

SOUTH AFRICA V IRAQ Asians have extra motivation

AFP, Johannesburg

If ever a team had extra motivation to perform well on the pitch it is Iraq, who are hoping to emulate their 2007 Asian Cup success at the Confederations Cup starting with victory over hosts South Africa here on Sunday.

Despite the acute suffering and hardship in a country in the process of picking itself up off its knees after years of conflict, the Iraqi team surmounted all to be crowned champions of Asia two years ago.

And experienced captain Younes Mahmoud and star striker Nashat Akram spelled out their wish to replicate that feat on the fields of Africa in this dress rehearsal for the 2010 World Cup.

Having struggled since the Asian Cup the players, accompanied by veteran and much-travelled coach Bora Milutinovic, told an eve-of-match press conference at Ellis Park here that they were in Africa to do business.

"In the Asian Cup we did well against all odds in what was a difficult period for our people. We won it, and now we're looking forward to rekindling that memory of happiness for the Iraqi people," said Mahmoud.

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Last lap for SA Confederation Cup starts today

AP, Cape Town



With the country's president kicking a soccer ball off a stand, South Africa began its one-year countdown to the World Cup at a nearly complete stadium overlooking Nelson Mandela's former Robben Island prison.

"We have made it," President Jacob Zuma said Thursday at Greenpoint Stadium.

Zuma spoke amid cheers from construction workers and the honking of vuvuzelas, the plastic horns that could become one of the tournament's hallmarks.

The 68,000-seat stadium is to be completed in December. It has come to symbolize the pitfalls and prizes that go with the country's role as the first African nation to hold a World Cup.

The stadium was long delayed by residents angered at the prospect of raucous soccer fans disrupting the tranquility of some of South Africa's most expensive real estate. The cost of \$550 million is way more than originally budgeted and there are fears it may become a very expensive white elephant after the whis-

tle blows on the semifinal it hosts.

But it has also provided a platform for Cape Town to launch a \$1.5 billion infrastructure program to upgrade transit and other facilities that would otherwise have been neglected. That pattern is repeated in other host cities.

The government says the infrastructure investment planned and budgeted while the economy was blooming will help create jobs and lift South Africa as it deals with its first recession in 17 years.

"It's the best possible time to have investment," said Michael Jordaan, the chief executive officer of South Africa's First National Bank. "It is the most wonderful thing that we have a deadline. We have to get the stadium ready and the roads. It's very fortuitous that the timing hits us right now."

"Barack Obama talks about being shovel ready," Jordaan added. "We're already shoveling."

But he said the economic benefits of the World Cup were likely overstated and that South Africa still had to overcome many challenges to make the tournament a success.

While international attention has focused on stadium construction and South Africa's ability to protect fans from crime, the biggest stumbling

block has been transportation.

All major airports are being upgraded. But plans to create rapid urban bus systems to supplement erratic and often dangerous minibus taxis are being fiercely resisted by taxi drivers who have threatened to wreak mayhem if they are ignored. The government and taxi associations are trying to resolve the impasse, even as construction work continues on bus lanes.

"It is our biggest concern, no question," Helen Zille, premier of the Western Cape province, told delegates at the World Economic Forum.

There are also questions whether there will be enough accommodations for the expected 450,000 fans, and whether South Africa's communications network will be advanced enough to handle the anticipated 15,000 media members.

Zuma, who was elected president in April, dismissed all the worries.

"We have proved to the world that South Africans are special people," Zuma said. "When we have challenges we always rise to the occasion."

TODAY'S FIXTURES

South Africa v Iraq
New Zealand v Spain



South Africa president Jacob Zuma (R) juggles the ball next to team captain Aaron Mokoena in Soweto on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

Blatter defends C'Ron fee

AFP, Johannesburg

FIFA president Sepp Blatter on Friday defended Real Madrid's world record 80 million pound swoop for Manchester United's Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo.

Blatter, speaking in the build-up to the Confederations Cup which gets underway on Sunday, said the huge fee proved that football was still an attractive business despite the global financial turnaround.

"If we have a good market in football, it means we have a good product. But it is not only a product to sell or to buy, it gives people what they want; and that is emotions and entertainment," said Blatter.

"At the same time as Ronaldo's transfer ten years ago, there was a Picasso painting sold at Sotheby's in London for over 100 million pounds and what happened to it?"

"They put it somewhere where no-one could see it or on display at a museum for a short period, but with a football player, you can see him once or twice a week."

"I heard yesterday that you could buy millions of pieces of bread to give to the people for that amount, but entertainment is also food for the people."

Cannavaro out of opener

AFP, Pretoria

A calf strain has ruled Italy captain and defender Fabio Cannavaro out of their opening Confederations Cup Group B match against the United States here Monday.

Italian officials said the 2006 World Cup-winning skipper could also miss the June 18 clash with African champions Egypt at Ellis Park in Johannesburg, scene of the opening ceremony and first game Sunday.

Cannavaro, just two appearances away from matching the 126-cap Italian record of fellow defender Paolo Maldini, missed a 4-3 midweek friendly win over New Zealand and a training match two days later.

Lions scarier than Real

INTERNET, undated

The new Real Madrid, with superstars Cristiano Ronaldo and Kaka, does not scare Barcelona defender Gerard Pique. At the Spain camp in Rustenburg, South Africa, when asked Friday whether he would be more scared of a lion or of the strong Real Madrid side that is being built by new club president Florentino Perez, Pique laughed.

"Of a lion, of course!" he said, in the wake of a morning safari alongside his Spain teammates.

More seriously, the centre-back said he understood why Real Madrid were going on a huge spending spree, set to include the signing of Ballon d'Or Cristiano Ronaldo for a record 94 million euros (131 million dollars).

"They are signing players because they saw they needed to," Pique said.

The defender, 22, was key for Barcelona to win the Champions League, La Liga and the King's Cup this season, and for the 6-2 Barca win over Real Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

"For La Liga it is fantastic to have so many stars next year," he said.

Still, he stressed that Barcelona should not worry after the most successful year in their history.

"If we do not have that calm after a year with a treble, we would be doing badly," Pique noted. "I prefer something that is working to something about which you do not know how it's going to work. I prefer to be on Barca's side. This team guarantees titles, because we have proved it and we have the quality it takes."

Okada vows result

AFP, Tokyo



Japan coach Takeshi Okada has vowed to spoil Australia's clean sheet in the 2010 World Cup qualifiers as he takes an under-strength squad against the Socceroos in Melbourne this week.

"I feel vexed that they are ahead on 17 points and have never conceded a single goal," Okada told his charges at Tokyo's Narita airport before leaving for Australia late Friday.

Goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer has not let in a single goal in Australia's seven qualifiers in Asia's Group A, in which it scored 10.

By finishing first and second in the group, Australia and Japan last week claimed the group's two places for the 2010 World Cup

finals in South Africa.

"I hear Australia will field their best side and it will be a tough battle. But we will conquer them," Okada said of Wednesday's game.

Australia beat Bahrain 2-0 at home last Wednesday to lead the group with 17 points from five wins and two draws. Japan trail by two points after winning four matches and drawing three, including one against Australia in Yokohama in February.

Okada's goal of a semifinal spot in South Africa was thrown into question Wednesday when the Blue Samurais were held to a 1-1 draw by Qatar at home.

Qatar's French coach Bruno Metsu said the target would be "very difficult" for Japan to achieve as they tended to "lose their direction when they are under pressure" and needed to boost their physical strength.

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Helmes out for six months

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen's Germany striker Patrick Helmes will be out for up to six months having damaged his cruciate knee ligament while on holiday, it was revealed on Friday.

The 25-year-old had an operation on Friday after picking up the injury in a kick-around with friends during his summer break, according to German tabloid Bild.

"It is a bitter pill for Patrick to swallow, he will be missed," said Leverkusen's coach Jupp Heynckes.

With a year to go before the World Cup, Germany coach Joachim Loew said he had sympathy for the striker who has 12 caps and scored in the 2-1 friendly defeat to England last November.

"That is unfortunate for Patrick that he picked up an injury in the summer holiday," said Loew.

"Whether it sets him back for the World Cup, it is really too early to say."

"Philipp Lahm had a similar situation in 2006 and he was back in time and scored the opening goal."

Villa signs for Real?

AFP, Madrid

Valencia striker David Villa, one of the stars of Spain's victorious Euro 2008 squad, has signed for Real Madrid for close to 40 million euros, a Spanish newspaper said Saturday.

Marca, citing sources at Real Madrid and Valencia, said both clubs were hammering out the fine details of the deal before officially announcing the transfer.

If confirmed, Villa would become the third big name to join the club under new president Florentino Perez, after Brazilian playmaker Kaka and Portuguese winger Ronaldo from AC Milan and Manchester United respectively.

Perez has established a 200-million-euro war chest for players, vowing to create a "spectacular team" capable of overtaking arch-rivals Barcelona next season.

The top scorer at Euro 2008, the 27-year-old Villa scored 28 goals in the Spanish championship this season.

But Valencia is reportedly ready to sell some of its top stars in a bid to ease its financial difficulties.

Perez returned as president of Real on June 1.

During his first stint, from 2000 to 2006, he oversaw the era of the "Galacticos" when world stars such as Zidane, England's David Beckham and Brazil's Ronaldo were attracted to the club.

Becker weds Lilly

Tennis

INTERNET, undated

Boris Becker, 41, the German tennis legend whose clubbing lifestyle has kept him in the news, married Dutch model Lilly Kerssenberg in Switzerland on Friday at a wedding attended by 200 celebrities, close friends and family. For both, it was the second marriage.

Protestant pastor Brent Fisher declared them man and wife in the Regina Pacis chapel amid alpine meadows, just hours after they had gone through a registry office ceremony in the resort of St. Moritz. Dual civil and church ceremonies are common in continental Europe.

The sun twinkled Friday on nearby snow-capped peaks and the 32-year-old bride's white clothes - a suit for the registry office and a bridal dress for the chapel - as they rushed through their rounds.

There were scuffles with news photographers as the bride arrived in a white limousine for the church wedding with bodyguards running alongside holding out umbrellas to block the car windows from view.

When the couple emerged and climbed into a car with dark tinted windows, some photographers blocked the road in protest.

Becker had sold the broadcasting rights for the wedding to Germany's RTL television

network.

He achieved international renown in 1985 when he became the youngest-ever winner of the Wimbledon's men's singles title at the age of 17. The gawky teenager went on to win Wimbledon twice again, plus two Australian Opens and one US Open.

After retiring, his on-again-off-again relationships and visits to pricey nightclubs became a staple of the German gossip press.

He was married for eight years to Barbara Becker, formerly Feltus, with whom he has sons Noah Gabriel, 15, and Elias Balthasar, 9. He also has a daughter Anna after a brief encounter with another woman.

Becker and Kerssenberg, whose proper first name is Sharlely, rekindled their relationship after he separated from a previous fiancée, Alessandra Meyer-Woelden, the 26-year-old daughter of his late manager, just seven months ago.

Later Friday, the happy couple and guests were headed to a plush St. Moritz hotel, Badrut's Palace, for an evening wedding reception, with the party set to resume Saturday morning 2,181 metres high at a mountain restaurant, El Paradiso, with superb views over the Alps.

Among guests were Becker's two sons, football great Franz Beckenbauer, former top cyclist Jan Ullrich, Formula One motor racing ex-champion Mika Hakkinen and Becker's former manager, Ion Tiriac.

Glamour back at Real

Football

AFP, Barcelona

Only a few weeks have passed since Barcelona completed their historic treble but now the return of Florentino Perez to Real Madrid has already stolen the limelight from their bitter enemies with the audacious signings of Ronaldo and Kaka.

Perez is believed to have more big names on his shopping list.

In the build up to last month's elections at Real, Kaka was unveiled by the Perez campaign as the big money signing for 65 million euros from AC Milan, in what appears to be a return to the galacticos days when the club

brought in a major star each season.

But it has been the signing of Ronaldo for 94 million euros which has really set pulses racing in the Spanish capital and caused indignation around the rest of the country.

This campaign from Perez may have lacked the bravado of that in 2000 when he won the election by signing Barcelona's most emblematic player of the time, Luis Figo, but the impact is likely to be as considerable.

Real stumbled to the end of the season with a caretaker president, Vicente Boluda, and coach Juande Ramos unable to motivate his players once Barcelona had moved over the horizon in the league.

To give full justice to Ramos, his arrival at the end of

last year led to a run of 17 wins in 18 matches, which saw Real keep on the shoulders of Barcelona, but the stunning 6-2 destruction by Barca at the Bernabeu ended the championship race and emphasised the difference in class.

As Barca imperiously went on to win the league and cup followed by their Champions League victory in Rome, Real were left wondering where it had gone wrong.

Their only answer was to look to Perez as their salvation and his promise of returning success to the club, forgetting that only a few years before he had left in failure.

Standing down in February, 2006, he admitted with the team ten points adrift, that his policy of expensive signings had not worked.

Perez followed up the transfer of Figo with Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo and David Beckham in a policy which supposedly mixed these players with youth products.

But most of the players coming from the Real academy were forced to leave and while the club did enjoy the success of two domestic league titles and one Champions League, between 2003 and 2006 they failed to win a major trophy.

With the signings of Kaka and Ronaldo, along with Zidane and Figo previously, Perez has now overseen the four most expensive signings of all time and Valencia's David Villa appears to be close to following them to the Bernabeu in what



A picture of Spanish newspapers on Friday show AS and Marca both headlining with digitally modified images of Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo donning a Real Madrid jersey. The headlines read "Signing of the century" & "Number One." PHOTO: AFP

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Spain stars (from L-R) David Villa, Juan Mata and David Silva stretch during a training session in Rustenburg late on Friday ahead of their opening match of the Confederation Cup against New Zealand on Sunday. PHOTO: INTERNET