



EXPECTING A WALK? Tunisia midfielder Medhi Nafti (L) and defender David Jemmali (R) stroll with the ball during a training session at Saks Stadium in Schweinfurt on Monday ahead of their opening match against Saudi Arabia on Wednesday.

Age is an asset

AP, Germany

Still at the heart of Tunisia's stingy defence, Ali Boumnijel is the oldest player at the World Cup.

The 40-year-old goalkeeper will be the fifth-oldest player in World Cup history if he lines up Wednesday against Saudi Arabia in Munich. Only Roger Milla of Cameroon and three other keepers -- Pat Jennings of Northern Ireland, Peter Shilton of England and Dino Zoff of Italy -- played at a more advanced age.

There seems little doubt he will start in the all-Arab matchup considered critical to Tunisia's goal of making the second round for the first time in four attempts. Tunisia

also faces Spain and Ukraine in Group H.

"There is no better goalkeeper in Tunisia," said Mohqtar Naifi, who played the position for the North African country during its 1978 tournament debut and now coaches Boumnijel and his back-ups. "He is absolutely the No. 1."

Boumnijel was born a few months before England won the 1966 World Cup. He started his career in earnest only in 1988 with Gueugnon and played for other French clubs before returning to Tunisia with Club Africain in 2005.

He made his international debut in 1991 against Ivory Coast, but he spent more than a decade in the shadow of former Tunisian

goalkeeping great Chokri El Ouair

and has racked up a relatively modest 48 caps. That includes Tunisia's victory at the 2004 African Cup of Nations and its 2002 World Cup campaign, when the team was eliminated after a draw and two defeats.

A relaxed figure at Tunisia's Bavarian base, Boumnijel looks younger than his years and says he feels it, too. His recipe: clean living, a careful diet and relentless training.

"My weight hasn't changed for 10 years," he said before a workout under the watchful eye of coach Roger Lemerre. "When we do speed training, I'm still one of the fastest. The other players say they

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are not happy, that it's impossible!"

Former French national coach Lemerre has favoured players with experience at bigger clubs in Europe rather than the league in Tunisia. Boumnijel's goal is protected by defenders including Ajax's Hatem Trabelsi, Bolton's Rahdi Jaidi and David Jemmali of Bordeaux -- all aged between 29 and 31.

The team yielded only nine goals in 10 World Cup qualifying matches and will need to be just as stout in Germany, especially if main strike Francileudo dos Santos doesn't recover from injury.

"Particularly at the start, we have to concede goals," said Lemerre, who has lent Tunisia a dash of South American flair with the inclusion of Brazilian-born Jose

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I'M WITH YOU: An Italy fan cheers her team on prior to the Azzurri's World Cup opener against Ghana at Hannover's AWD Arena on Monday.

Saudis offered cash incentive

REUTERS, Bad Nauheim

Saudi Arabia's players could earn up to 600,000 riyal (\$160,000) each if they reach the last 16 of the World Cup, a team spokesman confirmed on Sunday.

The players were told of the incentives by the Prince Sultan, head of the Saudi Soccer Federation, at a meeting in the team hotel on Saturday.

"The players will earn 100,000 riyals for each victory in the group phase, and a 300,000 riyals payment if they get through the group," team media officer Ibrahim Al-Goba said on Sunday.

Saudi Arabia begin their campaign on Wednesday against Tunisia in Munich and also face Ukraine and Spain in Group H.

The pay-outs are the highest ever offered by the wealthy kingdom's government for the national squad.

Tunisia replace second player

REUTERS, Schweinfurt

Reserve defender Mehdi Meriah has withdrawn from the Tunisian World Cup squad due to an injury and will be replaced by forward Haykel Guemamdia, the Tunisian team's Web site said on Monday.

A statement said Meriah, 27, picked up a muscular injury on Thursday but did not give any further details. FIFA confirmed the replacement on its Web site.

Guemamdia, who plays for French club Strasbourg, was brought into the squad as additional cover for leading striker Francileudo dos Santos who is carrying an injury and will miss Tunisia's opening game on Wednesday against Saudi Arabia.

The replacement is the second for Tunisia since they arrived in Germany. Striker Issam Jemaa withdrew from the World Cup last week after injuring his right knee.

Tunisia also face Spain and Ukraine in Group H.

TUNISIA V SAUDI ARABIA

Arabs seek to end drought

AFP, Munich

Neither Tunisia or Saudi Arabia have particularly impressive records at the World Cup, but both have an opportunity to burnish their statistics when they meet here on Wednesday.

Tunisia turned heads when they won their first World Cup match in 1978, but 28 years later they're still waiting for victory number two.

Meanwhile Saudi Arabia also impressed on their debut, beating Morocco and Belgium to reach the knock-out round in 1994.

But two barren campaigns in 1998 and 2002 -- including a humiliating 8-0 reverse to Germany -- have left them scratching around for another win.

Both need to pick up points here to stand any chance in an imposing Group H which also features Spain and Ukraine.

Tunisia's campaign has been given extra impetus by coach Roger Lemerre, who is seeking redemption after his World Cup nightmare four years ago with France.

The defending champions crashed out winless and goalless in one of the World Cup's greatest flops, with Lemerre receiving his marching orders soon afterwards.

Lemerre has already led Tunisia to the 2004 African Cup of Nations title, making him the only man to win different continental crowns after France's Euro 2000 triumph.

He has now set his sights on succeeding where he failed with France -- by reaching round two.

"Every country dreams of reaching the second round of the World Cup at least once in their history. That's my dream too," said Lemerre.

The first two group matches will be decisive. After that day we will know where everyone is and what they have to do."

Lemerre has lent Tunisia a dash of South American flair with the inclusion of Brazilian-born Jose

Clayton and Francileudo dos Santos, who helped them secure six wins, three draws and a defeat in qualifying.

However the 'Carthage Eagles' will be sweating on the availability of Dos Santos, who has plundered 18 goals in 28 appearances, after he picked up an injury last week.

Saudi Arabia cruised through qualifying undefeated, beating South Korea home and away as they made it to their third finals in as many attempts.

The three-time Asian champions will be hoping to make the step up to the big stage with Brazilian Marcos Paqueta, their 16th coach in 12 years after Gabriel Calderon was sacked in December.

"It's against the only other Arabic team, it's going to be an Arab derby, a fight of a game," Paqueta said.

The Saudis have enjoyed a fruitful warm-up in Germany, banging eight past a Frankfurt reserve side and 15 past a Bad Nauheim XI, including seven from veteran striker Sami Al Jaber.

However Al Jaber was among nine players to miss training last week after injuring his right foot.

Officials were quick to dismiss talk of an injury crisis, and

TEAMS

Tunisia (4-4-2)

1-Ali Boumnijel; 6-Hatem Trabelsi, 15-Radhi Jaidi, 3-Karim Hagui, 18-David Jemmali; 20-Hamed Namouchi; 12-Joahar Mnari, 14-Adel Chedli, 13-Riad Bouazizi; 5-Ziad Jaziri, 9-Yassine Chikhaoui

Saudi Arabia (4-5-1)

1-Mohamed Al Deayea; 3-Redha Tuker, 13-Hussein Sulaimani, 4-Hamad Al Montashiri, 2-Ahmed Dokhi; 14-Saud Al Khariri, 7-Mohamed Ameen, 8-Mohamed Noor, 10-Mohammad Al Shalhoub, 9-Sami Al Jaber; 20-Yassir Al Qahtani

midfielder Omar Al Ghambi was adamant that the 'Sons of the Desert' could erase memories of the 2002 drubbing by Germany.

"Our team is better than the one who played in Japan," Al Ghambi.

"We are better because we have prepared well both technically and physically and played some tough matches."

Saudi goalkeeper Mohamed Al Deayea is the most capped player of all time, while his Tunisian opposite number Ali Boumnijel will become the World Cup's oldest player at 40 years and 62 days.

Tunisia are tensed: Lemerre

AFP, Schweinfurt

The Tunisian football coach Roger Lemerre said on Monday that his squad were paralysed with fright just 48 hours ahead of their opening World Cup Group H match with Saudi Arabia.

The former France handler added, however, that he thought they might be able to shake it off and show their abilities when they take to the pitch against the Saudis in Munich.

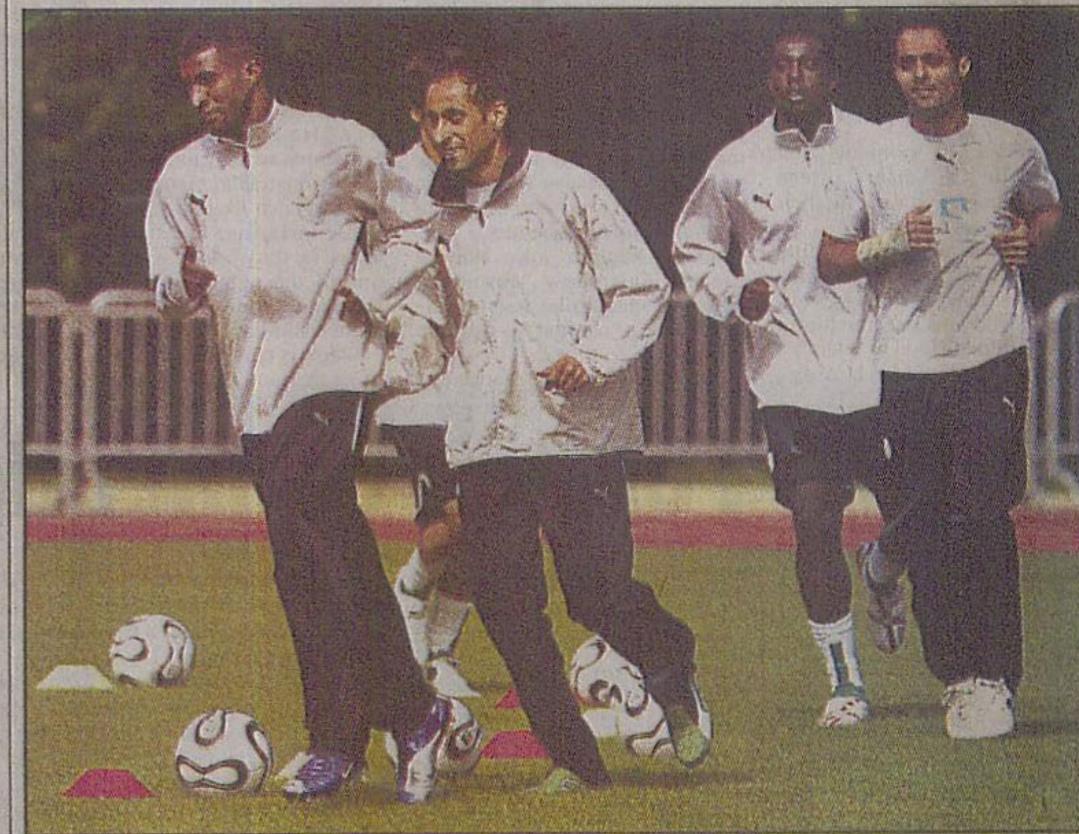
"With two days to go to the match, the squad is tense," said Lemerre, who guided Tunisia to the 2004 African Nations Cup title.

"The pressure is mounting and one could be forgiven for thinking that everybody is paralysed."

"But once the whistle goes, that fear will disappear and then we must show what we are made of," added Lemerre, who is bidding to take Tunisia beyond the first round for the first time in their history.

Lemerre, who has been handed the confidence booster of a new

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Saudi Arabians are getting ready in Frankfurt ahead of their Wednesday's World Cup opener against Tunisia.

Pressure on Al Montashiri

REUTERS, undated

Central defender Hamad Al Montashiri will need to show the qualities that made him 2005 Asian Footballer of the Year if Saudi Arabia are to reach the World Cup second round.

Al Montashiri, who will be 24 the day before the Group H match against Spain on 23 June, helped Al Ittihad to a second consecutive AFC Champions League title last year.

However, with memories of his country's 8-0 thrashing by Germany in 2002 still fresh, the FIFA World Cup debutant says the pressure will be on him to justify his burgeoning reputation.

"This was a big honour for me to be named best player in Asia, especially with so many good players," Al Montashiri told

reporters on Thursday as he prepared for the side's final warm-up match against Eintracht Frankfurt's B team on Friday.

"I hope I can prove I deserved that title in this tournament. There is pressure because everybody will be looking at me and any mistakes will be magnified because this is such a huge competition."

Al Montashiri, comfortable on the ball and strong in the air, exudes leadership qualities despite his relative youth and those attributes will be required in the next two weeks.

After the Saudis play Arab rivals Tunisia in Munich on Wednesday, they face Ukraine and Spain, teams that possess world-class strikers such as former European Player of the Year Andriy Shevchenko, Raul and Fernando Torres.

"We have showed against the big teams we are making progress defensively," said Al Montashiri. "We are improving gradually."

"We've had team meetings, seen lots of videos. The coaching staff is working very hard on making us defend as a team, it's not just the defence," he said.

Coach Marcos Paqueta said the team were determined to erase the pain of the Germany debacle four years ago and picked out Al Montashiri as someone who could have a special tournament.

"He's been very influential for his club, played a lot of matches, played in the Olympic qualifiers and Asian qualifiers," the Brazilian said. "He's a very good defender and is going to be important for us."