

Egypt confident of repeat

AFP, Accra



Egypt, who have defied predictions and proved themselves worthy defending African Nations Cup champions, are confident of retaining the title against Cameroon on Sunday.

The 2008 finalists clashed in their opening group game where Egypt meted out a 4-2 win to Otto Pfister's mentally tough Cameroon, and the men from the Nile see no reason why that result won't be repeated at Accra's Ohene Djan stadium.

"We are champions of Africa until Sunday and we hope we will be still after the final," said Egypt coach Hassan Shehata whose team could win the title for a record sixth time.

"Cameroon are a big team, but we've already beaten them in this tournament and that is a good sign for us to produce a good result on Sunday."

"All my players are motivated; they want to keep the title to prove that we are truly the champions of Africa."

Cameroon too are taking positives out of that initial loss to the five-time titleholders, but for obviously differing reasons.

"We started slowly and no one expected us to make it this far. Losing to Egypt helped spur us on to the final," said midfielder Stephane Mbia, who scored the extra-time winner in Cameroon's 3-2 quarterfinal success over Tunisia.

Pfister, who led Ghana to the 1992 finals, added: "We've progressed match by match. Perhaps we started badly but we always know how to react."

A win for Egypt will see Shehata join a rare club of coaches that have won back-to-back titles.

This is not the final that most pundits had predicted, with Ghana and Ivory Coast seen as the most likely to scrap it out for the right to be called the kings of Africa.

But the Ivorians were taken apart by Egypt in Thursday's semifinal in Kumasi 4-1 while Cameroon put paid to hosts Ghana 1-0 in Accra to set up a rematch from the 1986 final in Cairo won by the Pharaohs on penalties.

While Shehata has the luxury of a fit squad to choose from Cameroon are sweating it out to see if midfielder Alexandre Song recovers after picking up a knock and being stretchered off at the end of the hard fought win over Ghana.

"The doctors reckon it's not serious. It's not a ligament problem," said the player's cousin and Cameroon captain Rigobert Song.

Cameroon are also missing Andre Bikey, the Reading defender

who was sent off in the 90th minute in the semifinal for showing a medical official tending a stricken teammate.

Pfister had pledged before that game that his team would "paralyse" Ghana tactically and it worked as Cameroon soaked up Ghana pressure before delivering the sucker punch on a counter attack.

Egypt though represent an altogether trickier problem as Shehata's side have looked equally polished in defence and attack, with keeper Essam El Harary in particular in superb form.

The Egyptians are aiming to add to their record five titles haul after capturing the continental trophy in 1957, 1959, 1986, 1998 and 2006.

Cameroon are four time winners, the Indomitable Lions coming up trumps in 1984, 1988, 2000 and 2002.

At the start of the competition one of Accra's most popular hotels hung the flags from each of the 16 nations competing outside its main entrance.

A hotel porter has had the job of removing them as teams have fallen by the wayside, leaving just Egypt and Cameroon flying proudly in the breeze.

By Sunday night only one will remain with the clever manager pointing to the red, white and black of the defending champions rather than the green, red and yellow of Cameroon.

Grant writes off L'pool

AFP, London



Avram Grant believes Chelsea can deliver the final blow to Liverpool's spluttering Premier League title challenge in Sunday's clash at Stamford Bridge.

Grant is usually keen to avoid the kind of pre-match fireworks so beloved of his predecessor Jose Mourinho, but the Israeli emerged from his shell for once to write off Liverpool's hopes of ending their 18-year wait for league success.

The Reds are 17 points behind leaders Arsenal after a dismal run of one win in six matches and a loss to Grant's third placed side would kill them off once and for all.

"It is too far for them, it is too many points. I cannot say they are out of the title race because in football anything can happen, but it will be very hard for them," Grant said.

Rafa Benitez's men will travel to London more in hope than expectation. They have yet to score a goal at Chelsea in seven attempts since the Spanish coach took over in 2004 and crashed out of the League Cup there earlier this season.

With Fernando Torres sidelined after suffering an injury playing for Spain in midweek, Liverpool will be missing their striking talisman, but

despite dismissing their title hopes, Grant is cautious about facing the Reds.

"Liverpool are a top club and it is never easy to play against them so I think it will be a difficult game, very difficult," he said.

"When two clubs play together you always think of something from the past, but of course I don't have a problem with Liverpool. My only concern is that Chelsea succeed."

"Whether we win or we draw on Sunday, football is a strange game, sometimes you are very sure of yourself and you lose and sometimes you don't, so anything can happen."

Chelsea are unbeaten in 75 league games at the Bridge and will make it four years without a defeat at their west London home if they avoid a loss on Sunday.

In truth Grant's side can't afford anything but a win as they try to keep the pressure on Arsenal, who are currently six points clear of the Blues.

The Chelsea manager will be boosted by the return to fitness of England midfielder Frank Lampard, back from a thigh injury and available to start for the first time since December 26.

Nigeria midfielder John Obi Mikel is back in the squad after African Nations Cup duty, but Michael Essien, Didier Drogba and

Salomon Kalou - all also in action in Ghana - will not be back in time to feature.

Torres's absence leaves Peter Crouch to shoulder the burden of Liverpool's attacking threat.

Crouch impressed for England against Switzerland on Wednesday after coming on as a second half substitute and has the added motivation of wanting to make up for his red card at Chelsea in the League Cup.

The former Aston Villa forward, whose father is a Chelsea fan, was dismissed for an ugly two-footed challenge on Mikel in the quarterfinal tie this season, but he is only focused on helping his team rather than gaining personal revenge.

"It's a big game next for us at Chelsea. We will go into that game with more confidence," Crouch said.

"We are good enough to beat Chelsea, we have done it before and I am sure we can do it again although it will be a difficult game."

"This is a big one for both of us. They want to challenge Arsenal and Manchester United and we have got to make sure we keep our momentum going."

Liverpool will be without suspended midfielder Xabi Alonso, while Andriy Voronin, Daniel Agger, Alvaro Arbeloa and Fabio Aurelio are all injured.



Newcastle United striker Michael Owen runs off to celebrate scoring the opening goal in their Premiership match against Aston Villa at Villa Park on Saturday.

Magpies bow to Carew

AFP, Birmingham



John Carew scored a second-half hat-trick as Aston Villa produced a fantastic turnaround to sink Newcastle at Villa Park.

The 4-1 win for Martin O'Neill's men means Kevin Keegan is still seeking a first win in his second spell as Newcastle manager and the Magpies have now gone nine games without a victory.

Keegan must have thought he was on course for victory as Michael Owen gave the visitors a half-time lead.

treble from forward Carew ensured the game was turned on its head.

Villa are now back on course for European football next season but Newcastle are edging ever closer to the relegation battle.

Ashley Young returned for Villa after suspension while Newcastle dropped Charles N'Zogbia and Emre, bringing in James Milner and Habib Beye.

Alan Smith and Owen were partnered in attack for the visiting side, who needed just four minutes to find the net.

With their first attack, Milner floated a cross from the left flank deep into the Aston Villa penalty area.

England midfielder Barry came close to equalising on 14 minutes as his 20-year left footed strike was blocked in the penalty area by Joey Barton, but claims for a handball by the Newcastle man were dismissed by referee Lee Mason.

Villa seemed hard done by, particularly as Barton appeared to push Shaun Maloney to the ground in the build-up to the effort.

Chances were few and far between for the rest of the half, but five minutes before the break, Villa must have thought they had found a breakthrough.

After a long spell of Newcastle domination, the home side won a free kick. Young swept it into the area and Given reacted superbly to keep out Carew's glancing header.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK



TEAM INDIA: Flamboyant Indian billionaire and co-owner of new Indian F1 team Force India, Vijay Mallya (C) is surrounded by Bollywood beauties (from L-R) Lara Dutta, Sameera Reddy, Shilpa Shetty and Shamitha Shetty during the unveiling of the new team car in Mumbai on February 7. Force India, which enters the F1 arena taking over the former Spyker team is gunning for the support from Indian enthusiasts by parroting the slogan "force of a billion hearts."

Press roast Ivory Coast

AFP, Abidjan

The Ivory Coast received a roasting from the national press over what was termed their 'humiliating' 4-1 semifinal defeat to Egypt.

The Ivorians turned up in Ghana billed as pre-tournament favourites but Didier Drogba and company were taken apart by Egypt in a repeat of the 2006 final.

"Humiliation" was how Soir Info described Thursday's demolition, the paper labelling the match "the final before the final between the best team on the continent (Ivory Coast) and the most successful (Egypt)".

"The Elephants drowned in the Nile" was the headline used by both the Fraternite Matin and Le Jour Plus.

"4-1. Incredible! The Elephants' defeat to the Pharaohs is one of the black pages of Ivorian football," said Le Jour Plus.

"The Elephants broke their tusks against (Essam) El Hadary, a world class keeper," added the paper who reckoned the Egyptian stopper was the man of the match.

"Elephants, what a debacle" was the reaction from Supersport for whom "our attack, the team's strong point, was silenced by Essam El Hadary."

"The Ivory Coast's dream is broken," reflected Notre Voie who regretted that there was no chance of avenging the 2006 penalty defeat in Cairo.

L'Intelligent adopted a measured line, telling its readers: "At every level we have to assume and get back to work."

It added: "Certainly it's a shame but life continues."

Venables not convinced

INTERNET, undated

Former England manager Terry Venables has cast doubt on whether Fabio Capello and his backroom team can improve the technique of national team players in the short time they spend together.

England general manager Franco Baldini claims the players need to work on their technique and find a way to transfer their club form to the international stage, but Venables, who also served as assistant manager to Capello's predecessor Steve McClaren, insists that cannot realistically happen during the training sessions before international matches.

"I was intrigued to learn Fabio Capello and Franco Baldini are planning to use England training sessions to raise the technical levels of our players," Venables wrote in his Sun column.

"Good luck with that one. It will be a great trick if you can do that in three days. But I wouldn't hold your breath."

"I've met Baldini and he seems like a nice guy. But the way he is attacking his new job as general manager seems a little strange to me. It's all very well talking about raising standards and improving

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PLATINI BERATES, WENGER SUPPORTS Road-show under scrutiny

THE GUARDIAN



There was fresh opposition to the Premier League's "international round" yesterday with harsh words from Sir Alex Ferguson, Manchester United's manager, and from the Uefa president, Michel Platini, who branded the plan "comical".

There was also a negative response from the very territories which it wishes to conquer.

"It's a strange and comical idea," Platini said. "I laughed because it will never be received by Fifa, by the fans and the national associations. It's a nonsense idea. It's like if I am the president of Uefa and I put the house of Uefa in China. It's ironic. Soon you will have in England no English presidents, you already have no English coach and maybe now you will have no clubs playing in England. It's a joke."

Fifa will discuss the Premier League's scheme at its next committee meeting in Zurich on March 14 and the world body's president, Sepp Blatter, is believed to oppose the plan.

Ferguson, meanwhile, hit out at the way in which the new plan was communicated, accusing the Premier League of a complete lack of respect for pursuing its global expansion policy without any consultation with managers or players.

While he refused to be drawn on the implications of the controversial scheme yesterday, he said the league had made an unconvincing start by failing to keep the project a secret. Not excusing his own chief executive and FA board member, David Gill, from blame, the Scot also condemned the lack of dialogue between the producers and stars of the potential Premier League roadshow and claimed managers remain unaware of the details.

"I don't want to get into it because I will lose my temper," said Ferguson. "What I will say, though, is that it is disrespectful not to have been consulted. Some people cannot get out their offices quick enough to tell their pals in the press. They are blabber-mouths down there."

"What disappoints me is that David Gill phoned me before the meeting and said to keep it quiet. David said, 'We are going to be consulted, so not to say a word.' The next thing it is all over the papers and then I put on Sky this morning and there it is." Arsene Wenger, while welcoming the idea,

has also been angered by the Premier League's handling of the proposal. "Before a decision is made they have to speak to the managers and the players. This is still something that is not right in this country," said the Frenchman. "Clubs have a new global fan base and I don't believe having a pre-season tour is enough now. Those fans want to see competitive football. At the moment 10% of our fans have access to competitive games and 90% don't."

The prime minister, Gordon Brown, said the Premier League must listen to the fans. "Now if that is money that is going back into football and if that is helping keep the price of tickets down in England and if that means that more fans get more opportunities of going to matches as a result of that at a cheaper price, then that would be something that I think people would want to take into account. But, really, let's hear what the fans say on this."

Junji Ogura, who as a Fifa executive committee member is one of the four most powerful men in Asian football, also criticised the plan. He is a vice-president of Japan's football association, the JFA, and spoke of the need to protect his clubs from invasion: "It

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Anna battles into semis

AFP, Paris

Top seed Anna Chakvetadze of Russia battled past former world number one Amelie Mauresmo in three sets to advance to the semifinals of the WTA Paris Indoor Open here on Friday.

The 20-year-old clenched her fist in delight after achieving her first victory in four meetings against two-time winner Mauresmo 3-6, 6-3, 6-3.

"I've played against her (Mauresmo) a lot so I knew how she was going to play and had my game plan," said Chakvetadze.

She will now meet French number one Marion Bartoli, the third seed, who coasted past countrywoman Virginie Razzano, 6-1, 7-6 (7/3).

Mauresmo, 28 and coming off a disappointing Australian Open where she went out in the third round, had been bidding to claim her third Paris title after 2001 and 2006 and put her poor form since her injury-blighted 2007 behind her.

The 18th-ranked Frenchwoman had looked to be on her way as she went 3-0 after just six minutes, holding her advantage until the seventh game when the Russian broke for 3-4 only to lose the next two games.

Chakvetadze lifted her game in the second set, breaking for 5-3, to level proceedings at one-set all.

But in a third set which saw seven consecutive breaks of serve in as many games, Chakvetadze proved to have the edge, finally holding for 5-3, and wrapping up the tie after 2hr 4min.

"There wasn't much in it," said sixth-seed Mauresmo.

"I was lacking a little bit in all

areas. I need to play more matches like that to bridge that tiny margin there is with her physically and mentally."

World number seven Chakvetadze, who won four of her six WTA titles, last year, achieves her first semifinal in Paris on her

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Russian starlet Anna Chakvetadze makes a backhand return to Frenchwoman Amelie Mauresmo during their Paris Indoor Open quarterfinal on Friday.

Jose's belief in Africa

AFP, Accra

Former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has tipped an African team to reach the semifinals of the 2010 World Cup to be hosted by South Africa.

"At this Nations Cup, we have seen two great semifinals. The level is very good and this has to be so when you know that most of these teams have several players playing at the top level in Europe," said Mourinho, who is in Ghana to watch the final of the 2008 Africa Cup of Nations.

"There has been colour, enthusiastic crowds, positive atmosphere. I'm sorry that Ghana and Ivory Coast are not in the final but that's the beauty of the game."

"Now Africa is ready to take the next stage. By next stage I don't mean win the World Cup, that would be too drastic. But an African team could get to the quarterfinals or even the semifinals."

Cameroon and Senegal are the two African teams who have thus far reached the last eight of the World Cup. The Indomitable Lions lost out to England in the quarterfinals at the 1990 World Cup in Italy while Senegal were stopped at that stage of the 2002 tournament by Turkey.

Mourinho again dismissed talks that he would be interested in working with a national team, whether in Europe or Africa.

"I'm not interested at this moment with a national team job because I prefer to work every day, be involved in two, three matches a week," he said.

Fenin stars again

REUTERS, Berlin

Martin Fenin scored his fourth goal in two Bundesliga appearances to help Eintracht Frankfurt to a 2-1 home win over Arminia Bielefeld on Friday.

Czech striker Fenin, signed from Teplice for 3.5 million euros (\$5.07 million) in the transfer window, followed up his debut hat-trick against Hertha Berlin with a second match-winning display against Bielefeld.

Fenin's fine pass to Patrick Ochs in the 37th minute started the move that led to Ioannis Amanatidis tapping in the opener.

Two minutes after the break Fenin grabbed the second, stabbing the ball in on the rebound after a long shot from Markus Weissenberger was pushed away by the keeper.

Artur Wichniarek pulled one back for the visitors in the 74th minute.

Victory took Frankfurt up to seventh with 29 points from 19 games. Bielefeld are 14th on 18 points.

The race for Champions League places heats up over the weekend.

Bayer Leverkusen and Hamburg SV, third and fourth respectively, meet on Saturday at the BayArena. Leaders Bayern Munich have the chance to go six points clear when they host second-placed Werder Bremen on Sunday.