



IT'S AFTER TURNING GERMANY UPSIDE-DOWN: Welshman Robert Earnshaw somersaults for joy after scoring the only goal against Germany in their World Cup warm-up game at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium on May 14.

## Argentina Reuters' pick



Reuters, London

Argentina has topped a Reuters poll as favourite to win the soccer World Cup final on June 30, edging defending champion France.

In a Reuters survey published last December, a clear majority of sports journalists around the world backed Argentina to win the Cup with only a few supporting France.

But in the latest poll taken April 25 to May 3, 14 out of 35 sports editors and journalists said Argentina would reclaim the world title this year while 12 said France would successfully defend its crown.

Four said Italy would be winner, two said Brazil, two backed England and one opted for Portugal.

"Argentina... are still the favorites. They are full of star caliber players," said Juhani Heikkila at the Finnish News Agency (STT).

The 32-team finals, in Japan and South Korea, kick off on May 31.

Argentina defeated old rival Germany 1-0 in a warm-up game last month after only managing draws -- 1-1 with Wales and 2-2 with Cameroon -- in its previous two outings of the year.

Sports editors said Argentina would be tough to beat with the likes of Juan Sebastian Veron and Hernan Crespo in the squad.

Still, others said France, who enjoyed a stunning 3-0 victory against Brazil in the World Cup final

four years ago, were currently looking the better side.

Donald Walker at The Scotsman voted for Argentina in the last Reuters poll but now favors France. "I have changed my mind simply because France have looked more impressive than Argentina in warm-up games," he said.

France, grouped with Senegal, Uruguay and Denmark in group A of the tournament, had a hard-earned 2-1 victory over Romania in a warm-up friendly in February and drew 0-0 with Russia last month. However, it crushed Scotland 5-0 in March.

"(France) are in great shape... and Argentina are an extremely balanced side," said Andreas Jaro at Sportmagazin in Austria. "But right now I think France have the edge."

Argentina, world champion in 1978 and 1986, is in the toughest group with Nigeria, Sweden and arch-rival England, the 1966 world champion.

Argentina knocked England out of the 1998 World Cup after David Beckham was sent off for kicking out at Diego Simeone.

Beckham was vilified by the British press afterwards but became a national hero when he secured England's place in this year's World Cup by scoring a superb free-kick against Greece.

He suffered a broken bone in his foot at the beginning of April although he is expected to be fit for when needed," he said.

But Roger Crutchley at the Bangkok Post said four times winner Brazil would be champion. "For probably the first time in recent history, Brazil are not among the hot favorites and this may take a lot of pressure off them," he said. "They should improve game by game as the tournament goes on."

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Argentina coach Marcelo Bielsa has given a clear indication of his intended World Cup squad by calling Juan Pablo Sorin and Diego Placente in to his Rome-based training camp.

Sorin has been otherwise engaged with his club Cruzeiro in the Brazilian League while Placente is staying with Bayer Leverkusen as they build up to the Champions League final against Real Madrid.

But, when they arrive in Italy, that will bring the training party to 23, which surely represents a World Cup squad in all but name.

And it means there is no room for Barcelona's Javier Saviola or Juan Roman Riquelme, of Boca Juniors.

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CLAUDIO CANIGGIA

Diego Placente

February, also misses out.

The selection of Gustavo Lopez earlier this week was the only real surprise in the party.

His call-up surely also ends the hopes of Facundo Quirroga and Real Madrid's Santiago Solari.

Meanwhile, Rangers striker Claudio Caniggia will be fit to play in Argentina's World Cup opener against Nigeria on June 2.

The veteran frontman has made a good recovery from the knee injury he picked up in the Scottish Cup final and has travelled to Japan with the Argentina squad.

Caniggia's agent, Pablo Cosentino, told Rangers' official website: "He is running now and the doctors have told him he will be fit to play against Nigeria. He is delighted.

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