

Eagles sans Oliseh, George!



AFP, Lagos

Nigeria coach Adegboye Onigbinde on Sunday firmly shut the door to the World Cup on former captain Sunday Oliseh and Finidi George as they try to rebuild for the future.

Oliseh and George were left out of the country's build-up for the World Cup after they led a players' protest for air ticket refunds at the African Nations Cup in February.

Borussia Dortmund midfielder Oliseh has been most vocal since coach Shaibu Amodu was fired after Nigeria failed to reach the final of the Nations Cup in Mali.

He said it was unfair to sack Amodu after he qualified Nigeria for the soccer finals. He also accused new coach Onigbinde of having not control over the team, claiming top officials dictated to him.

However, last week Onigbinde raised Oliseh's hope he could still be on the World Cup party after the player apologised for what he termed "the Nations Cup fiasco".

Both Oliseh and Finidi have featured at the last two World Cups, where Nigeria's 'Super Eagles' were eliminated in the second round. They had hinted they will quit international football after soccer's showpiece in Asia.

Wilson Oruma, who has signed for French side Sochaux, also lost his place in the squad after a below-par performance in Thursday's warm-up game against the Republic of Ireland.

The biggest surprise inclusion on the final squad was youngster Femi Oparunmi.

Only last September, Oparunmi was in the team beaten by France in the final of the FIFA Under-17 Championship in Trinidad and Tobago.

The recent Grasshopper Zurich signing crowned his senior debut against Kenya about two weeks ago with an opportunistic goal.

Late inclusions to the squad were midfielders James Obiorah of Russian club Lokomotiv Moscow and Garba Lawal from Dutch outfit Roda JC.

Obiorah, former captain of the country's junior team, impressed in Saturday's 1-0 friendly victory against Jamaica, even netting the match winner.

Lawal, on the other hand, will be at his second World Cup as a result of the squad's lack of depth on the left side of the field. The player is versatile - he can play either as a defender, a defensive midfielder or as a winger.

Mutiu Adegboju of Spanish second division side Salamanca is making a big comeback to the team he last played for two years ago. The hard working midfielder is expected to fill the space created by the axing of Oliseh.

SQUAD
Goalkeepers: Ike Shorunmu (Lausanne/Swi), Austin Ejide (Gabros), Vincent Enyeama (Enyimba)
Defenders: Taribo West (unattached), Joseph Yobo (Marseille/Fra), Isaac Okoronkwo (Shakhtar Donetsk/Ukr), Christopher Justice (Antwerp/Bel), Ifeanyi Udezue (PAOK Salonika/Gre), Rabiu Afolabi (Standard Liege/Bel), Eric Ejiofor (Maccabi Haifa/Isr), Efe Sodje (Crewe/Eng), Celestine Babayaro (Chelsea/Eng)
Midfielder: Augustine Okocha (Paris Saint Germain/Fra), Pius Ikedia (Ajax Amsterdam/Ned), James Obiorah (Lokomotiv Moscow/Rus), Garba Lawal (Roda/Ned), Mutiu Adegboju (Salamanca/Spa), Benedict Akwuegbu (Shenyeng Gendi/Chn), Femi Oparunmi (Grasshopper Zurich/Swi)
Strikers: Nwankwo Kanu (Arsenal/Eng), Julius Aghahowa (Shakhtar Donetsk/Ukr), Bartholomew Ogbeche (Paris Saint Germain/Fra), John Utaka (Al-Saad/Qat).

Czechs rattle Italy



AFP, Prague

A single goal from Vladimir Smicer saw the Czech Republic beat Italy 1-0 here in a friendly match, ensuring the Italians head off to the World Cup next week on a losing note.

It was only the second defeat for Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni after last year's 2-1 defeat in a friendly against Argentina in Rome

inches wide.

Giant striker Jan Koller then fired just wide as the home side continued to press.

In the second half defensive lynchpin Alessandro Nesta needed treatment as he injured an ankle but he returned to the field of play within a minute.

But the Czechs continued to press and then Karel Poborsky played a brilliant one-two with Jan Koller but his shot was well saved by Francesco Toldo, who had replaced Buffon.

Libor Sionko was also proving a



PHOTO: INTERNET

PLAYING LEAPFROG? Italy's Ivan Genarro Gatuso (L) jumps above Tomas Rosicky of Borussia Dortmund during their practice match at the Sparta Stadium in Prague on May 18.

but 63-year-old will have been thankful that with the World Cup day away none of his players received any notable injuries.

Staying healthy appeared to be the uppermost thing in the players' minds with only the Czechs, who failed to qualify for the World Cup, playing any quality football.

Liverpool star Smicer had already threatened once when he played a one-two with Jiri Jarosik who fired his shot goalwards only for goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon to tip the ball onto the bar.

But although Buffon got a hand to the ball he could not prevent Smicer heading home seconds later from a Marek Jankulowski corner to put the Czechs in the lead.

The Italians were clearly taking no risks and their best moment of the first half came when Gianluca Zambrotta cut inside and fired

threat for the Czechs as he first forced another fine save from Toldo and then was denied by a late Nesta tackle after receiving a good pass from Poborsky who has just agreed to join Sparta Prague from Lazio.

Poborsky, whose two goals for Lazio contributed to the 4-2 defeat of Inter Milan that handed the Italian title to Juventus, got a standing ovation when he was replaced but in truth he was the only player who looked interested in proceedings.

Italy could have snatched an undeserved equaliser when Vincenzo Montella received the ball in the danger zone but the Roma player completely miscontrolled the ball but there was little that Trapattoni was able to learn in a game where he used nine substitutes.



PHOTO: INTERNET

JUST OUT OF REACH: An outstretched France goalkeeper Ulrich Rame fails to stop a shot by Belgium's Glen de Boeck (not in picture) from going inside the net during their World Cup warm-up match at the Stade de France near Paris on May 18.

Wilmots floors France



AP, Saint-Denis

Marc Wilmots' late winner lifted injury-hit Belgium to a surprise 2-1 win over France in a World Cup warm-up match on Saturday, denting the World Champions' pride less than two weeks before they begin their title defense.

The veteran Belgium skipper fired a right-foot shot home in the first minute of second-half injury time, handing 'Les Bleus' their first defeat in over eight months.

The defeat was a huge disappointment for the France fans who packed out the Stade de France for the team's last match before head-

ing to Asia on Sunday.

France was missing star player Zinedine Zidane, who was with his wife for the birth of their third child. During halftime, officials announced over loudspeakers that Theo Zidane was born on Saturday. He has two brothers.

Belgium showed no sign of nerves against the World and European champions, splitting possession evenly with Roger Lemerre's men.

Arsenal forward Sylvain Wiltord had the first scoring chance, but fired just wide of Geert De Vlieger's left goalpost.

Defender Glen De Boeck headed in a free-kick by midfielder Johan Walem to leave France trailing after 20 minutes. Goalkeeper Ulrich Rame was nowhere near the ball.

Rame is the second choice goalie at the World Cup behind Manchester United's Fabien Barthez.

Marseille's Frank Leboeuf leveled in the 41st minute with a close-range shot.

De Boeck caught the French off-guard again in the 26th minute, but Mbo Mpenza failed to connect with his pass across the goalmouth.

Djibril Cisse made his international debut by replacing Juventus striker David Trezeguet at the start of the second half. He came close to scoring but De Vlieger tapped his well-aimed header over the woodwork.

Rame made up for his first-half failure by saving two powerful free kicks from Belgium skipper Marc Wilmots in the 73rd minute, but was finally caught out in the 91st minute.

It was France's first loss since its 2-1 defeat to Chile last September.

The France squad was to fly to Japan on Sunday for a five-day training camp at Ibusuki, where Zidane will join his teammates next week.

"Les Bleus" play South Korea in a warm-up match on May 26 and open the World Cup against Senegal on May 31 in Seoul. They meet Denmark and Uruguay in other first-round matches.

Injury denied Belgium a string of players for the World Cup, including top forward Emile Mpenza. It plays Russia, Tunisia and co-host Japan in first-round Group H, widely considered one of the weakest groups at the World Cup.

Belgium could meet France as early as the quarterfinals.

Ronaldinho steals the show



REUTERS, Barcelona

Two pieces of cool finishing from Ronaldinho and a fine shot from Edmilson helped Brazil to a 3-1 win over a Catalan regional selection as they continued their preparations for the World Cup at the Nou Camp on Saturday.

The lively Paris St. Germain midfielder notched his first with a sweetly-struck free kick midway through the first half and added a second just before the break when he finished off a fine run by guiding past keeper Victor Valdes into the net.

Catalunya pulled a goal back after the break when Luis Garcia's header was adjudged to have crossed the line despite the acrobatics of Brazil keeper Marcos.

But the South American side wrapped up the win when Edmilson cracked home after the Catalans failed to clear after a corner in the 76th minute. "I was very happy with the team's performance," Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari told reporters after the match.

"I was particularly pleased to see a two front men Ronaldo and Denilson working on their defensive game."

It was a good test against strong opposition and fortunately we came through without any injuries, although I fully realise we will face even tougher matches in the World Cup against Turkey, China and Costa Rica."

Scolari said that there would be only minor changes to the starting line-up for the final friendly against Malaysia next Saturday, in which he would field his first choice World Cup side.

He hinted that Barcelona forward Rivaldo would return in the Malaysia game after resting a troublesome knee injury.

On the half hour Ronaldo, playing in the stadium he graced as a Barcelona player in the 1996-97 season, broke into the action for the first time.

The Brazil striker made a powerful run to create a good

chance for Ronaldinho, although his shot was well saved by goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

Ronaldo was replaced by Luizao in the 68th minute but won huge cheers from the Nou Camp crowd as he left the field.

Saturday's game was preceded by a minute's silence in honour of the former Barcelona forward Ladislao Kubala who died after on Friday.

Then an emotional 97,000 crowd were then given plenty to cheer about as their side got the better of the early exchanges with Raul Tamudo forcing Marcos into several sharp saves in the opening minutes.

But the early scares sparked

the visitors into life and tricky winger Denilson, who impressed throughout, led the way with a series of darting runs on the left and team mate Ronaldinho opened the scoring with his fine curling free kick soon after.

Ronaldinho looked real sharp, especially when he scored his second by skipping past a defender and then guiding the ball neatly round the keeper into the net.

Catalunya rallied briefly in the second half after Garcia's goal, but Brazil hit back 13 minutes later when Edmilson cracked in a fine shot after substitute keeper Francesc Arnau failed to punch the ball clear after a corner.



PHOTO: INTERNET

RO-RO: Ronaldo (L) greets Ronaldinho after the latter scored the first goal against Catalunya during a practice match at Nou Camp in Barcelona on May 18.

Subdued send off for 'Les Blues'



AFP, Paris

World champions France flew out from Roissy/Charles de Gaulle airport here at 13:15 (11:15GMT) Sunday destination Osaka as they bid to defend their world title in Japan and South Korea in two weeks.

The farewell under cloudy skies was muted however after the going away party of the world and European champions was spoiled by Belgium who snatched a 2-1 victory in Stade de France on Saturday night.

Les Bleus spent the night in an hotel at Roissy airport and the only face missing from Roger Lemerre's squad of 23 who boarded Air France flight AF292 for Japan was playmaker Zinedine Zidane, whose wife Veronica gave birth to their third son Theo in Marseille on Saturday night.

The absence of Zidane was felt by the team against Belgium, but the Real Madrid star will join his team-mates on Wednesday.

"Winning the Champions League Wednesday and having a third child Saturday it couldn't be better than that," said Zidane in a recorded message to the fans before Saturday's match. "Now I'm pining to see my teammates even if I have to leave my little family."

An estimated 300 fans gathered to bid farewell to the team who are among the favourites to lift the title. Despite the police escort team captain Marcel Desailly and

midfielder Alain Boghossian signed autographs.

Staff on board the Airbus A340 admitted that they had received special instructions on how to deal with the French team, but the experience wasn't new for pilot Michel Arnoux.

"Today we have passengers who are a little special on board," said Arnoux. "For me it's not the first time that I've flown the French team. It was in 1999 on their return from Yerevan in Armenia."

Air steward Philippe Blaire said they were under strict instructions to handle the team with care.

"We received telegrams from the football federation asking us to 'protect' the team and let them rest," said Blaire.

"Our main objective today will be to allow them recuperate from yesterday evening's match," said head cabin steward Stephane Brevart, adding that special measures had been taken to ensure more comfortable seats, individual video screens and a special menu for the team.

Les Bleus are expected to arrive in Osaka at 08:10 local time (23:10GMT) where they will head immediately for the thermal spa of Ibusuki at the southern extremity of Japan.

Following a week-long training camp designed to getting the squad acclimatized to the heat and time difference the team will leave Japan for South Korea.

A friendly will be played against South Korea next Sunday, their final run-out before their opening tie against Senegal on May 31. Their group A also includes Uruguay and Denmark.



PHOTO: INTERNET

FLORAL WELCOME: England captain David Beckham upon his arrival with his teammates at the Jeju Airport in Korea yesterday morning.

Beck on course, Dyer doubtful



AFP, Jeju

England arrived in World Cup territory on Sunday increasingly confident that captain David Beckham will be fit for the first tournament game against Sweden.

But while the Manchester United icon is pursuing a stunning recovery from a broken foot suffered only last month, winger Kieron Dyer admits his World Cup dreams could still be shattered.

The England squad arrived at the sub-tropical South Korean island of Jeju in the early hours of Sunday and were soon in training to prepare for a match on Tuesday against South Korea, the World Cup co-hosts.

Beckham did not train with the rest of the players but remains the centre of attention.

"David Beckham's condition is rather good," said coach Sven Goran Eriksson. "In the past week in Dubai he did very well with his running as well as his kicking with his right foot."

Beckham's foot was broken during a European Champions League match between United and Deportivo La Coruna of Spain. At the time he thought his chances of playing in the World Cup at all had gone, let alone starting the first Group F match against Sweden on June 2.

But he has kept up a special training programme elaborated by United which includes practicing shots on a mini-trampoline which cushions the shock on his injured left foot while he shoots with the right.

Beckham trained alone inside at the Seogwipo hotel where the team are staying on Sunday while the other players went to a local ground. Eriksson said England still needs a fit Beckham.

"I know the injury happened more than one month ago but he will not have forgotten how to play football in that short time. The important thing is that he is fit."

The role that Newcastle winger Dyer will play in the World Cup remains uncertain, however. Dyer was to undergo a fitness test on Sunday having joined the squad in Dubai, where England spent four days, to join them on the flight to South Korea.

"If there was a game tomorrow I would not be ready but I am giving myself a fighting chance of being fit for June 2," Dyer told a news conference.

According to team officials, Eriksson has ordered restricted use of mobile phones from now and alcohol is banned before and after games. But the coach has insisted it is up to the players to be serious about winning the World Cup.

The Swede, who has master-minded dramatically improved performances since taking over, said any player who needs motivating now should not be in the squad.

"I will do as I have always and if I have to motivate any of the 23 players, then I have picked the wrong squad because if you are not motivated to go to the World Cup, then you should not be there."

"If they are on the bench, then of course I may have to talk to them but I will not have discussions with the players about what I want them to do if it is not necessary."

Eriksson went on: "You should not try to sit next to a player 24 hours a day and tell them what to do and what not to do -- or at least I should not like to have a manager doing that to me."

England will play South Korea in the next warm-up match at the Seogwipo World Cup stadium on Tuesday before moving on to Japan where their final preparation match is against Cameroon next Sunday.