

EGYPT SEE OFF ANGOLA Cameroon clinch a thriller

AFP, Accra



Defending champions Egypt and Cameroon came through their respective quarterfinals on Monday to join holders Ghana and Ivory Coast as the last four teams standing at the African Nations Cup.

Egypt saw off a spirited Angola 2-1 in Kumasi to set up a rematch of the 2006 final with Ivory Coast and as for Cameroon, they have an equally tough assignment facing hosts Ghana after a 3-2 extra time win over Tunisia.

Both semifinals are scheduled for Thursday with the third place play-off set for Saturday.

Five-time titleholders Egypt took control at the Baba Yara Stadium via a Hosni Abd Rabou penalty. Angola's exciting Manchester United signing Manucho equalised with a shot out of nowhere before Amr Zaky exploited some poor defending to wrap up the game.

Goalscorer Rabou paid credit to Angola, who were making their first appearance in the knockout stages of the continental competition.

"They gave us our toughest game so far," the Ismailia midfielder said.

"Now we've got the Ivory Coast.

They're a good team, but we beat them two years ago."

Midfielder Sayed Moawad added: "We came here to defend our title and today we confirmed we're on the right path."

"The Ivory Coast have shown they're here to win the title, and they'll be looking for revenge but we'll prepare well for it."

Angola, the surprise package at the 26th Nations Cup, head home having proved themselves as the rising force of African football.

But coach Luis Oliveira Goncalves believed the wrong team were knocked out.

"Normally in football the best side wins, but today it was the opposite," he lamented.

"Egypt were lucky, we created more chances, but weren't able to convert them."

"But my players shouldn't have any shame. Egypt are a good, experienced team, and my side are young."

Later in Tamale Cameroon, with 70-year-old coach Otto Pfister guiding them, kept on course for a record-equalling fifth title.

Despite his stage in life the German veteran looked as happy as a child afterwards, joining his players in a celebratory sing-song.

The doyen of African football recalled Stephane Mbia and that move proved the key.

Dropped following a 4-2 loss to Egypt in their first group match, Mbia made the most of his second

chance to open the scoring in the first half.

Cameroon struck again nine minutes later as a trademark Geremi Njitap free kick floated over the wall and landed in the left corner of the net.

With 34 minutes gone Tunisia were back in contention from an equally brilliant set piece as Chaouki Ben Saada sent a free kick flying over Carlos Kameni into the near corner.

After Samuel Eto'o had caused more panic with a break that was hastily cleared, Tunisia deservedly levelled nine minutes from full-time when Ben Frej cut the ball back for Yassine Chikhaoui to strike the ball sweetly past Kameni.

Mbia though hadn't had his final say and he snatched the winner two minutes into extra time.

Galatasaray defender Rigobert Song, reflecting on how the Indomitable Lions had lived up to their name, said: "That was very tough, Tunisia is a very good team."

"We scored quickly but their goal gave them confidence. But we won this match because of our heads, our mental strength."

Cameroon struggled initially in the group stage with Song acknowledging: "No one was waiting for Cameroon to get this far. We've gone slowly, slowly, and now we'll do everything to make it to the final."

Ghana are waiting to make sure that doesn't happen.



Cameroon players are ecstatic as they celebrate scoring the third goal against Tunisia during their African Cup of Nations quarterfinal at Tamale Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Capello era begins

Football

AFP, Paris

As Euro 2008 hopefuls get down to the serious business of fine-tuning their squad permutations for the summer England must embark instead on the long road to the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa under new Italian coach Fabio Capello.

Capello, brought in to pick up the pieces after England failed to make it to Austria and Switzerland in June, will seek to lay down an early marker on the pitch with a win over the Swiss.

Off the pitch, the dapper Italian has already asserted his authority by resisting a cacophony of calls to give the semi-retired David Beckham his 100th cap.

Beckham's last competitive game was in the defeat by Croatia in November and, even if Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger professed to be "amazed by how good" Beckham

was in recent training stints with the Gunners, Capello was not convinced by the fitness levels of the man who helped his Real Madrid win La Liga last season.

"I advised him that he is still part of my plans," was as far as Capello would go as Beckham waits on a 100th cap.

One player who is part of Capello's plans for 2010 is Steven Gerrard, likely to don the captain's armband in the absence of the injured John Terry, skipper during Steve McClaren's reign.

As with Beckham, Capello has again shown he has no room for sentiment by dropping Spurs' keeper Paul Robinson and keeping faith with Scott Carson despite his Croatian nightmare, Portsmouth veteran David James and Wigan's Chris Kirkland.

"We owe the fans and we owe ourselves because we did not qualify" for Euro 2008, Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand said on Monday.

For those taking their place at the

top table of European international football in June as England look on forlornly from afar, Wednesday is a chance to show their mettle.

Raymond Domenech's France want to go one better than the World Cup, where Italy pipped them, and has urged the squad to be single-minded in their pursuit of glory.

"We are going to look to rub out a few imperfections from the World Cup," said Domenech, insisting players must shut out all external distractions.

He would not specify what France is not quite in England's "class" when it comes to the wives and girlfriends sideshow, but Domenech stressed: "I mean everything, even the weather - though there's not much I can do about that!"

Les Bleus' friendly with Spain in Malaga brings together two of Europe's more eccentric coaches with Domenech possibly even just bested on that score by Luis Aragones, who once stooped to

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PHOTO: AFP

England coach Fabio Capello (R) poses with players Michael Owen (C) and Shaun Wright-Phillips during the launch of their latest away strip at the Grove country club in Watford on Monday.

Sania snub shocks India

Tennis

AFP, New Delhi

Indian tennis star Sania Mirza's decision not to play in home tournaments this year because of off-court rows has left fans and officials shell-shocked.

Mirza opted out of India's richest tennis event, the 600,000-dollar WTA Bangalore Open from March 3-9, telling reporters she was finding it tough to deal with the controversies.

The 21-year-old, a Muslim, has been criticised in the past by Islamist groups for wearing short skirts on court, and recently was taken to court after media photographs showed her bare feet resting near the Indian flag.

Mirza, Asia's highest-ranked

player at number 29, revealed before last month's Australian Open she had considered quitting the game because of the controversies.

Former Davis Cup player Vishal Uppal said he was surprised at Mirza's reason to avoid the Bangalore Open.

"She said she did it to avoid controversies, but I think she has created another controversy by opting out," said Uppal.

A tennis official, who declined to be named, said he suspected business rivalry may have played a role.

Mirza is managed by doubles specialist Mahesh Bhupathi's company Globosport, which runs the rival WTA Sunfest Open in Kolkata in September.

"It could be injury, a business decision or anything," the official

said. "But it's a big loss for the Indian tennis fan."

Vijay Amritraj, India's best-known tennis player said he was shocked at Mirza's decision.

"I am dumbfounded," he said. "She is such a fine player. She is the best not just at home but in the whole of Asia. In my time, to play in India was such a big thing."

Former Davis Cup coach Akhtar Ali said it was a "sad day for Indian tennis."

"That something like this should happen to a dedicated professional like Sania is extremely unfortunate," he said.

"She has become the victim of politics. She has done so much for this country, single-handedly catapulting ladies' tennis on to the world stage. She has finally given in to the pressure."

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Gerrard will lead England

AFP, London

Steven Gerrard will captain England in Wednesday's friendly against Switzerland, the first match under new coach Fabio Capello.

The Liverpool midfielder takes the armband in the absence of injured Chelsea defender John Terry, who was England's regular captain under Capello's predecessor Steve McClaren.

Capello has indicated that he will not be deciding on a long-term captain until England begin their 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign in September.

Gerrard, 27, will be winning his 64th cap on Wednesday. He has captained the side six times previously, with England winning two and losing four of those matches.

Terry remains the favourite to continue in the role once he resumes playing but Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand is also regarded as a potential long-term captain.

Italy lose Materazzi

REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan defender Marco Materazzi has been ruled out of Italy's friendly with Portugal in Zurich on Wednesday because of a bad back, the Italian soccer federation said on its Web site (www.figc.it) said.

Coach Roberto Donadoni had already drafted in Fiorentina defender Alessandro Gamberini as cover.

Becks respects decision

AFP, London

David Beckham's axing from the England team for Wednesday's friendly against Switzerland at Wembley has borne witness to manager Fabio Capello's rugged approach but the former England captain said he "totally" respected the decision.

Though former England captain Beckham has been training with Arsenal, he has not had a competitive game with his club Los Angeles Galaxy since the end of last year.

It is the second time the midfielder has been dropped by Capello after he was also sidelined during their time together at Real Madrid.

And Beckham has admitted he "half expected" to suffer the same fate he experienced at the Bernabeu a year ago.

"It's always disappointing when you're not included in an England squad," he said on Sky Sports News. "The thing is I half expected it because I know what Fabio Capello is like as a manager and if he thinks you're not fit and ready to play then you won't be in the team."

"I totally respect that and totally understand that. There are a lot of Premiership players who have played 15 games in the last two months and I haven't played a game since December - so to be called into the squad was probably unfair."

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Donadoni reassures omitted players

Football

AFP, Zurich

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni moved to reassure the players left out of his squad for Wednesday's friendly against Portugal in Zurich, that they can still force their way back in.

In-form attacking pair veteran World Cup winner Alessandro Del Piero and the troublesome Antonio Cassano were two surprise omissions from Donadoni's squad having been in fine form for their clubs - Juventus and Sampdoria respectively - this season.

Del Piero has hit the back of the net 12 times in 24 matches in all competitions while Cassano has netted three times in his last five league outings.

And when asked about the pair's chances of forcing their way back into the side, Donadoni assured all the players left out that the door is still open.

"I know what Del Piero can do and where he can play but it's not

scoring seven (he actually has nine in the league) goals that renders a player indispensable," said Donadoni.

"He knows very well what the situation is; he's intelligent and knows what we always say: no-one should already feel out in the cold for Euro 2008."

Donadoni also turned his attentions to Cassano, whom many are clamouring to see brought back into the fold having not been included in an Italy squad since 2006.

But the national coach was less encouraging, saying the player renowned in Italy more for his tantrums than his talent, still has a lot to work on with regards the mental side of his game.

"I think I can say that maybe he is the one I know the best. He is a player who needs stimuli and attention," said Donadoni.

"He needs to work on certain aspects of his character. On Sunday, for example, he was a bit too excitable."

It's not just those two who have been left out of the squad, though,

with the likes of AC Milan forward Alberto Gilardino, who has seen his first team starts limited since the arrival of Brazilian teenage star Pato, and Vincenzo Iaquinta, who has lost his place in the Juve attack to Del Piero, also omitted.

Portugal have named a small squad for the match with Benfica striker Nuno Gomes a notable injury absentee.

However, the finalists at the last Euro tournament can call on the goal-scoring machine that is Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo, who has bagged an incredible 27 goals in 29 games from the wing already this campaign.

It is not just Ronaldo that Donadoni is worried about for a match against one of the world champions' likely main rivals for the title in Austria and Switzerland in June.

"It's a tough test. Portugal are a great team, technical and quick," said Donadoni.

"We will try to do our best against an opponent that puts you under pressure."

Drogba's no show

AFP, Takoradi

Didier Drogba says the African Footballer of the Year award picked up by Frederic Kanoute was originally destined for him.

Mali's Sevilla striker Kanoute received the continent's top player award at a ceremony hosted by the Confederation of African Football in Lome, Togo, on Friday.

Drogba was unable to travel to Lome due to his commitments with the Ivory Coast at the African Nations Cup in Ghana, and the Chelsea star revealed here Monday that his no-show meant Kanoute picked up his title.

"I received a call in the afternoon (on Friday) from a high ranking CAF official," Drogba explained.

"He told me that if I didn't appear at the ceremony the rules would be changed, that I would no longer be first and that the prize would go to the runner-up, Frederic Kanoute."

Kanoute duly received the honour, with Drogba's Chelsea teammate Michael Essien, who was released by Ghana to attend, in second and Drogba third.

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Injuries concern Bierhoff

AFP, Frankfurt

The build-up to Euro 2008 must start now, Germany team manager Oliver Bierhoff said Monday, warning that injuries could undermine his team's chances of success in the June 7 to 29 tournament.

"The current situation leaves me a little worried," said Bierhoff. "There are so many players who are, or who have been, injured. For some, they have to start from scratch."

For Wednesday's friendly international game against Austria here, coach Joachim Loew has been unable to call up Torsten Frings, Christoph Metzelder and Marcell Jansen.

Captain Michael Ballack will play against Austria, fresh from returning from 10 months on the sidelines with a serious ankle injury. Bierhoff also issued a rallying cry to German footballers and clubs alike.

"It's all a bit quiet at the moment, we must be careful not to go to sleep, we must pick it up," said Bierhoff, who scored the goal that ensured Germany victory in the Euro 1996 final.

"Preparations for the Euro have started; I hope that everyone will fully understand this warning. It would be a terrible mistake to go into the tournament too relaxed."

Since becoming the first country to qualify for Euro 2008, Germany has been installed as one of the bookkeepers' favourites to win European football's showpiece tournament.

Loew's team has been drawn in Group B alongside Austria, Poland and Croatia. "The level of an European Championships is higher than that of a World Cup and from the first round," warned Bierhoff.

FED CUP Americans book Russia date

Tennis

AFP, La Jolla

Americans Lindsay Davenport and Ashley Harkleroad won their respective singles rubbers on Monday to give the US women a first-round Fed Cup victory over Germany and a semifinal date with Russia.

Davenport defeated 115th-ranked German substitute Julia Goerges 6-1, 6-2 and Harkleroad then downed 19-year-old Sabine Lisicki 6-4, 7-5 to give the American hosts an insurmountable edge and a doubles victory completed a 4-1 tie triumph.

Davenport and Lisa Raymond defeated Tatiana Malek and Anna-Lena Gronefeld 6-2, 6-0 in 41 minutes in the doubles dead rubber.

Rain washed out play on Sunday, delaying the decisive matches to Monday after a 1-1 split in Saturday's opening encounters.

Harkleroad broke for the third time in the second set to seize a 6-5 lead on an errant forehand by Lisicki, who upset Davenport on Saturday, and held serve for the US to advance into April's semifinals against title holders Russia.

The Russians powered by Australian Open winner Maria Sharapova, eliminated Israel 4-1 in a tie that concluded on Sunday.

China will meet Spain in the other Fed Cup semifinal tie. The Chinese edged France 3-2 at Beijing last weekend thanks to a decisive doubles win while the

Spaniards downed hosts Italy 3-2 after taking the first three matches.

German captain Barbara Rittner inserted Goerges to face Davenport on Sunday instead of 92nd-ranked Tatiana Malek, who had been 4-0 in Fed Cup play before Harkleroad trounced her 6-1, 6-3 on Saturday to pull the Americans level.

Lisicki shocked Davenport 6-1, 7-5 in Saturday's opening match. It was only the third loss for Davenport in 28 Fed Cup singles matches.

Davenport, who last played for the US squad in 2005, returned to the WTA in September after missing 11 months while giving birth to her first child and has gone 19-2 with three titles in her comeback.

The US team is seeking an 18th Fed Cup crown but has not won the title since beating Spain on home soil in 2000. The Germans, who fell to 4-8 against the US women, have not taken the trophy since 1992.



PHOTO: AFP

Germany manager Oliver Bierhoff (L) and striker Miroslav Klose are dressed up as mountaineers while taking part in the shooting of an advertisement in Frankfurt on Monday.