

Rosy route for world champions

LAS VEGAS, Dec 20: World champions Germany were given the ideal start to the defence of their title when they were drawn in one of the easiest first-round groups of the 1994 World Cup finals on Sunday, reports Reuters.

Germany begin their defence when they play minnows Bolivia in Chicago in the opening match of the tournament. Rank outsiders South Korea are also in their first round group, as well as Spain.

Brazil, three-time world champions like Germany, ended up in probably the toughest of the six groups — and one which coach Carlos Alberto Parreira had feared most beforehand and labelled "the group of death."

They face Russia, Cameroon, who reached the quarter-finals in 1990, and European Championship semifinalists Sweden, who were drawn from the supposedly weaker outsiders bowl during the televised ceremony from the Las Vegas Convention Centre.

Their only concession was that they were placed in Group B, based in the cooler climate of San Francisco, as they had requested.

Breaking from tradition, FIFA selected the venues for each group after they had drawn them so teams could be placed among their ethnic support base.

Italy will play their three opening games in New York, New Jersey, while the United States were placed in Los Angeles.

Argentina, beaten finalists in Italia '90, were matched against Nigeria, the strongest of Africa's three teams, bringing back their haunting memories of their opening game in 1990 when they were beaten by another African side, Cameroon.

But Argentina, the two-times champions who will play in Boston and Dallas, landed two of Europe's weaker teams, Bulgaria and World Cup debutants Greece.

Three-times winners Italy were cursing their luck at being thrown into what will be an awkward group with Ireland, Mexico and Norway.

The Italians had said they hoped to avoid Norway, who took three points off them in qualifying for the 1992 European Championship, costing them their place.

Hosts the United States were given no favours, "pulling" Colombia, who beat Argentina twice in qualifying, Romania and Switzerland.

Belgium, the sixth seeds, and the Netherlands, twice finalists, drew the short straw when they were placed in Group F and forced to play two of their first-round games in the ferocious heat and debilitating humidity of Orlando, Florida — the city all coaches had said they wanted most to avoid.

The Belgium-Netherlands match on June 25 will be in marked contrast to the rest of their 100-plus meetings in a rivalry dating back to 1905.

They have never met in the finals before — and are unlikely ever to have played in the heat they can expect in Florida.

Worse still, their opponents, Morocco and Saudi Arabia, will be much more at home in the conditions.

German coach Bert Vogts picked out Brazil as the seeded team with the toughest task of making the second round.

"The groups are largely all very fair, but Brazil is certainly in one of the toughest groups — you can never underestimate the Russians," he said.

He played down suggestions that Germany had been given a plum draw, warning that Bolivia, who became the first team to beat Brazil in World Cup

qualifying and ousted Uruguay, were potentially dangerous. "Bolivia are a good team and they have some good players," he said.

There will be pressure on us in the opening game. People expect more than just a draw or a close victory from us."

Bolivia, making their first appearance in the finals since 1950, won all their home qualifying games, but that was at high altitude in La Paz and

on to reach the final. Italian coach Arrigo Sacchi said his side and Brazil had the hardest groups.

"It will not be easy for us, as we have three formidable opponents. But if we want to win the World Cup we have to play well," he said.

Vogts, however, believed Italy had received a good draw, and would benefit from playing in New York, New Jersey where there is a vast Italian popula-

tion. "They are virtually playing at home in New York," he said.

Argentina will be wary of meeting Nigeria — and all the better prepared after the rude awakening from Cameroon in the 1990 finals which almost cost them a second round berth.

Nigeria, appearing in their first World Cup finals, are considered to be the strongest of the three African finalists.

Germany's toughest opponent is Spain, who beat European champions Denmark in their final qualifying game, denying the Scandinavians a place in the finals.

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Greece should not trouble Argentina, although they qualified without losing a game and beat Russia.

But Argentina will be keen to win Group D as the runners-up meet the winner of Italy's Group E.

The United States make history in their opening game, on June 18, the second day of the month-long tournament, when they meet Switzerland in the Pontiac Silverdome, Detroit in the first World Cup game played indoors.

Their Serbian coach Bora Milutinovic was far from dismayed at his opponents, and picked out Colombia as the most dangerous.

"Colombia are the team to beat and we can do it. We need five points to go through and it is within our grasp," he said.

Group F features a clash of Dutch tacticians, with the probable Netherlands coach, Dick Advocaat, coming up against compatriot Leo Beenhakker who took over as Saudi Arabia boss last month in place of sacked Brazilian Jose Candido. Beenhakker was Dutch national coach at the last World Cup.

Advocaat is expected to lead the Dutch after Barcelona's Johan Cruyff pulled out of an arrangement to take over for the finals.

The draw, involving actress Faye Dunaway, world heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield, and a host of past and present soccer stars including Franz Beckenbauer and Marco van Basten, was heavily manipulated.

FIFA decreed that no teams from the same continent apart from Europe were to be placed together, which ensured a spread of interest but meant that some teams had to be strategically placed in selected groups when pulled from the glass bowls to avoid such clashes.

In a break with tradition, FIFA also matched up the venue cities with the groups after they had been drawn.

Germany, Brazil bookies favourites

LONDON, Dec 20: British bookmakers Ladbrokes made defending champion Germany and Brazil 4-1 co-favourites to win the World Cup after Sunday's draw in Las Vegas, reports AP.

Before the draw, Ladbrokes had Germany as the 7-2 favourite. Host nation United States remained a long shot at 50-1.

The odds on the Netherlands winning the event shortened from 8-1 to 7-1 after they received a comparatively easy first stage draw and Argentina came down from 9-1 to 8-1. Italy remained third favourite at 9-2.

Ladbrokes shortened Colombia's odds 12-1 to 10-1 while Belgium came in from 25-1 to 20-1. Spain stayed at 16-1 and Russia's odds lengthened from 20-1 to 25-1.

Bolivia moved up from 25-1 to 33-1; Norway, Sweden, Ireland and Mexico all lengthened from 33-1 to 40-1; and Cameroon went out from 66-1 to 100-1 after a tough draw. Switzerland stayed at 33-1.

Romania, the United States and Bulgaria remain at 50-1, Nigeria stayed at 80-1 and Greece 100-1.

Morocco also lipped out from 100-1 to 150-1 while Saudi Arabia remained a 200-1 shot and South Korea is still rated 250-1.

Clinton invited to inaugurate Atlanta Games

WASHINGTON, Dec 20: President Clinton was invited Friday to open the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, reports AP.

"We hope that he will be there with Hillary," said Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee.

There was no word from the White House on whether Clinton accepted the invitation during a brief, private meeting with Samaranch.

The official said he also asked Clinton to support an International Olympic Committee and United Nations call for a cease-fire in the former Yugoslavia during the Winter Games early next year in Lillehammer, Norway.

"I explained to him what was going on and that we considered a truce very difficult, very nearly impossible," Samaranch said. "But we have to try, and we will try."

The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in October calling for the revival of the ancient Olympic Truce — a halt to all wars around the world during the Games.

The idea is especially fitting because the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo was the site of the 1984 Winter Games, Samaranch said.

Samaranch also said he told Clinton of another UN resolution declaring 1994 the International Year of Sport and the Olympic Ideal.

Palmeiras' fine treble

SAO PAULO, Dec 20: Palmeiras, playing textbook fast, attacking soccer, subdued Victoria with two first-half goals to win the Brazilian National Championship on Sunday, reports Reuters.

The Sao Paulo side, carrying the advantage of a 1-0 win in the first-leg a week ago, stunned their Bahia opponents with an early goal after four minutes.

Evair sprinted forward to connect with a low cross from the left by Roberto Carlos, stabbing the ball past Victoria keeper Dida.

Twenty minutes later, Edmundo deftly controlled a high pass from midfield and beat Dida with a low, angled drive into the left-hand corner.

The title capped a triumphant season for Palmeiras, in which they also won the Sao Paulo Local Championship and the Sao Paulo-Rio Competition, another national soccer event. They lost on the Brazilian Championship title in 1973.

Victoria fought back in the second-half, despite the sending off of defender China after he pulled down Edmundo. He had already collected a yellow card in the first half.

The Bahia team's best chances came from Roberto Cavallo, who twice fired blistering free kicks towards the Palmeiras goal. One was saved by Sergio and the other went wide.

Palmeiras fans around Sao Paulo celebrated their team's win in typical style, unleashing a barrage of ear-deafening firecrackers that echoed across the city's landscape of skyscrapers and high-rise apartments.

Revolutionary boot unveiled

LAS VEGAS, Dec 20: Former Liverpool star Craig Johnston launched a revolutionary soccer boot here on Friday which promises to unleash a volley of more spectacular goals at next year's World Cup finals, reports Reuters.

The performance-enhancing boot, developed in conjunction with sportswear giant Adidas with FIFA's blessing, will give players more power, accuracy and greater ball-swerve, according to Johnston.

He said Adidas tests had shown that the boot, christened the Predator, produced 50 per cent more rotation and 28 per cent more swerve on the ball, which will give free-kick specialists another weapon in their arsenal.

The controversial boot, which was sanctioned after much deliberation by FIFA, the sport's ruling body, features moulded ridges on the top of the boot which were designed by computer and which resemble fins.

Johnston, who said he initially created the boot as a coaching aid for children, got the idea from the material on table tennis bats which give the balls more spin.

When he showed his prototype to former Liverpool colleague he realised its potential went far beyond a simple coaching aid.

Adidas chief Simon Skirrow said: "When we began testing we immediately recognised that there would be parties with a vested interest in stopping us and this is why we involved both FIFA and some of the world's top players in the development phases."

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Zimbabweans well placed

LAHORE, Dec 20: Pakistan, after conceding a first innings lead of 83 runs, scored 37 without any loss on the fourth day of their third and final cricket Test against touring Zimbabwe here Monday, reports AFP.

By stumps, Aamir Sohail had scored 19 and Shoaib Mohammad was batting on eight.

Replying to Pakistan's meagre 147, the tourists resumed their innings at 121 for three after a day's rest on Sunday.

A breezy spell from Pakistani pacemen Waqar Younis and captain Wasim Akram failed to contain the tourists, who hit 230. Zimbabwe secured a respectable 83-run lead over their experienced rivals before the dismissal after 80 minutes after lunch.

Andy Flower playing a masterly knock of 62 remained not out while David Houghton made 50.

Younis finished with five for 100 while Akram captured four for 70 in the face of strong re-

sistance from the tailenders. This was the 16th time that the 23-year-old Younis took a haul of five wickets. He has now raised his tally of scalps to 27 in the current series.

When Pakistan started their second innings, the run rate was slow in the face of some accurate bowling. They scored 37 in 100 minutes from 27 overs.

Bad weather again delayed the start for about half-an-hour, while only 21 minutes play was possible on Saturday due to mist and fog.

Tuesday being the last day, the match is heading towards a draw.

Pakistan already leads 2-0 in the three-Test series.

SCOREBOARD
Scoreboard on the fourth day of the third and final Test between Pakistan and Zimbabwe here Monday:

PAKISTAN: 1st innings 147
ZIMBABWE: 1st Innings
G Flower c Latif b Rehman 30
Dekker c Latif b Akram 2
Campbell c Latif b Younis 6
Houghton c Latif b Younis 50
A Flower not out 62

Whittall c Mujtaba b Akram 2
James c Shoaib b Younis 8
Streak b Younis 0
Brain c Sohail b Akram 28
Brandes lbw b Akram 9
Rennie c Latif b Younis 2

Extras: (b-10, lb-13, nb-7, w-1) 31
Total: 230

Fall of wickets: 1-17; 2-35; 3-88; 4-121; 5-126; 6-141; 7-141; 8-181; 9-215.

Bowling: O M R W
Wasim Akram 32 7 70 4
Waqar Younis 34 4 9 10 5
Aamir Rehman 13 6 24 1
Mushaq Ahmed 5 1 13 0

PAKISTAN: 2nd Innings
A Sohail batting 19
S Mohammad batting 8
Extras: (lb-9, nb-1) 10
Total: (for no wkt) 37

To bat: Inzamamul Haq, Javed Miandad, Basit Ali, Asif Mujtaba, Rashid Latif, Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis, Mushaq Ahmed, Aamir Rehman.

Bowling: O M R W
Brands 8 3 9 0
Brain 7 4 7 0
Streak 5 1 5 0
Rennie 7 2 7 0

Cronje, Cullinan rescue SA

BRISBANE, Dec 20: Hansie Cronje and Daryll Cullinan shared a record 242-run fourth-wicket partnership Monday to rescue South Africa from a dismal start on the first day of their four-day cricket match against the Queensland state team, reports AP.

The partnership enabled the tourists to rally from 38 for three to a healthy 297 for four by stumps at the Gabba.

After winning the toss and batting, the South Africans found themselves in dire straits with Andrew Hudson, Gary Kirsten and captain Kepler Wessels all dismissed cheaply.

A record South African partnership in Australia then turned the match around.

Cronje recorded his highest total for South Africa with 145, while Cullinan was unbeaten on 109 at the close of play with Dave Callaghan on four.

The performance of Cronje and Callaghan gave South Africa a much-needed boost with the first Test against Australia due to start Dec 26 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

The partnership totally eclipsed the previous South African fourth-wicket record in Australia of 150, set by Dave Nourse and Tip Snook against Tasmania in 1910-11.

"This game is not the one that really matters but I'm happy to get some runs under my belt," Cronje said.

The team needed a big stand after the start we made and Daryll did a really fine job after the problems he's had with

a virus since he arrived in Australia.

"It's good to get a big stand and to get runs but in the Test match we know we'll need to make a much better start than we did today."

Cronje's 10th first-class century included 12 boundaries and one six and his 267-minute stay was included 19 boundaries and two sixes in all.

Cullinan started slowly and his century was the less sparkling of the two, requiring 259 minutes and 203 deliveries in all.

The squat right-hander struck 12 boundaries and confidently handled the pace of Australian Test bowler Craig McDermott.

"We had to get in with McDermott and mix it with him for the later games," Cullinan said. "It was good to get an idea of the conditions we might expect for the Tests and it was ideal preparation in that regard."

"I just wanted to occupy the crease, so I'm very happy with the way it went."

The Queensland team played without ace opener Matthew Hayden and captain Carl Rackemann.

Hayden was forced to pull out of the match with a virus, while Rackemann stood down in favour of Mike Kasproutz.

The match continues through Thursday.

Brazil shine
DELRAY BEACH, Fla. Dec 20: Brazil, led by Gustavo Kuerten and Marcelo Carlsom, won the doubles match Sunday to defeat Chile for its first victory at the Sunshine Cup since 1958, reports AP.

That was the inaugural year of junior tennis' version of the Davis Cup.</