

The Greatest Ritual of Sports

Afro ebullience v Euro maturity

FOOTBALL

SYDNEY, Sept 29 (Reuters/Interpress): The only certainty about Saturday's Olympic soccer final between Spain and Cameroon is that it will pit European pragmatism against African power and exuberance. Both are bidding for their first Olympic gold in any sport having reached the final with last-gasp 2-1 knockout victories over Brazil and Chile.

They want to emulate Nigeria who became the first African side to take a major global competition by winning gold in Atlanta in 1996.

They also want to complete a great double by adding the Olympic title to their victory in the African Nations Cup earlier this year.

They are a hard-running, powerful side who never give up and are capable of playing some outstanding soccer — although sometimes with a little too much force than is necessary.

Spain, attempting to win gold for the second time in eight years, have played far more cautious and disciplined soccer knocking out Italy (1-0) and the United States (3-1).

After two weeks of travelling around the outposts of the Games in Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide, the sides come face to face in front of an expected 110,000 crowd under the Olympic torch in Stadium Australia.

Both teams have the ideal mix of youth and experience and the confidence that reaching the final brings. But for one player the Olympic final will represent the fulfillment of

a once-impossible dream.

Cameroon's goalkeeper will be 16-year-old Carlos Idriss Kameni, third choice keeper at French Second Division side Le Havre, who started this tournament as reserve to Daniel Bekono, six years his senior and keeper at one of Cameroon's top sides, Canon Yaounde.

But coach Jean-Paul Akono called up Kameni in place of Bekono for the quarter-final match and the teenager was outstanding as Cameroon, reduced to nine men after two sendings-off, stunned Brazil 2-1 with a golden goal winner.

They also won the European Under-18 title in 1995 and the Under-21 championship in 1998 and most of the players in this team have been playing together in those various age group sides since they were 16 years old.

"I really cannot believe that this is happening to me," he said on Friday. "It is like a dream. The whole country is behind us, there is a huge festival in the streets, every time we play and the gold medal would just be too fantastic for words."

"I did not expect to be playing here, but now I am, I feel confident and the whole team believes we can keep the Olympic title in Africa. That would be a fantastic achievement."

FIFA confirmed on Friday that neither team would have any players suspended, which means that Cameroon skipper Geremi and defender Aaron Nguimbou, who were red-carded against Brazil, would be eligible to play.

The match will have a special poignancy for Geremi, who

plays for Real Madrid, and his Spanish club mate Samuel Eto'o and for Arsenal midfielder Lauren, who used to play for Real Mallorca in Spain. They all know the Spanish players well, and will be especially keen to do well against them.

Spain come to the final with a fine pedigree at this level, which belies their reputation down the years as under-achievers in the European Championship and World Cup.

As well as winning the Olympic gold in Barcelona eight years ago, they finished third in the World Under-17 championship in Egypt in 1997 and won the World Under-20 championship in Nigeria 18 months ago.

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The star of their 3-1 win over the United States in the semi-finals was AC Milan striker Jose Mari, but the Barcelona trio of Puyol, Xavi and Gabbi have all been outstanding and there is not a weak link in the team.

The Spanish players collectively have more experience of the big occasion — forward Angulo was in the Valencia side beaten by Real Madrid in the European Cup final in May — and in the end that experience could tell.

But Cameroon have overcome the odds throughout the competition and could well do so again on Saturday to give Africa the Olympic gold medal again.

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90 DEGREES! France's Eva Serrano performing in the women's individual all-round qualification round of rhythmic gymnastics on September 28.

—AFP photo

Lanka on cloud nine

ATHLETICS

COLOMBO, Sept 29: Sri Lanka heaped praise on sprinter Susanthika Jayasinghe here Friday after the athlete bagged the country's first Olympic medal for 52 years, reports AFP.

Jayasinghe bagged bronze in the woman's 200 metres Olympic on Wednesday, delighting sport and politicians in her homeland.

The Daily Mirror devoted its entire front-page to Jayasinghe's feat and published dozens of congratulatory messages.

Gifts were also pouring in for Jayasinghe with newspapers reminding that the Sports Minister had earlier promised 10 million rupees (130,000 dollars) for any Sri Lankan athlete making it to the finals of an Olympic medal.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga said Jayasinghe's bronze had brought Olympic pride to Asia.

"As a woman I am indeed proud of another woman's moment of glory," President Kumaratunga said.

Sri Lanka's main opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe drew attention to the obstacles Jayasinghe has had to overcome in her sporting career, which was nearly scuppered in 1998 during a bitter row with the sports ministry.

She shot to fame at the 1997 World Championship where she bagged a silver medal. But her rise in celebrity following that result led to turmoil, with allegations of sexual harassment against a sports ministry official.

She was hit with a drug ban by the International Amateur Athletic Federation in 1998. The IAAF later abandoned the case.

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Fu Mania

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BEIJING, Sept 29: The winning smile of diving queen Fu Mingxia graced Chinese newspapers Friday, as President Jiang Zemin led national celebrations over her fourth Olympic gold and entry into the realms of sports legends, reports AFP.

The action provoked criticism in Sri Lanka, but on Thursday she defended the country at the Sydney games.

Earlier in the Olympics Jayasinghe wore a yellow ribbon during the 100m event to call for free and fair elections at the October 10 parliamentary polls.

The yellow ribbon was a red rag to the officials who objected to her making a political statement while representing the country at the Sydney games.

"She showed a lot of guts," said Waruna Larunatileke, a campaigner for free and fair elections here. "We are very happy she wore it and won a medal despite a lot of pressure from officials."

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President Jiang Zemin sent a congratulatory message to China's Olympic team, praising them for winning 26 golds for China, 10 more than its best ever Olympic haul in 1996.

"The motherland is proud of you," Jiang said. "The athletes' excellent performance reflects the vigorous spirit of the Chinese people in the course of reform and opening, which has contributed to the Olympic spirit."

While Jiang urged the athletes to maintain a high morale, continue their scientific training and strive to continue to bring

move.

"What difference does it make if I wear a yellow ribbon or not," Jayasinghe was quoted as saying in the local press here. "How will you know what colour underwear I am wearing?"

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