

THE world's greatest sporting extravaganza starts today, and all bets are off as to who will lift the title on the 9th of July. It is often said that form leading up to a big tournament counts for nothing, because it's all a matter of form during the tournament. Some teams peak too early, some too late; the real champions show their true mettle in the knock out stages, when the team that handles the pressure best wins. Here is my guide to the World Cup and the teams who could walk away with the title, soon enough we'll know who handles the pressure best.

Germany

Being the host nation has put immense pressure on Germany to perform. But what is often forgotten by the German fans is that Germany is no longer the team it was a decade and a half ago. Germany is the footballing equivalent of the West Indies, once a great team and world beater, now merely mortal and routinely being beaten by everyone. Germany much like the West Indies have a Lara to fall back on, his name is Michael Ballack. A player can win you a match, but not a tournament. Even though Ballack has a host of youngsters to help him out, reaching the quarters seems highly unlikely. Look out for Podolsky and Schweinsteiger, that aside the home fans had better prepare for an early exit. I doubt if they will improve on their world ranking of 19.

Argentina

Much like 2002, Argentina has come into the World Cup as one of the favourites, but if the last tournament was anything to learn from, the tag of favourites means nothing before a ball is kicked. This year with their hopes renewed and with a messiah by the name of Messi, the football gods have smiled on Argentina. This could be start of a golden era in Argentine football; Messi and Riquelme are already considered two of the best players in the world, helped by a squad of underachieving superstars, this is their chance to stand up and be counted. Twenty years after Maradona lifted the cup, this tournament could announce their second coming.

England

Where does one start, if one were simply to look at starting elevens, England would be the second best team on paper. If only that were the case, they have almost

the perfect blend of youth and experience, but when it comes to actually turning that team on paper into world beaters on the field, Sven-Goran Eriksson has never managed. This year things could be different, I personally believe Rooney's injury has taken a lot of the pressure and attention off the English team. They could possibly fly under the radar into the quarters or semis without Rooney, and then with him fit and able, make their first real attempt at winning the world cup, since the Bobby Charlton and the class of '66.

Brazil

Quite simply the best team on the planet, I will not bet against them winning their 6th World Cup, but history may be against them. Brazil went into the '82 world cup as overwhelming favourites only to crash out, this is a distinct possibility with this year's team. They are 23 man squad sent down from heaven, but as so often happens with teams so sublimely gifted and attack minded, no one really wants to defend. They may come unstuck in the second round against either Italy or the Czech Republic, but if they can see that challenge off they will probably go on to lift the cup.

Italy

Italy has come into the World Cup with the worst possible preparation; their country has been rocked by a match fixing scandal and several members of the Italian squad are being investigated. Aside from that their squad has a good mix of players, but as usual all the attention is focussed on their strikers. This year they have two masters in Del Piero and Totti, and two apprentices in Gilardino and Toni. With Totti only recently coming back from a major injury, it will be up to the new strikers to form a meaningful partnership with Del Piero. Their pre tournament form has also been off colour, it does not look like a good year for the Azzuri but stranger things have happened, they may be a later bloomer in this tournament, and as we all know, it's about when the team peaks.

France

The French have come into the world cup in confident form, the team seems to have gelled well and their ageing wizard Zidane would like to sign off on a high note. Unlike last time France is not burdened with the weight of expectation, that weight lies

Germany 2006 The Preview

NADER RAHMAN



Germany captain Michael Ballack races away with the ball from Colombia's John Edivis Viafara as Torsten Frings look on during their World Cup warm-up match in Moenchengladbach.