

Gonzalez expects to feature

REUTERS, Germany

Luis Gonzalez is likely to start for Argentina in Friday's World Cup Group C match against Serbia & Montenegro, giving his team a more attacking option in midfield.

"I played on the right of midfield," said Gonzalez of practice behind closed doors on Wednesday, with Esteban Cambiasso making way from the side that beat Ivory Coast 2-1.

Gonzalez, a substitute last Saturday, said holding midfielder Javier Mascherano played in the middle and Maxi Rodriguez, who was on the right wing in Hamburg, was on the left.

"The idea is to create more surprise in attack," Gonzalez told reporters.

Coach Jose Pekerman appears to be looking for his team to play higher up the field, sacrificing a tackler in Cambiasso for a fast ball-carrying player and giving playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme more company.

Argentina dropped back in the second half against Ivory Coast when they were two goals up and relinquished the initiative.

Pekerman is keen for his side to beat the Serbs and secure qualification for the second round before their final group match against Netherlands in Frankfurt on June 21.

Hernan Crespo and Javier Saviola, the scorers against Ivory Coast, are expected to remain up front.

Pekerman chose to practice at 1500 local time, the time of Friday's kickoff in Gelsenkirchen.

Versatile defender Fabricio Colocini, who will be on the bench again, said: "We practised in the afternoon to get accustomed to this heat which will be tough. But I think we'll have a good match."

The afternoon games are being played in temperatures rising above 30 degrees Celsius (86.00F).

No gift for Lemerre

REUTERS, Munich

Frenchman Roger Lemerre could be forgiven for wondering what it is about him and roller-coaster rides of hope and disappointment at the World Cup finals.

The Frenchman, who celebrates his 65th birthday on Sunday, was in charge of France four years ago when the defending champions were eliminated without scoring a goal.

He promptly left that job and was soon engaged again in North Africa where he guided Tunisia to success in the 2004 African Nations Cup.

On Wednesday, his Tunisian team raised his hopes when they dominated Saudi Arabia and took a comfortable first half lead through Ziad Jaziri's well-taken volley.

It looked as if they were on their way to a first win at the finals in nine attempts since overcoming Mexico on their debut in 1978. Their flexible 4-4-2 system gave them control.

But, after the interval, they resumed as if the job was done, the defence buckled and goals from Yasser Al Qahatani, with a classic near-post finish to Mohammed Noor's pass, and substitute Sami Al Jaber put the Saudis ahead with six minutes of normal time remaining.

Al Jaber, in his 161st appearance for his country, steered home his 44th goal with such aplomb it seemed that the Saudis were heading for their first win at the finals since 1994.

It seemed also that Saudi Arabia, transformed into a team of urgency and desire during the 15-minutes break, were set to wipe away memories of the 8-0 humiliation by Germany in their opening game four years ago.

But, in added time, Lemerre waved Tunisia's big Bolton Wanderers defender Radhi Jaidi forward to join the attack and, from a clever cross by Jaziri, he powered a downward header past Mabrouk Zaid for the equaliser.

Lemerre, facing another stunning defeat, was saved.

"I wanted three points and I got one," admitted Lemerre. "We started well, but we did not start too confidently. Our mistake was to consider this game as something final - and the second half was not good for us."

On the evidence of the opening half, Tunisia were so superior they could have won by several goals, but they disintegrated and the Saudis, who started with a 4-5-1 formation, became increasingly adventurous and confident.

Only the creative running and skill of Jaziri kept Tunisia afloat in the closing stages and it was fitting that he should make Radhi's late leveller as this Arabic derby, after a slow start, ended in a crescendo of sound and celebratory flares.

Saudi midfielder Mohammed Ameen added: "Our second half performance will motivate us to play equally well against Ukraine."

"We are sure they will show another performance than they played against Spain today (losing 4-0)."



Ukraine's dejected striker Andriy Shevchenko gestures after their 4-0 loss to Spain at Leipzig Stadium on Wednesday.

Stumbling Shevchenko



AGENCIES, Leipzig

Andriy Shevchenko's reputation as one of the world's most lethal strikers failed to shine through as Ukraine ended an historic first World Cup match with a 4-0 defeat to Group H favourites Spain Wednesday.

For the 29-year-old former AC Milan striker, who has recently signed for a reported 30 million pounds, for English champions Chelsea, just finishing the match unscathed was perhaps the best result of the day.

Shevchenko, who has scored 29 goals in 64 games for his country including six of the 17 in total during qualifying, had been doubtful due to a lack of match fitness following a recent injury.

But that did not stop Ukraine coach Oleg Blokhin, who like his star player was a former European Player of the Year, from including Shevchenko in the starting lineup for their group opener.

Against Luis Aragones' high-flying Spaniards Shevchenko was however virtually non-existent.

"We all understood before the match that Spain would be the team to beat in this group," said

Shevchenko.

"Maybe if they didn't get their second goal so quickly things would have worked out differently for us."

Despite a couple of close efforts, including Andriy Voronin's swerving drive in the second half which shaved Iker Casillas's right-hand post, in the end Ukraine were totally outclassed.

Shevchenko had few chances to threaten Casillas, although Blokhin would be the first to admit that he did not get the service he would expect from the midfielders.

The crucial thing for Ukraine now is that Shevchenko finished a full competitive match and he is now looking forward to the games against Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, who complete Group H.

"My leg feels much better," he added.

"I've played 90 minutes of a match and now I'm ready to play the other two games."

"It's going to be difficult for us but we have to rest and take stock of what lies ahead."

His teammates and coach Oleg Blokhin, however, are concentrating on picking themselves up for their remaining two Group H matches.

Tunisia and Saudi Arabia should prove less of a challenge than the excellent Spanish and Blokhin's squad are still expected to make it

through to the knockout stages.

Most of the players were given the day off on Thursday at their base in Potsdam near Berlin, though some who did not feature on Wednesday will do some light training.

"If the journalists think Shevchenko played badly they should write that but you won't hear it from me," Blokhin said.

"We'll have to analyse our mistakes very closely and lift the players for next game."

The statistics from Wednesday's match underscore Spain's dominance, boosted at the start of the second-half when experienced Ukrainian defender Vladislav Vashchuk was harshly sent off for a challenge on Fernando Torres.

Spain had 10 shots on goal to Ukraine's two and enjoyed 54 percent of the possession to their opponent's 46 percent.

After taking the lead in the 13th minute the Spanish players stroked the ball around with aplomb, in contrast to the sluggish Ukrainians, and constantly looked threatening in attack.

"We are all very down but we should be able to pick ourselves up and turn things around in the next match," said Ukraine striker Serhiy Rebrov, who came on in the second half but also failed to produce a shot on goal.

Al Jaber joins Pele, Maradona

REUTERS, Munich

Saudi Arabian striker Sami Al Jaber joined an elite group of players that include Pele and Diego Maradona when he scored against Tunisia on Wednesday.

His goal in his team's 2-2 draw with Tunisia came 12 years after his first goal in the World Cup finals against Morocco in 1994 and he has now joined Pele, Uwe Seeler, Diego Maradona and Michael Laudrup as the only players who have scored World Cup goal 12 years after their maiden goal.

Henrik Larsson of Sweden can also join this elite list if he scores for Sweden against Paraguay on Thursday.

Pele's goals spanned the years 1958-70. Seeler's 1958-70. Maradona's 1982-94 and Laudrup's 1986-98.

Al Jaber, who was struggling with a thigh injury before the match which threatened his participation in his fourth World Cup finals, was bitterly disappointed the Saudis had not taken all three points in Group H after his 84th minute goal.

"We were unlucky to let a goal in one minute before the end. Now we have one point. It is not the end of the competition for us. We have to work hard against Ukraine," Al Jaber told reporters.

"I am still recovering (from the thigh injury) and I will do everything possible to recover to be ready for that match."

Ronaldo says he is ok

AFP, Konigsstein

Under-pressure Brazilian striker Ronaldo insisted on Thursday that his World Cup campaign will not be derailed by his latest worrying health scare.

The Real Madrid attacker, who has been dogged by injury and fitness problems, needed treatment at a Frankfurt hospital after complaining of dizzy spells.

But the 29-year-old said he has been given the all-clear and is fit to play in the world champions' next World Cup Group F clash against Australia in Munich on Sunday.

"This is nothing like what happened in 1998," said Ronaldo referring to the infamous fit in the dressing room he suffered just before kick-off in the final against France in Paris which his side eventually lost 3-0.

"I feel fine and I'm thinking only of the match against Australia."

Earlier Thursday, the Brazil Football Confederation (CBF) had said that the tests showed nothing wrong with the player.

Nakata blasts negative press

REUTERS, Bonn

Japan's Hidetoshi Nakata has blasted the media for being pessimistic, telling them not to write off the Asian champions' hopes of World Cup survival.

Monday's 3-1 defeat by Australia in their Group F opener has left Japan in a precarious position with matches against Croatia and world champions Brazil to come.

But Nakata was in a bullish mood after training on Wednesday and boldly predicted victory over Croatia, who themselves will need maximum points on Sunday after losing 1-0 to Brazil.

"You guys are always pessimists," Nakata told reporters. "There's only one thing we can do - think about winning our next match. That's it."

The playmaker was also unimpressed when asked if Japan were realistically targeting four points from their last two group games.

"Why four points?" shrugged Nakata. "We still have two matches. We could get six points. Why do we have to think about four points?"

"Croatia are a very good team but I still believe we're a better team. We're calm. They could have won (against Brazil)."

Japan's most recognisable player had labelled the side a shambles in the run-up to the World Cup but the Japanese were quick to deny any rift amongst the players.

Nakata bit his tongue after Japan squandered the lead by conceding three goals in eight minutes in their late collapse against Australia.

The 29-year-old has called on Japan to get over their Kaiserslautern collapse quickly and was not about to conduct a lengthy post-mortem with the press.

"It's in the past," he said. "We had quite enough chances to win it but unfortunately we couldn't score the second goal. If we had we could have won it. That was where we lost it."

Nakata added: "Let's be clear about one thing. I don't need to think about past matches. We have to look forward. If you want to write about the last match, watch it again."



Saudi Arabian record-breaking forward Sami Al Jaber celebrates scoring his goal against Tunisia at Munich's Allianz Arena on Wednesday.

Serbs cry for Vidic



REUTERS, Billerbeck

Serbia & Montenegro assistant coach Goran Stevanovic said the withdrawal of Nemanja Vidic had left his defensive plans in ruins.

The centre back, who missed the 1-0 Group C defeat by Netherlands through suspension, is out for the rest of the tournament after injuring his knee in training on Monday.

"It took a while to build that defence on Vidic and we can't rebuild it overnight," Stevanovic told a news conference on Wednesday ahead of the match

with Argentina in Gelsenkirchen on Friday.

"We have a clear vision of what it should look like against the Argentines but we have to wait and see whether it works. We'll try to make life difficult for them."

A makeshift defence with Nenad Djordjevic at right back looked shaky against Netherlands. Coach Ilija Petkovic is likely to prefer Igor Duljaj in that position with Goran Gavranic moving into Vidic's slot in the centre.

Up front, 32-year-old Savo Milosevic may be dropped for towering striker Nikola Zigic, whose aerial strength appears to be Serbia's best chance against a younger and more talented Argentina.

"We have to avoid situations in which they are clearly the better side and try to exploit our own

strengths as much as we can," said Stevanovic.

"It won't be easy but our bags are not packed yet and we don't plan to take an early flight home."

The Serbs need to avoid defeat to keep alive any realistic hopes of progressing, with the Argentines enjoying the cushion of a 2-1 opening win against Ivory Coast.

Vidic said beating Argentina was a difficult task.

"They have superior skill and overall they are an even better team than the Dutch," he said.

"They are not invincible, though, and I am confident the lads will play their hearts out to win."

"I feel terrible being sidelined and unable to help. I thought my leg had come off when I got injured but the scan showed it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought."

Young generation shines



AFP, Berlin

When German Jurgen Klinsmann was still around as a player, not the 1990 World Cup-winning incarnation but the striker who was part of an aging 1998 squad which earned

infamy back home for a quarter-final loss to Croatia, the talk was of a team of has-beens.

Not any more, as under the former Stuttgart, Inter Milan, Tottenham and Bayern Munich star there has been a generational shift among Die Mannschaft.

There have been teething pains - a 4-1 loss earlier this year to Italy saw abuse heaped on the side amid acrimonious media claims that a California-based Klinsmann was not perhaps the man to bring the World Cup home after a 16-year gap.

But two group wins out of two, vindicating Klinsmann's decision to blood youngsters such as Per Mertesacker, 21, and David Odonkor, 22, has seen them putting out the flags on the "Fan-Miles" - the thoroughfares reserved for the jubilant celebrations of home fans watching on giant screens.

Suddenly, the fans believe - and so, increasingly, do the players.

Odonkor was still taking in his dream of appearing in the World Cup on his home Dortmund turf as a substitute in the seat-of-the-

pants win over Poland which essentially wrapped up passage into the last 16, courtesy of Oliver Neuville's last-minute winner.

"When the goal went in I just didn't know where to run - the emotion of the moment was overpowering," said the man whose father is Ghanaian and whose mother is German.

The attacking midfielder was a surprise call-up into the German squad and saw his development hampered by a serious knee injury after making his Bundesliga debut in 2002.

Odonkor says the atmosphere at the World Cup in the German camp could not be better and says the young players are being given their head.

"The whole team have taken me under their wing - it's really like a family," Odonkor said Thursday at the German team's Berlin media headquarters.

"My family came (to the Poland game). It was so important to me they were in the stadium."

The Germans looked rocky at the back in conceding two goals against plucky Costa Rica, but Odonkor and Mertesacker insisted the problems had largely been ironed out after the squad sat down and analysed where they were going wrong in defence.

"We showed yesterday we are a good team and we can be proud of our performance," Odonkor said, echoing Klinsmann's assessment after the final whistle.

Mertesacker, of Hannover 96, who already has 25 caps to his name

at 21 as a cultured defender, has kept his place since a 2004 debut win over Iran, holding off claims to bring back one of the veterans of 1998 Christian Worns.

He said Thursday that the Germans were feeling quietly confident after their winning showings.

"We went over the first game with a fine tooth comb. We decided what needed fixing and worked to iron out those weak points which had emerged in defence."

With Klinsmann having blooded a clutch of other young stars such as Lukas Podolski of Cologne and Bayern's Bastian Schweinsteiger the future, at least in the medium term, is suddenly looking quite bright for the hosts, though it is asking a lot of them to conquer the world in the next three weeks.

"It's a steep learning curve - many people laughed when I was first called up after just 20 league games. Things are going very quickly," said Mertesacker.

Team assistant and Euro-96 champion Oliver Bierhoff meanwhile said Neuville's late winner "proves you have to keep on plugging away till the final whistle."

"We have now seen everyone and we haven't really seen anyone we can't deal with," Bierhoff said as he looked forward to a likely second-round meeting with England or Sweden.

"I think I could live better with the winner of Sweden versus Paraguay," conceded the man who helped knock England out in the Euro-96 semifinals.

Spain dispel striking doubts



REUTERS, Leipzig

Strikers David Villa and Fernando Torres dispelled any doubts about Spain's lack of punch up front as they scored three of the four goals in their crushing opening victory over 10-man Ukraine on Wednesday.

"I'm delighted with the goals and in particular with the win for Spain," Villa said after notching a double in a thumping 4-0 win in their Group H opener at

Zentralstadion.

"We all hope that this will be the first step in a great World Cup. We gave our all, the fans enjoyed themselves and I hope we can continue like this."

"I had a great chance for the hat-trick but am happy to wait until the next game to get my third. The win and the goals give us all a lot of confidence, especially us strikers."

The victory, Spain's fourth opening win in 12 attempts, gave them their best start to a World Cup.

Midfielder Xabi Alonso put Spain in front with his first goal for the national side while Torres put the icing on the cake when he blasted home nine minutes from

time.

The 22-year-old striker, who got the winner in last week's friendly against Croatia, was especially glad to score again after a frustrating season with Atletico Madrid.

"After a bad year with my club when nothing seemed to go right, by luck I just seem to have hit some great form now," he said.

"I hope we can all make the most of it and enjoy it because it is the national team that is most important to me at the moment."

"I was pleased with what I'd done for the team before my goal. If you work hard and do things well you're usually rewarded and it was nice that this time it was in the form of a goal."



Supporters of the Eagles of Carthage, the Tunisian national football team, cheer their footballers during their match against Saudi Arabia at Munich Stadium on Wednesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS		DOWN	
1 Knighted lady	39 Pair	3 Apportion (out)	25 Longing
5 Bookie's fee, for short	40 Re	4 Main punishment	26 Director Howard
8 Chew away at	43 Rehearse	5 Market course	27 Rhyming praise
12 Squared down	47 Miss	6 PC price	28 Zero
13 Expert	49 Go out	7 Metro symbol	29 Understood
14 Judicial garb	50 Withered	8 Abase oneself	31 Monkey suit
15 Catcher's aid	51 Exploit	9 Bossa — (on)	34 Stared fiercely
16 Examine	52 A slave to cross-words?	10 Not up yet	35 Kin of
18 Infest	53 Trampled	11 — off to see ...	22-Down
20 Duck	54 Scarlet	12 Actor	36 Press for payment
21 Prior night	55 Unable to hear	13 Acute motor	37 Rifle with trees
22 Spell-down		14 Motor homes, briefly	39 — it out (fought)
23 Grant's successor		15 Show-room sample	40 Put in the mailbox
26 Go into overtime, maybe		16 Use arrow	41 Always
30 Candle tally		17 Holbrook follower	42 Infamous lyre player
31 Heavy weight		18 Assign	43 Got up
32 God, to Mario		19 Pleading	44 Florist's vessel
33 Broad-way hope		20 Same	45 Sicilian spouter
36 Lived		21 Ewes	46 Coral formation
38 Bagel topping		22 HED	48 — American Cousin?

Solution time: 21 mins.

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