

Will Raul break Kanu's heart tonight?

JOHN PLAYER GOLD LEAF LIGHTS

Spain should start a step ahead

NANTES, France, Jun 12 (AFP): It looms as one of the most compelling encounters of the first round of the World Cup — a fascinating contrast in style.

Spain, massively talented but perennial under-achievers, take on unpredictable Nigeria, the Olympic champions and Africa's great hopes at France '98, in their opening Group D match at the La Beaujoire stadium here on Saturday afternoon.

Spain have a team chock-a-block with a talent but have often stumbled on the World Cup stage — a fourth place finish in 1950 remains the best Spanish performance in nine previous appearances in the finals, although they were quarterfinalists in both 1986 and 1994.

There is a feeling in the Spanish camp, though, that this may be their year, despite the fact they have been drawn into a tough group that also features 1994 semifinalists Bulgaria and enigmatic Paraguay.

Coach Javier Clemente's record with the Spaniards is remarkable, since he took over in 1992, the Spaniards have lost only three times in 54 matches. They qualified unbeaten for their sixth straight appearance in the finals.

Clemente has worked hard to establish a sense of unity in a squad that contains many individual stars.

"I've always wanted to put a real team together and I think I've got that right now," said Clemente. "I have the feeling that we have strength in numbers. Individuals are important in certain situations, but what is important is that every player knows what is necessary for the good of the team."

The current side have a winning mentality, it's one of their primary characteristics. They are born winners.

Striker Raul, a 20-year-old prodigy, the prolific Alfonso and the tenacious Luis Enrique give the Spaniards plenty of attacking flair but the backbone of the team will be goalkeeper Andoni Zubizarreta, who is making his fourth finals appearance, and the superbly composed defender Fernando Hierro.

"We have absolute confidence in our abilities and our results have shown over time that we are one of the best teams in the world," said Luis Enrique. "But while Spaniards are confident, they are also guarding against over-confidence."

"We are good," said defender Miguel Angel Nadal. "But there are many other teams as good as us."

One of those teams may just be enigmatic Nigerians, who love the big stage and have vowed to fight back after a series of disappointing warm-up results, in which they conceded 12 goals in three matches those losses left the future of coach Bora Milutinovic resting on a knife edge.

"I know it is difficult to accept defeat in whatever form, but it is better to lose friendlies than World Cup matches," he said. "I still believe in this team and people should not write us off."

British bookmakers Ladbrokes on Friday slashed the odds on Salas from 50-1 to 4-1 — equal with Ronaldo — after he scored twice in Chile's 2-2 draw with Italy on Thursday.

Ladbrokes spokesman Sean Boyce said Argentina's Gabriel Batistuta was next at 6-1, followed by Germany's Oliver Bierhoff at 8-1 and England captain Alan Shearer at 10-1.

Boyce said he was expecting plenty of takers for Ladbrokes' offer of 25-1 on 18-year-old England striker Michael Owen.

"If Owen starts Monday (against Tunisia) you can expect those odds to come tumbling down," he said.

"Already he's hugely popular with football punters (bettors) because of his incredible strike rate and if it looks like (coach Glenn) Hoddle will give him the opportunity I expect the floodgates will open."

Massive fraud detected

PARIS, June 12: Over 200,000 fake merchandising items were seized by French authorities before the World Cup and thousands were still on sale around the stadiums during Wednesday's first two matches, a government official said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Some 5,500 unlicensed products ranging from balls to shirts and caps were spotted outside the Stade de France, where Brazil beat Scotland 2-1 in the opening game, Marylise Lebranchu, Secretary of State for Commerce and Craft, said.

"We were surprised to find so many items because we had seized such a lot already and people were aware that there would be checks," she said.

Around 50 people were caught selling the goods and face fines of up to 10,000 francs (about 1,700 US dollar) each.

Obviously, inquiries have been opened to find where those items come from," Lebranchu said. "There are networks which must be dismantled."

In Montpellier, where Morocco and Norway drew 2-2, some 70 kg of food and beverage which did not meet hygiene requirements were seized, she added.

Asked about black market for tickets, she said there could have been some but only on a small scale.

"There were some little groups moving around the stadiums from one entrance to the other and may be there was some ticket selling going on but no one was caught," she said. "As far as tickets are concerned, there has not been a single complaint."

Lebranchu said hotels and restaurants had put up their prices significantly because of the event.

"Hotel rooms are from 25 to 75 per cent more expensive than the normal prices but that's not an offence," she said. "What is an offence is when people who only want to stay for one night are forced to stay for three and that has happened."

Defence Romania's concern

ALBI, France, Jun 12: Ending two days of warmup games with local teams Romanian coach Anghel Iordanescu still has a major problem to plug gaps in the team's defence before Monday's opener against Colombia, reports AP.

"I'm still dissatisfied with the weaknesses of our defence," Iordanescu said Thursday.

Already without Atletico Madrid's Daniel Proda, who was left out due to last month's knee surgery, Iordanescu told reporters that another mainstay of the defence, Tibor Selymes of Anderlecht, has a strained ankle and is unlikely to play in Lyon Monday.

Even worse for the Romanians, striker Adrian Ilie of Valencia, nicknamed the "Cobra" for his habit of striking from nowhere, missed the warmups on Wednesday and Thursday reportedly due to a bruised leg. Team officials were silent about his chance of making the team against Colombia.

So bad was the situation that in the Thursday game the Romanian side had to borrow three players from the French squad of Albi to be able to make the full team. Romania used their main lineup in the first game Wednesday, while on Thursday they fielded their reserves.

Replacing Selymes was 26-year-old Liviu Ciobotariu of National Bucharest of the Romanian first division.

"Colombia is a technical team and the fate of the game is open to both sides," Iordanescu said.

In the main game Wednesday, Romania gave an idea of what their tactics against the Latin American team might look like, with defender Dan Petrescu of Chelsea making devastating runs down the left wing and midfielder Gheorghe Hagi diligently supporting both offense and defence.

Hoddle happy

LA BAULE, France, Jun 12: Manchester United defender Gary Neville and Tottenham striker Les Ferdinand underwent a full training session Thursday, leaving England's 22-strong World Cup squad at full strength for the first time since manager Glenn Hoddle announced his roster, reports AP.

Neville injured his calf Tuesday during England's exhibition match against French Second Division club Cean, while Ferdinand was suffering from an Achilles tendon problem.

"It's always nice to have a clean bill of health," Hoddle said. "You see and hear about a few problems here and there in the other camps."

"We have had our fair share of problems on the injury front coming into big, vital games. I hope this is the reverse, a bit of good fortune going into the most important games of our lives. That would be a significant way for us to do well in this tournament."



Dutch players warming up at Versailles on June 11.

— AFP photo

ROK, Mexico evenly balanced

PARIS, June 12: South Korea and Mexico, blatant under-achievers in previous World Cup campaigns, face a must-win situation in their opening World Cup encounter on Saturday, reports AP.

The Koreans, playing in their fifth World Cup finals but still without a win, and the Mexicans also meet fancied Holland and Belgium in Group E and both know that defeat in Lyon on Saturday will likely bring an early end to their France '98 campaign. Mexico have won just seven out of 33 World Cup matches but coach Manuel Lapuente insists that they will play attacking football and lie up to their FIFA ranking of world number four.

"We will play to win against South Korea as we always do," said Lapuente, who took over from Bora Milutinovic in December 1997. "The Koreans will defend, we will attack. We will have to take risks, that's the kind of game it is."

Since winning the Gold Cup with a 1-0 win over the United States in January the Mexicans have had a string of disappointing results and their most famous player, Hugo Sanchez, has written of their chances in France.

"This team is dreaming if it thinks it can bring back the cup to France," said the soccer legend before the team left for the World Cup.

"His successor in the striking role, Luis Hernandez, will carry a lot of responsibility when he comes up against South Korean stopper Hong Myung-Bo on Saturday. Hernandez was top scorer in the Copa America but is often criticised for being selfish and in Hong he meets a formidable opponent. The 29-year-old veteran plays his club soccer in the competitive Japanese League and has been watched by Spanish giants Barcelona.

The fair-haired Hernandez, nicknamed "the matador" discounts Mexico's poor warm-up form and predicts they will sparkle on the big stage.

"In the more important competitions like the Copa America and the Gold Cup we have produced good results," he said.

Lapuente's prediction that South Korea will defend and rely on the country attack to score goals is borne out by their likely 3-6-1 formation. The decision to pack the midfield and play Choi Young-Soo as sole striker has been forced on coach Cha Bum-Kun by the injury to veteran forward Hwang Sun-Hong.

Hwang misses that match with a knee injury and Cha could also lose the services of influential right-sided midfielder Choi Sung-Yong.

Cha, who had a successful career in German football and is a winner by nature, will rely on the speed of his midfield to catch Mexico on the break. The charismatic Cha, who receives respect from the squad because of his achievements as a player, knows the importance of the opening encounter for Korean and Asian soccer.

"This game, gives us the chance to win our first match in the World Cup," he said. "Korea have never got past the first round. More than any other year, this year we must at least reach the last 16 to save the face of Asian football and to prove that Asian sides do not just reach the finals and then fail. I want us to move into the top echelons of world football."

With the tiger economy of South Korea moving into recession the country's sports minister has also underlined the need

for a win to boost the morale of the population.

"The Korean people are down, frustrated and disappointed at the moment and if the team do well it will give hope and encouragement to overcome the problems," said Shin Nak-Kyun on a visit to Korea's training site.

PROBABLE TEAMS

MEXICO: 22-Oscar Perez (1-Jorge Campos), 3-Joel Sanchez, 18-Salvador Carmona, 4-German Villa, 16-Isaac Terrazas, 6-Marcelino Bernal, 9-Ricardo Pelaez, 14-Raoul Lara, 11-Cuautemoc Blanco, 10-Luis Garcia, 15-Luis Hernandez.

SOUTH KOREA: 1-Kim Byung-ji, 13-Kim Tae-yong, 5-Lee Min-sung, 20-Hong Myung-bo, 12-Lee Sang-hun, 15-Lee Sang-yoon, 7-Kim Do-Keun, 6-Yoo Sang-chul, 2-Choi Sung-yong, 10-Choi Yong-soo, 18-Hwang Sun-hong (11-Seo Jung-won).

Lions denied by Polster's late strike

TOULOUSE, France, June 12: Cameroon's Pierre Njanka scored the best goal of the World Cup to date in the worst match so far as Cameroon drew 1-1 with Austria here Thursday, reports AP.

The 23-year-old debutant collected the ball just inside the Austrian half on the left and set off goalbound.

Njanka went past Wolfgang Feiersinger then cut inside Peter Schottel before unleashing a shot that left Michael Konsel in the Austrian goal helpless.

It was a brilliant individual effort that brought a flash of individual genius to a game that brought the World Cup down to earth with a thud.

While the first three matches of the tournament had managed a minimum of three goals each, this Group B match threatened to be goalless until Njanka went it alone.

"You cannot afford to disappoint us because a dismal outing will further depress the national mood," Abubakar said in a message to the Super Eagles on Thursday.

ster's goal came in the first minute of time added.

It was his 16th goal of the World Cup campaign including qualifying and proved a bitter blow for a Cameroon side whose attack had been weakened due to Patrick Mboma, his side's leading scorer in the qualifiers with five out of their 10 goals, forced to play in a defensive-midfield position.

It is a role usually occupied by English Premiership side Manchester United target Marc Vivien-Foe, who broke a leg just before the tournament and Mboma had to drop back.

It left Samuel Ipoua playing alongside veteran Francois Omam-Biyck — famous for his winning goal in the opening game of the 1990 World Cup against then champions Argentina.

Austria had no excuse in a lacklustre match.

Ipoua set the tone when he had the Austrian goal at his mercy in the fourth minute.

The 25-year-old, who plays for Austria Vienna, headed straight at Konsel who took it

with ease.

Missed passes, missed tackles and missed chances spoiled what had promised to be a football festival.

Even Austria's 34-year-old Polster caught the blunder bug until his all-vital last gasp saver that kept Austria's hopes of getting through to the next round intact.

Presented with a golden opportunity in the 25th minute he managed only to give Cameroon goalkeeper Jacques Songso the easiest of saves.

A rare bright moment came half-way through the first half with a brilliant piece of individual play from Cameroon's Didier Angbeau who took the ball towards the byline.

The 23-year-old looked up, saw that Konsel was slightly off his line, and instead of crossing flashed in a shot that the Austrian keeper did well to get a hand to and tip over for a corner.

The first-half was marred by a series of over the top tackles that threatened to turn the match into a battle.

Cameroon's Njanka slid in, studs showing, on Harald Cerny but Paraguayan referee Elias Gonzalez Chavez let it go.

Both teams were greeted by jeers when the half-time whistle blew in a game that was doing little to warm up the crowd on a chilly Toulouse night.

In a bid to keep warm the fans were reduced to doing the Mexican wave, which they managed rather more successfully than the two teams attempt to score a goal.

The two teams had obviously been told to cool it during the half-time talk and concentrate on football instead, giving the crowd something to cheer about instead of boos.

GROUP B

World Cup Group B table after Thursday's matches:

Teams	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Italy	1	0	1	0	2	2	1
Chile	1	0	1	0	2	2	1
Austria	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Cameroon	1	0	1	0	1	1	1

Remaining matches (all times GMT):

June 17
Chile V Austria (St Etienne — 15:30)

Italy V Cameroon (Montpellier — 19:00)

June 23
Italy V Austria (Paris-Stade de France — 14:00)

Chile V Cameroon (Nantes — 14:00)



An unidentified Cameroon player (R) tries to wrongfoot Roman Mahlich of Austria during their June 11 encounter at Toulouse.

— AFP photo

Njanka: A star overnight

TOULOUSE, France, June 12 (Reuters): Six weeks ago, Pierre Njanka didn't exist — in world footballing terms at least.

On Thursday night, Njanka announced himself with the panache the world has come to expect from the eccentric footballing wizards from West Africa.

The announcement was made with a 55-metre run, linking outside an Austrian defender and then inside another to blast home to give Cameroon a 1-0 lead in their first World Cup match against Austria — and he's a defender.

"A month and a half ago Njanka did not exist. I had to go and get him from his village of Myvole. When you see the goal he scored tonight you can understand the potential of Cameroon football," said Cameroon's French coach

Claude Le Roy. The goal was remarkable for the skill and balance shown by the young stopper in his first competitive international and only his third game for Cameroon.

But the story behind his selection as a member of the squad is even more astounding. Until he recently joined Olympique Myvole in Cameroon's First Division, Njanka couldn't even find a league club to make use of his undoubted talents.

He was discovered by Le Roy after Cameroon's French coach asked 16 local teams to put forward the best players they had to help him unearth any talent that could help the Lions in their bid for World Cup glory.

Of the 50 players that turned up for a practice session Le Roy chose eight, including Njanka.

He is such a new find that even Cameroon's celebrated striker Patrick Mboma did not know about him until the squad got together in France for their final pre-World Cup warm-up games.

"He's an unknown," said Mboma. "But what he did was great. He scored the only goal and we were near to winning because of him."

Until Austria's veteran forward Toni Polster fired home the equaliser in injury time Njanka's goal looked to have wrapped up the points for Cameroon.

"He (Njanka) has a lot of ambition and courage," said Mboma. "He won't stay in Cameroon long. It's 100 per cent certain he'll leave for a bigger club after the way he played tonight."



Toni Polster, the Austrian skipper scoring his team's equaliser against Cameroon on June 11.

— AFP photo