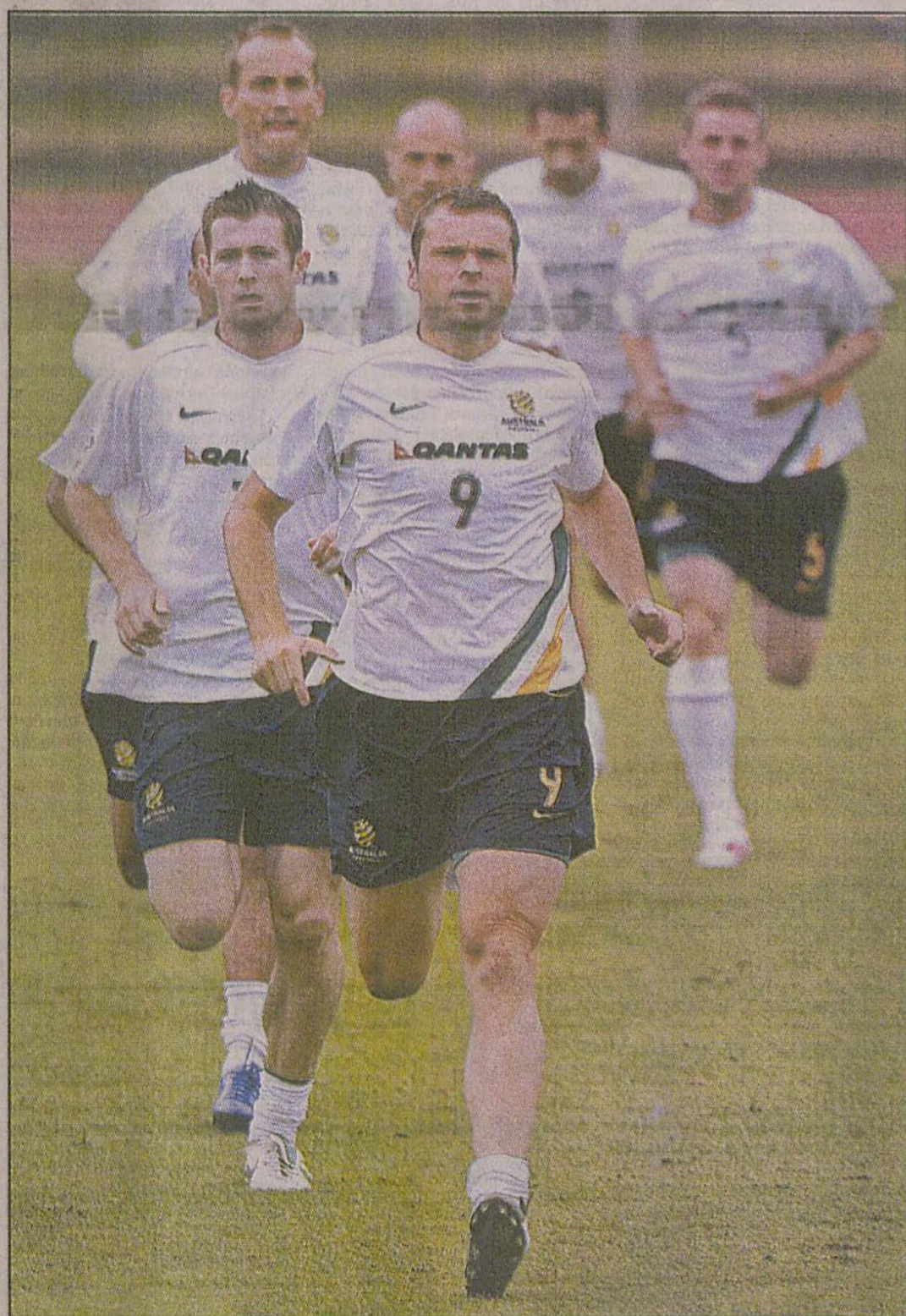
"But you can't change yourself physically in the space of three days -- so it is vital that we have the right attitude and the mental factor will be very important in this game," added the forward.

Fullback Gianluca Zambrotta said the Italians needed to improve their approach to the early stages of games where they had been caught cold by opponents.

"It couldn't have really gone much better for us in the group stage -- we won two and drew one from the three games, scored five goals and conceded just one."

"But we need to have a look again at our approach to the game -- in the early phase of matches we always suffer," he added.

"The United States were first to the ball during the early stages of that game and the Czech Republic had their best spell against us in the first half. Against Australia we need to really cover a lot of ground," said Zambrotta.



FOLLOW THE LEADER: Australian captain Mark Viduka (C) leads the Socceroos during their training session in

PHOTO: AFP

Italians rally around Totti

REUTERS, Duisburg

Italy's players have jumped to the defence of forward Francesco Totti after his place in the side was questioned by Italian media.

Playmaker Totti has disappointed so far at the World Cup as he has struggled to find full fitness and form after his three month absence due to a broken ankle.

Coach Marcello Lippi started with Totti in all three group E games despite the Roma player admitting that he is only at 70 percent of his form.

"Totti is fine and is full of desire to do well," said midfielder Simone Perrotta. "Francesco is not at 100 percent but even at 70-80 percent he can make the difference in a game."

"He is not a luxury for the side -- in the role that he occupies there isn't anyone else who can make an impact the way that he does," added Perrotta.

The midfielder rejected suggestions from the media that some in the Italy team were frustrated that Lippi was continuing to construct his side around a not fully fit Totti.

"There is no faction hostile to Francesco and there isn't a divided dressing room at all. Everyone is backing him," he said.

Striker Alberto Gilardino was also dismissive of the notion that the squad was split over whether Totti should play against Australia.

"There is not even a discussion about that in the dressing

room -- we all believe in him and see that he is giving his best," said Gilardino.

"The issue is not weighing on us at all -- we are a united team and that is our real strength," added the Milan centre forward.

Considered the top Italian in Serie A, Totti has not managed to produce his best at major international tournaments.

He was sent off in Italy's second round exit to South Korea four years ago and then got a five-match ban for spitting at a Danish opponent during Italy's ill-fated Euro 2004 campaign.

Totti broke his ankle in February and went into the World Cup trying to get match fit after his lengthy absence from competitive action.

Italy unfazed by critics

AFP, Kaiserslautern

Italy couldn't care less if they don't entertain like the Azzurri teams of old as long as they end up holding aloft the World Cup.

Italy were once regarded as one of the most exciting sides in the world with players like Gigi Riva, Gianni Rivera, Sandro Mazzola and Roberto Baggio etching their names in the pantheon of football greats.

And in the build-up to this tournament, the Italians displayed an exciting brand of attacking play, which swept aside World Cup hosts Germany and Holland in friendly matches.

But since arriving in Germany, they have reverted to a more defensive style, not 'catenaccio' but less easier on the eye, a move that has brought scathing criticism from the Italian media for whom entertainment is a requirement of the national side.

Italy midfielder Simone Perrotta insisted the team were unfazed by the negative press reaction to their first round performances, which

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SHOW THE WAY: Italian midfielders Andrea Pirlo (L) and Francesco Totti seen during a training session in Duisburg on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP