

WORLD CUP USA '94

Brazil, Italy glory bound

PASADENA, July 16: Destiny beckons Brazil to a long overdue World Cup victory on Sunday but the omens look bleak for a nostalgic return to the magic of the classic 1970 final with Italy, their rivals then and now, reports Reuter.

Optimists can dream. Brazil and Italy, two of the giants of the game and both going for a record fourth World Cup win, possess in Romario and Roberto Baggio respectively a wizard able to lend enchantment to the greatest occasion in sport.

But the harsher realities suggest a match decided more by physical than mystical qualities, with the midfield workers and the defensive drones exerting a greater influence than the queen bees of the forward line.

Baggio may have to play with a hamstring injury and the coaches are busy devising ways of muting their opponents' virtuosity.

Brazilian trainer Carlos Alberto Parreira, carrying the burden of bringing back a trophy for the first time in 24 years to a fanatical football nation which believes it is theirs by divine right, knows the score.

"We can't give them any space," he said. "We have to play tight. They don't open up either. They know how to close up and come out on the counter-attack."

The tone is set. The 90,000 fans at the Pasadena Rose Bowl and the massive worldwide television audience can expect no remake of 1970 when the dazzling Brazil team of Pele, Tostao, Gerson and Rivelino sizzled to a 4-1 victory over an excellent Italian side in perhaps the greatest game ever played.

Fate seems to have been

kind to a Brazilian side which, though comfortably the best team of the US finals, bears little comparison with their illustrious predecessors.

Brazil have gone into most matches with the cards stacked in their favour. In the quarter-final they played a Dutch team tired from the stifling, humid conditions of earlier games in Orlando and then faced a Swedish team which had only two days to overcome an exhausting extra-time and penalty shootout win.

Sunday will be no exception as the Italians curse the rough luck which has plagued them. The suspensions of defenders Alessandro Costacurta and Mauro Tassotti weaken Italy's hand considerably but the injuries to Baggio and Franco Baresi may rob them of their trumps.

Baggio, who has single-handedly kept Italy in the tournament with five goals in the last three games, has a 50-50 chance of playing, according to team doctor Andrea Ferretti.

But it is inconceivable that trainer Arrigo Sacchi would leave out the pony-tailed pivot of his attack, even if half-fit.

"This injury is a real shame because we had rediscovered the Roberto Baggio we know," Sacchi said. "Even in his worst match, he is capable of producing something special. When he plays as he did against Bulgaria, he's the best in the world."

Baggio has stepped quietly into the role occupied by Paolo Rossi, scorer of six goals and national folk hero in Italy's last World Cup triumph in 1982.

If Sacchi gambles on Baggio, he may be less inclined to do the same with Baresi, the most elegant sweeper in the world since Franz Beckenbauer, who is just fit again after keyhole surgery on a knee injury which has kept him out of the last

four games.

Sacchi, who has countered criticism of his tactics by saying he never promised spectacular soccer, is forced to try to stop the Brazilians playing.

Though his defence is disrupted, he has an abundance of defensive midfielders, led by his star's namesake Dino Baggio, who are eminently capable of clamping down on Brazil's attempts to make openings.

There they touch the weakness of an otherwise excellent Brazilian side. The defence is awesome and strikers Romario and Bebeto unrivalled but the midfield is uninspiring and uninspired, lacking in creative instincts for all the tireless beavering of Mauro Silva and Dunga.

Their flamboyant samba soccer has become a sedate foxtrot more in place on the Costa Brava than on Copacabana.

Romario, like Baggio his side's saviour with five goals to date, knows he has the chance to turn the direct duel with the Italian in his favour.

"We have both shown we are capable of scoring important goals for our teams," he said. "I'm sure the team which wins will be the one which has the best player of the competition."

PROBABLE TEAMS

BRAZIL: 1-Taffarel, 2-Jorginho, 13-Aldair, 15-Marcio Santos, 6-Branco, 8-Dunga, 5-Mauro Silva, 17-Mazinho, 9-Zinho, 7-Bebeto, 11-Romario.

ITALY: 1-Gianluca Pagliuca, 3-Antonio Benarrivo, 2-Luigi Apolloni, 5-Paolo Maldini, 8-Roberto Mussi, 14-Nicola Berti, 13-Dino Baggio, 11-Demetrio Albertini, 16-Roberto Donadoni, 18-Pierluigi Casiraghi, 10-Roberto Baggio.

Kickoff: 1935 GMT (01:35 AM, Monday, Bangladesh time).

It's all on the ice in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO, July 16: The beer is in the chiller, the fireworks are waiting for the lighted match, the last prayers are being whispered.

Brazil are ready to forget 24 long years of soccer heartbreak by cheering the national team on to victory in Sunday's World Cup final against Italy in Pasadena, reports Reuter.

"Three-one to Brazil, no problem," said Dario Melo, a shop vendor in downtown Rio. "The only ones we were worried about were the Germans and the Argentines."

"Italy? No sweat." "I don't think Brazil will win, I know they will win," said Lara Martins, selling copies of the number seven and 11 shirts worn by striking duo Bebeto and Romario.

It is hard to overstate the importance of soccer in Brazil, a vast nation of 150 million people.

The country's three World Cup triumphs are historical landmarks that rank alongside the declaration of independence from Portugal and the abolition of slavery.

"Before (the victories of) 1958 and 1962, Brazil were a mongrel among nations and the Brazilian a mongrel among men," journalist and playwright Nelson Rodrigues is once reputed to have said.

Brazilians recall the day Pele, Rivelino and the rest of the all-conquering 1970 side destroyed Italy 4-1 in the final of that year just as Americans might remember the day Neil Armstrong stepped on to the moon.

"They were the gods of football," said taxi driver Claudio Castro. "They played for the love of the game and of the country."

Yet not everyone will be backing Brazil.

"Hundreds of thousands of Italians emigrated to Sao Paulo during the country's coffee boom early this century and many have remained faithful to the 'Azzurri'."

One of them is economist Joao Roberto Modugno, whose grandparents made the move across the Atlantic.

"There's going to be a lot of us rooting for Italy," he said.

Dunga, Brazil's heart: Pele

LOS ANGELES, July 16: Brazil skipper Dunga got the greatest compliment he could on the eve of the World Cup final against Italy from the world's greatest player, Pele, reports AFP.

"Dunga is the heart of the Brazil side," said Pele as Dunga was selected for the first ever World Cup all-stars team named by FIFA.

It was pleasant change for the no-nonsense midfielder who is more used to brickbats than praise.

But Dunga insists the criticism which has been heaped on him at this World Cup makes him play better.

The tough, 30-year-old, defensive-minded midfielder said: "People can criticise me as much as they want. It will not affect my performance. It could improve my game."



The members of the Brazilian soccer team limber up during a training session on July 15. Brazil will meet Italy in the World Cup final at the Rose Bowl midnight today. — AFP photo

Sacchi gambles with Baggio

PASADENA, July 16: Italy on Saturday named ace attacker Roberto Baggio in a provisional line-up for Sunday's World Cup final with Brazil, but coach Arrigo

Sacchi said it was not certain he would play, reports Reuter.

"We are going to try out Baggio in training this (Saturday) morning," said Sacchi. "I hope Baggio makes it but if not Giuseppe Signori will take his place."

Baggio suffered a strained hamstring in Wednesday's semifinal win over Bulgaria. He scored twice in that game to take his tally to five goals in the past three games.

He had not trained in the last two days. Sacchi said midfielders Roberto Donadoni, Demetrio Albertini and Dino Baggio were all nursing muscular strains and would train only lightly on the eve of the final.

"They should all be fit unless there is deterioration in their condition," he said.

The coach named Parma's Luigi Apolloni to replace suspended central defender Alessandro Costacurta in what he said was a provisional team. He has apparently resisted the temptation to recall captain Franco Baresi in defence. Baresi, 34, had knee surgery on June 24 and has only just resumed training.

"The problem with Franco is there is a worry he won't last 90 minutes," Sacchi said. The coach has dropped striker Pierluigi Casiraghi from the team which beat Bulgaria 2-1 and replaced him with the more mobile Daniele Massaro, who has a wealth of experience with European champions AC Milan.

Italy, like Brazil, will be chasing their fourth World Cup title when they play in Sunday's final at the Pasadena Rose Bowl (kickoff 1935 GMT - 01:35 am BST).

The Italians last appeared in a World Cup final in 1982

and won, beating West Germany 3-1 in Madrid.

The provisional team named by Sacchi: 1-Gianluca Pagliuca, 8-Roberto Mussi, 3-Luigi Apolloni, 5-Paolo Maldini, 3-Antonio Benarrivo, 14-Nicola Berti, 13-Dino Baggio, 11-Demetrio Albertini, 16-Roberto Donadoni, 10-Roberto Baggio, 19-Daniele Massaro.

out to the overlapping full-backs who then play it back into the middle after Bebeto and Romario have sprinted upfield.

The Italian midfield relies heavily on Roberto Donadoni's creativity down the left. On Sunday, Nicola Berti on the right, Demetrio Albertini and Dino Baggio will team up with Donadoni across the middle.

Coach Arrigo Sacchi likes then to create space as well as opportunities for the front men with plenty of movement off the ball. Despite Baggio's shortcomings as a passer, the Italian midfield is more inventive than the Brazilian.

Unlike their Brazilian counterparts Italy's forwards Roberto Baggio and Pierluigi Casiraghi will only drop back to midfield if things are going badly wrong.

Both attacks are reinforced by crosses from the over-lapping full backs, while the Italian attack is also boosted by the midfield which quickly pushes up on the break.

Both teams play with four men in the middle, but in different formations. Dunga and Mauro Silva tend to play in a defensive-oriented partnership in front of the back four for Brazil with Mazinho, wide on the right and Zinho, on the left having more attacking responsibilities.

If Brazil have a weakness it is the midfield which lacks a creative play-maker. That means that forwards Bebeto and Romario are often having to drop deep to win the ball and create their own opportunities.

They then either exchange quick one-twos or play the ball

Today's World Cup fixture

Brazil vs Italy (For details see page 1)

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Sacchi's dream comes true

LOS ANGELES, July 16: Arrigo Sacchi was a salesman for his father's shoe business when Italy played Brazil in the 1970 World Cup final.

"I had no idea at that time I would be able to make my life in football," he said Thursday.

"But in the next few years my life turned around completely. Many dreams do not come true, but mine did."

He was hired as coach of AC Milan by Silvio Berlusconi, now Prime Minister of Italy but then a simple soccer club owner and media magnate, in 1987.

And he replaced Azeglio Vicini as national coach in 1991 after winning two European Cups with AC Milan where his attacking style of play went against the grain of Italian football.

National coaches without any international experience as a player often struggle to command the respect of their players but Sacchi appears to have succeeded in spite of his continual fiddling with personnel.

His pressing game, which requires the four defenders to push up in order to cut down the opponents' space, is alien to Italian players but he was fortunate to find a like-minded spirit in Franco Baresi.

However, he had to persuade his AC Milan club captain to come back out of retirement when the qualifying competition got underway with a lucky 2-2 draw at home to Switzerland.

Sacchi has always been known as a lucky coach although he seems at times to have been stretching his luck in this tournament.

"My Italy will be a great team only when it seems to have lots of time when it's on the ball and, in contrast, is quick to win back possession from the opposition," he said.

"I'd be lying if I said I had not dreamt of this final," added the former shoe salesman whose dreams started to come true in 1987.

Rocha's despair

LOS ANGELES, July 16: Brazilian central defender Ricardo Rocha spoke on Friday of his frustration at being forced to miss his country's World Cup campaign through injury but said he was still proud to be part of a successful squad, reports Reuter.

Rocha has not played since limping out of Brazil's opening match against Russia with a thigh injury.

He said he would be fit enough to play in Sunday's final if needed but coach Carlos Alberto Parreira is not expected to break up the improvised central defensive partnership of Aldair and Marcio Santos, which has looked solid throughout.

"Playing is easy, it's sitting on the bench that is difficult," said the former Real Madrid player, who has had an excellent season with his current club Vasco Da Gama.

"Obviously, this has made me sad but life goes on and I am very proud to be taking part in a successful group.

Pele's Brazilian quartet

LOS ANGELES, July 16: Pele believes Romario, Jorginho, Dunga and Marcio Santos can lead Brazil to their fourth World Cup on Sunday, reports AFP.

"They are key players and, hopefully, can lead Brazil to the World Cup," the 1970s idol said here Friday.

"Romario is a specialist player. Whenever he gets the ball he's a very dangerous player. He can make space for the other forwards or score himself," said the man who inspired Brazil to their third World Cup in 1970.

Although he agreed Bebeto was important, Pele thought right-back Jorginho and central defender Marcio Santos could play a more important role in Sunday's final.

"Marcio Santos was the third-choice when this tournament started but now he is the best central defender in the world," he said.

"Dunga is the heart of Brazil. He is the man every national team should have and Jorginho makes the team think. He starts a lot of good moves down the right flank."

Brazil can be thankful their injuries came in their strongest department on the field — central defence.

Brazil had about eight central defenders before the event, and all would not have looked out of place in a world championship winning team.

To lose both centre backs, Ricardo Rocha and Ricardo Gomes, would almost certainly have been a major blow to any other team.

But replacements Aldair and Marcio Santos have ensured none of Brazil's three goals conceded in six matches have come through central defence.

Paris Saint German's Ricardo Gomes was ruled out of the World Cup with a torn hamstring following their friendly match against El Salvador in Fresno, California on June 12.

Ricardo Rocha hurt his groin during the first match against Russia on June 20 and was substituted by Aldair 22 minutes before the end. Since then Marcio Santos, who plays for French club Bordeaux, and as Roma's Aldair have performed superbly.

Thankfully, coach Carlos Alberto Parreira had no other serious injuries. An injury in his workmanlike midfield — at least workmanlike by Brazilian standards — could have been disastrous as they do not have the strength in depth to cover.

Brazil started well with five goals against Russia and Cameroon although a 1-1 draw with Sweden and Russia's subsequent six-goal thrashing of Cameroon put Brazil's performances into perspective.

They had Leonardo, their enterprising left-back, sent off and banned for the rest of the tournament for smashing his elbow into Tab Ramos' face in the 1-0 second-round win over the United States.

And the two goals they conceded to Holland in the quarter-finals again raised doubts.

But Branco, whose 30-metre free-kick clinched that 3-2 win over the Dutch, has proved a more than satisfactory replacement for Leonardo.

And the Romario-Bebeto partnership has looked better and better.

Zinho probes intelligently behind the front-runners but with Rai a pale shadow of the man who led Sao Paulo to the 1992 Intercontinental Cup, the attacking thrust provided by Dunga and Mazinho is steady but predictable.

Team spirit may have been helped as eight of the 11 probably starters against Italy play for European clubs.

Getting away from the pressure of being a footballer in Brazil may prove to have been crucial preparation, according to team press liaison officer John Polis.

"Team spirit is good because they did not have to suffer the weight of expectation heaped on them by the Brazilian press before the event," said Polis.

Europeanisation of the team has been a major criticism of Parreira. But he disagrees they have adopted a style in character with the old continent.

He said in Europe they play long balls, whereas Brazil play short passes. He added Europeans tend to mark man-for-man whereas Brazil use a zonal system.

"The only European trait we use is defensive discipline when we do not have the ball. South American sides in general are weaker than in Europe

when they don't have possession," Parreira said.

The only selection doubt for Sunday's final is whether Mazinho keeps his place ahead of skipper Rai, who was kept out of the starting lineup by Mazinho from the start of the knockout stages.

Mazinho, more of a workhorse than the creative Rai, was taken off after the first half of their semifinal against Sweden. Rai replaced him and will hope he did enough for a recall.

"It's the coach who picks the side but I hope I play some of the match. We are determined to get revenge for losing in the 1982 final," he said.

Rai's elder brother Socrates was in the side that lost 3-2 to Italy in Spain when they only needed a draw to reach the semi-finals.

Sandor Puhl to officiate WC final

PASADENA, July 16: Hungarian Sandor Puhl was handed a late birthday present on Friday when he was named as the referee for the World Cup final between Brazil and Italy, reports Reuter.

Puhl, 39 on Thursday, has referred games involving both finalists earlier in the tournament.

He took charge of the quarter final between Italy and Spain and the first round game featuring Brazil and Sweden. He also referred the group match between Norway and Mexico.

His linesmen for Sunday's final at the Pasadena Rose Bowl are Paraguayan Venancio Zarate and Mohammed Fanaei of Iran. The reserve referee is Francisco Lal Molina of Argentina.

FIFA said Puhl was the unanimous choice at Friday's referees' committee meeting.

He was a referee at the 1992 European Championship and took charge of several World Cup qualifiers. He also has experience of European Club Cup competitions.

Zarate has run the line in the Bulgaria-Germany quarter-final, the second-round tie between Nigeria and Italy and the Morocco-Netherlands and Germany-Spain group matches.

Fanaei was involved in the Netherlands-Brazil quarter-final and first round matches between Sweden and Russia and Romania and Switzerland.

Puhl, who rates the World Cup qualifying playoff between Australia and Argentina in Sydney last October as the most important match of his career before this tournament, is the only European official among the eight selected by FIFA for the final and third-place playoff.



THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE: The Hungarian referee Sandor Puhl has been selected by soccer's governing body, FIFA, to officiate the final of the 15th World Cup between Brazil and Italy at the Pasadena Rose Bowl midnight today. The match kicks-off at 1.30 (BST). — AFP photo