

SPAIN V FRANCE

Old foes clash

AFP, Hanover

Spain face off against France here Tuesday confident of victory and claiming the prize of a quarterfinal date with either Brazil or Ghana.

So often the team that has flattered to deceive, Spain waltzed through the first round as Group H

winners with impressive wins over Ukraine and Tunisia before coach Luis Aragones fielded a virtual 'B' side to scrape past Saudi Arabia.

It was an altogether different story for France, who started modestly with draws against Switzerland and South Korea before hitting some semblance of form with a 2-0 win over Togo to qualify through the back door as group runners-up.

Eric Abidal and Zinedine Zidane return from suspension but if Aragones' confident pre-match hype is realised then this will be Zidane's final curtain call before retirement.

French coach Raymond Domenech is mulling over whether to stick with his twin-striker combination of Thierry Henry and David Trezeguet, or revert to deploying Henry as a lone attacker

as in the opening two games. Spain will be most people's idea of the likely winner but France have history on their side as this first ever World Cup finals meeting is a repeat of the 1984 European

Championship final which Les Bleus, under the stewardship of Michel Platini, won.

Henry meanwhile would feel justified in having added motivation for the last 16 clash as he was the target of an unguarded comment from Aragones who last year used racist language about the Arsenal forward in an effort to spur on his Gunners teammate Jose Antonio Reyes.

Aragones, who has sidestepped the issue this month but at the time insisted, "I am not a racist", is bullish about a positive outcome in Hanover.

"All respect to the French, but I am sure we will get past them to reach the quarter-finals," the outspoken 67-year-old stated.

"France are a very good team, there is no doubt about that - but I am convinced we will beat them."

TEAMS

Spain (4-3-3)

1-Iker Casillas; 15-Sergio Ramos, 5-Carlos Puyol, 22-Pablo Ibanez, 3-Mariano Perea; 18-Cesc Fabregas, 14-Xabi Alonso, 8-Xavi, 9-Fernando Torres, 7-Raul, 21-David Villa.

France (4-5-1)

16-Fabien Barthez; 19-Willy Sagnol, 15-Lilian Thuram, 5-William Gallias, 3-Eric Abidal; 4-Patrick Vieira, 6-Claude Makelele, 22-Franck Ribery, 10-Zinedine Zidane, 7-Florent Malouda; 12-Thierry Henry.

HEAD TO HEAD

France v Spain head-to-head record (FIFA records)

France lead 5-1; 1 match drawn
2001: Spain 2 France 1 (Barcelona)
2000: France 2 Spain 1 (Bruges)
1998: France 1 Spain 0 (St Etienne)
1996: France 1 Spain 1 (Leeds)
1991: France 2 Spain 1 (Seville)
1991: France 3 Spain 1 (Paris)
1988: France 2 Spain 1 (Le Havre)



PHOTO AFP

FRANCE BEWARE: Spanish midfielder Joaquin (C) dribbles past teammates Xabi Alonso (L) and Cesc Fabregas during a training session in Kamen on Sunday.

Gesc faces his mentor

REUTERS, Kamen

Spain midfielder Cesc Fabregas put his former master Patrick Vieira in the shade last season when he helped orchestrate Arsenal's victory over Juventus in the Champions League.

The 19-year-old could get another chance to pit his skills against his old Arsenal team mate as well as current club colleague Thierry Henry when Spain take on 1998 champions France in the last 16 of the World Cup in Hanover on Tuesday.

Although he started on the bench in Spain's opening two group games, the young midfielder came on as a substitute in both and played a decisive role in Spain's 3-1 comeback victory over Tunisia by setting up two of his side's goals.

He is one of the first players coach Luis Aragones has turned to on the bench and is almost certain

SEE PAGE 20 COL 5

Blow out Spanish lights

AFP, Hanover

The French were blowing out candles in honour of birthday boys Zinedine Zidane and Patrick Vieira on the team coach heading back to their secluded chateau, which serves as their World Cup headquarters after mission, accomplished against Togo on Friday.

And on Tuesday les Bleus are counting on having enough breath left in their ageing frames to extinguish Spain's World Cup dream when they meet in a tantalising last 16 clash in Hanover.

Spain are already 1-0 up judged by the pre-match hype billowing out from the Iberian camp over the weekend but France aim to have the last word where it matters, on the pitch.

Spanish coach Luis Aragones reckons he's got a seriously talented team under his wing, and certainly results so far haven't done anything to disprove the wise man of Hortaleta, as the 67-year-old is

affectionately known.

In stark contrast ever since their woeful showing in Asia four years ago the French have had to adopt what some might argue is a wholly unfamiliar trait - namely humility.

Zidane and company swagged into the last World Cup buoyant after adding the European championships in 2000 to their 1998 World Cup triumph.

But a fortnight after their arrival they were on the plane back to Charles de Gaulle airport, setting an unwelcome new record as the only country in the history of the competition to come away from their title defence campaign without mustering even one goal.

The soul searching was long and painful with France's lacklustre showing at Euro 2004 only serving to ram home further the realisation that la belle époque of '98 and 2000 was, like Fabian Barthez' golden locks, a distant memory.

So under the guidance of Raymond Domenech France's very

presence in the last 16 is an accomplishment in itself with the ghosts of 2002 if not totally vanquished then at least locked away in a cupboard.

And after showing flashes of quality football in Friday's 2-0 win over already eliminated Togo which saw them into the second round through the back door as Group G runners-up the Gallic juggernaut appears to be gathering pace just in time.

Patrick Vieira, who scored the first goal and set up the second in Cologne, for one believes France is only now beginning to show her true face and still has a shelf life in the tournament.

"The Juventus midfielder, who kissed goodbye to his 20s on Friday, commented: 'I'm getting stronger just like the team. We're getting better and better in each match.'

"I hope the result against Togo will prove a trigger and that it's going to free us because when

SEE PAGE 20 COL 5

Intriguing midfield battle

REUTERS, Kamen

Spain's players reckon the secret to beating France in their last 16 showdown on Tuesday will be to keep their opponents' ageing midfield on the move and deprive them of the ball.

"One of the things we want to do is to make them run in midfield," forward Luis Garcia told a news conference on Sunday. "The team that doesn't have the ball will suffer and what's more they've had three hard games in the group stage."

Zinedine Zidane, Patrick Vieira and Claude Makelele, three of France's key midfielders are in their 30s whereas Xavi, the oldest player in Spain's first-choice trio, is still only 26.

But Luis Garcia, who is likely to be on the bench as Raul returns to the starting lineup, insisted Spain were not underestimating the size of the task confronting them.

"We have a lot of respect for France as they are a great team with great players and that makes them a side to fear even though they haven't played that well up until now," he said. "But at the same time we won't be in awe of them."

"There are no favourites at this stage of the competition, the team that makes the fewest errors will go through."

Centre back Juanito, who scored the winning goal in the 1-0 victory over Saudi Arabia in Spain's final group match, said he was at a loss to explain why France had struggled so much in recent years.

"France had a hard time in qualifying and could even have missed out on the tournament. They also found it difficult in the group stage and went out early in the last World Cup."

"They seem to be on the decline, but it is hard to understand why as

SEE PAGE 20 COL 1

Spain up against history

REUTERS, Kamen

A quick glance at the history books suggests the World Cup second round showdown between France and Spain is balanced on a knife edge. Spain have won 11 of their previous 27 meetings and France 10.

However, a closer examination of the statistics make worrying reading for Spain fans as their national team has never beaten the French in a competitive match.

Although they have never met in a World Cup, on the five occasions the two sides have played in competition France have won four. The only time they failed to come away with the victory was when they drew 1-1 in the group stages of Euro 96.

The last time the two sides crossed swords in an official match was at Euro 2000, a Zinedine Zidane-inspired France winning 2-1 after Raul fired a last-minute penalty over the bar. Les Bleus went on to add the European crown to the world title they had won in 1998.

In previous meetings two defeats to France in qualifying meant that Spain missed out on the 1992 European championships, but the bitterest defeat of all had come in the final of the same tournament in 1984.

Spain had high hopes of regaining the European title they had won 20 years earlier, but things started to go wrong when Luis Miguel Arconada secured a place in the goalkeeping chamber of horrors for letting a Michel Platini free kick squirt under his body and across the line.

France ran out 2-0 winners,

SEE PAGE 20 COL 2



PHOTO AFP

LOOK AT THAT: French midfielder Zinedine Zidane shares a light moment with teammates during training in Hameln on Sunday.

'Teamwork is the key'

INTERNET, undated

Safely ensconced at their base camp in Kamen, Spain are busy plotting the downfall of the French in their Round of 16 tie. Having been rested for the final group game against Saudi Arabia, Luis Aragones's first-team players will go into the game in Hanover somewhat fresher than their opponents on Tuesday.

One of the men to benefit from a well-deserved day off was central defender Carlos Puyol, who looked on from the bench as the second-string finally got a taste of the action against Saudi Arabia. "They're all very young but have got a lot of experience behind them having played some crucial games with their clubs," said Puyol approvingly. "I thought they performed well and their presence here is vital to the team as a whole."

"I think Spain have produced some excellent performances," added the man who led his club, Barcelona, to the Spanish league

and UEFA Champions League titles earlier this year. "We've strung together three wins, which has really helped build up confidence, but we've now reached a decisive phase. You've got to be so careful in the knockout rounds, one slip and before you know it you're out."

Tuesday's encounter pits together two sides who know each other very well. Historically it is the French who have the edge, famously beating their neighbours 2-0 in the final of the 1984 UEFA European Championship, and also prevailing in the teams' last meeting. That was in the same competition six years ago, when Raul skied a late penalty as Spain went down 2-1 in the quarterfinals.

Aragones's men may be talking a cautious game, but hopes are high within the camp of avenging past defeats. "I've got an awful lot of respect for France and there are no easy rivals, as this tournament has already shown," Puyol remarked. "What matters is how we play. We

know we can play good football and that's what we always set out to do."

Following a string of less-than-impressive warm-up games, Spain have earned rave reviews for their performances at Germany 2006. "I thought we were excellent in our first game (against Ukraine), and in the second half against Tunisia," said Puyol. "The Saudi Arabia match was far from easy. The pitch was very dry and we found it hard to get our passing game going, mainly because the ball wouldn't run and they were very compact. We played well all the same, and we've got a lot of confidence in ourselves."

Aragones has slowly but surely forged a young, new-look team, one that contains only six veterans of Korea/Japan 2002, Puyol among them. "Everything's going well," he said. "All the players want to be here, and those of us lucky enough to have made it have got to profit from this opportunity and enjoy it at the same time."

SEE PAGE 20 COL 1



CONTRASTING MOODS: A dejected Sylvie van der Vaart (C), wife of Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart, looks on during the Holland versus Portugal game in Nuremberg. (R) Victoria Beckham and son Brooklyn enjoy England's victory over Ecuador in Stuttgart.



PHOTOS AFP

France don't mind underdog tag

REUTERS, Hameln

France, automatic favourites against anyone not so long ago, feel they will be the underdogs when they face Spain in the second round of the World Cup on Tuesday and like it that way.

"Maybe it's a good thing that Spain believe they're the favourites," France midfielder Vikash Dhorasoo told reporters on Sunday.

"We will play them with respect but no fear" - Diarra

"Let them be confident."

France, world champions in 1998 and European champions two years later, are relying on an ageing team and have struggled to advance to the last 16.

By contrast, Spain, long regarded as under-achievers on the big stage, have plenty of young talent and have suggested they might make an impact at last.

"Maybe they (Spain) believe we will lose," said France defender Eric Abidal. "Maybe they were better than us in the group stage but it will get harder for them now."

France, who beat Spain in the

final of the 1984 European championship to win their first significant title, have played the Spaniards 27 times, recording 10 victories, 11 defeats and six draws.

The two neighbours have never met them on the World Cup stage and Spain will be chasing their first victory over the French in the finals of a major tournament.

France won 2-1 the last time they played Spain competitively, in the quarterfinals of Euro 2000. Raul missed a penalty in the final minute and France went on to win the title.

"I hope they realise we're a good team and beating us is certainly not easy," said Dhorasoo.

Midfielder Alou Diarra listed the reasons why France could justifiably feel optimistic against Spain and their quicksilver forwards.

"We have a tight defence, a lot of experience and players capable of making a difference at any time," he said.

"We want to be in the final on July 9 and to do that, we have to beat Spain," he added. "We will play them with respect but no fear."