

Rossi stabs USA

AFP, Pretoria



World champions Italy joined Brazil at the top of Group B after coming from behind to beat 10-man United States 3-1 in an electric Confederations Cup encounter here on Monday.

Landon Donovan put the States into a first half lead only for the Azzurri to hit back after the break with goals from New York-born substitute Giuseppe Rossi and Daniele De Rossi.

USA coach Bob Bradley naturally pointed to Ricardo Clark's red card eight minutes before half-time as a turning point.

"The sending off seemed harsh, for me it was more yellow. To have to play so long down a man was difficult," he said before reflecting on the irony of Rossi's American connection.

"I've known the Rossi family a long time, Giuseppe's dad coached high school soccer in New Jersey. I certainly hoped that he would have played for us but he made his decision."

Italy coach Marcello Lippi too dwelled on his star substitute's birthplace, smiling: "I was certainly happy tonight Giuseppe was Italian and not American!"

He added: Even though they went a man down it wasn't that easy, they are a strong team but once we found our peace of mind we played with greater lucidity and won, but it wasn't easy.

"Rossi's contribution was significant, he obviously scored a goal seconds after coming on and that helped our mental state."

The state capital's 45,000-seater Loftus Versfeld stadium was three-quarters full with the Tricolor comfortably outnumbering the Stars and Stripes off the pitch and, after Clark's dismissal, on it too.

Lippi was without injured World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro, but back on national duty was another World Cup winner, Gennaro Gattuso, fit after a knee injury that had kept him sidelined since Christmas.

Six of Bradley's CONCACAF Gold Cup winners were veterans of the bruising 1-1 draw with Italy at the World Cup in which two US and one Italian were sent off.

Italy, who hadn't lost to the States for 75

years, had the early run of play.

On eight minutes Gianluca Zambrotta lobbed a long ball for Vincenzo Iaquinta to head into the path of Alberto Gilardino only for the Fiorentina forward's shot to fall safely into the hands of Tim Howard.

Nicola Legrottaglie's diving header in the 20th minute would have posed a greater threat if it hadn't gone wide of the Everton stopper's right post.

Gianluigi Buffon had his first taste of action when Michael Bradley, the US coach's son, burst into the box only for Legrottaglie to take the punch out of his angled shot.

The US's lone striker, Jozy Altidore, then came calling on the Italian captain but his slide rule pass from the left failed to make it to the waiting Benny Feilhaber.

The States went a man down in the 32nd minute after Clark was sent off, arguably harshly, by Chilean referee Pablo Pozo, for a foul on Gattuso triggering heated protests from the men in white.

Soon after the Italians had the ball in the back of the net thanks to US defender Jonathan Bornstein's boot, only for Mauro Camoranesi to be ruled offside.

The Americans took the lead in the 41st minute when Altidore was felled by Juventus defender Giorgio Chiellini in the box with Pozo pointing immediately to the penalty spot.

Donovan stepped up to do the honours, his country's all-time top scorer slotting home his 40th international goal on his 111th cap.

With their numerical superiority Italy came out for the second half intent on restoring world order against a team ranked 10 places below them in FIFA's rankings.

Lippi brought on striker Rossi for Gattuso and Ricardo Montolivo for Mauro Camoranesi on 57 minutes and seconds later Rossi let loose a 30 metre cannonball which flew past Howard's fingernails to land in the top left hand corner of his net.

Howard had to look lively to punch away a shot from Andrea Pirlo but he had no answer when De Rossi, in the 72nd minute, struck with his right foot from 20 metres, the ball bouncing once on its journey into the bottom right corner.

Rossi rounded off the night with Italy's third in the fourth minute of injury time.



Italy starlet Giuseppe Rossi (L) scores his second goal past USA goalkeeper Tim Howard (C) during their Confederations Cup clash at the Loftus Versfeld Stadium in Pretoria on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bayern want huge sum for Ribery

AFP, Madrid

Bayern Munich are demanding "an astronomical sum" for French international midfielder Franck Ribery, Real Madrid's managing director said Tuesday.

"There was interest (by Real) in Ribery at a certain point, but Bayern are sticking to a very hard position," Jorge Valdano said.

"They don't want to sell and that is why they are proposing an astronomical sum."

Spanish media said Tuesday that Ribery would prefer a move to Real than to other clubs such as Manchester United, Chelsea or Barcelona.

The sports newspaper Marca said that Ribery's transfer could be announced this week.

Another sports paper, AS, said Ribery discussed his future at a meeting last week-end with his family and his agent, Alain Migliaccio, who also works for Zinedine Zidane, the France legend who is now adviser to Real's new president Florentino Perez.

"Real (Madrid) or nothing," was the conclusion of the meeting, according to AS.

The German media has said only an offer of more than 60 million euros could tempt Bayern to sell the 26-year-old, who is under contract with the club until 2011.

Perez has vowed to create a "spectacular team" capable of overtaking arch-rivals Barcelona next season.

This month, he signed Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo from Manchester United for a world record 94 million euros, days after paying AC Milan 65 million euros for Brazilian playmaker Kaka.

SPAIN V IRAQ

Spanish eye history

AFP, Bloemfontein



Spain can equal the record for the longest winning run by a national team on Tuesday, giving them an extra incentive to beat Iraq in the Confederations Cup.

The record of 14 straight victories is jointly held by Brazil and France and the European champions have a great chance of not just matching it but going one better, with South Africa next up after Iraq.

Following the emphatic way they dispatched New Zealand 5-0 in their tournament opener on Sunday, few would bet against Vicente del Bosque's men achieving the feat, as well as matching Brazil's world record unbeaten run.

The Brazilians put together 35 matches without defeat between 1993 and 1996 and Spain are currently on 33, stretching back to November 2006 when they lost 1-0 in a friendly against Romania.

Veteran coach Del Bosque, who replaced Luis Aragones after Spain's Euro 2008 triumph, can already lay claim to his own small piece of history, having led the team to victory in all 11 matches

since he took over, an unprecedented feat.

The former Real Madrid boss said coaching the current national side was a huge privilege.

"When you're involved with a national team at the highest level, naturally you want to win every competition," he said about his philosophy.

"I have enough experience to know that I have huge responsibility. But I also know that if you have the right players you can compete with anybody."

And the right players Del Bosque has, spearheaded by Liverpool striker Fernando Torres, whose quickfire hat-trick against New Zealand reinforced his international credentials.

In an ominous warning to Iraq, Torres said all the team were playing at the top of their game.

"I feel very much at ease in this team and one of the great advantages is that we have players who can hold the ball well," he said.

"I score but I benefit from the work done behind me. We are all playing at a top level."

Despite their phenomenal unbeaten run, Torres said it would not be on their minds against Iraq.

"We have another game and we must start from scratch and be ready," he

said.

Against South Africa, Iraq opted for a five-man backline which they may repeat against Spain as the Asian champions work to grind out another draw, knowing they faces minnows New Zealand in their final group game.

With a full-strength side captained by striker Younis Mahmoud and with the dangerous Nashat Akram in midfield, Iraq should pose a sterner test for Torres and his teammates.

"We got a point against South Africa and now for Spain. We can go through (to the knockout rounds)," said wily Iraq coach Bora Milutinovic, who has led five different teams at the World Cup finals.

"Our goal is to try to win every game," added the Serb.

Iraq were accused of adopting negative tactics against South Africa in their 0-0 draw on Sunday, but Milutinovic brushed aside the criticism as he looked ahead to surprising the world's number one-ranked team.

"Spain represent world-class football, we are aware of that. But we think we can achieve an impressive result and qualify for the next round," he said of his side, whose exploits are followed closely in the war-ravaged nation.

Good news for C'Ron

AFP, London

Cristiano Ronaldo, on the verge of a world record transfer to Real Madrid, has received more good news after the Portugal winger was told he will not face any charges after writing off his Ferrari sports car in a crash.

The Manchester United star, who should finally complete his long-desired move to Real for 80 million pounds later this month, demolished the front of his Ferrari when it hit a roadside barrier under a tunnel near Manchester Airport in January.

Ronaldo, FIFA's World Player of the Year, escaped uninjured and spoke to police at the scene before making his way to Manchester United's training ground.

After investigating the incident and interviewing Ronaldo last month, Manchester police decided not to take action against the 24-year-old, who also provided a written statement following the crash.

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Real get 153m euros in loans

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have received loans worth 153 million euros to pay for new players to build its team of new "Galacticos," such as Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo.

A spokesman for Caja Madrid savings bank said Tuesday it had lent Real 76.5 million euros, "half of the total".

The newspaper El Mundo reported Real had received two loans, one from Caja Madrid and the other from Santander bank to pay for new players.

Neither Santander nor Real would confirm the report.

El Mundo said the loans would be guaranteed by the 600 million euros that club will receive from the Mediapro group for television broadcast rights of its matches.

Bentley in Villa talks

AFP, London

England winger David Bentley is in talks with Aston Villa over a transfer to Martin O'Neill's team after being told he can leave Tottenham.

Bentley only moved to White Hart Lane from Blackburn in a 16-million-pound transfer last year but has fallen out of favour with Spurs boss Harry Redknapp.

The 24-year-old former Arsenal trainee is keen to find regular first team football and could be part of a swap deal, with Redknapp looking to exchange Bentley and Jermaine Jenas for Villa winger Ashley Young.

"I'm in talks with Villa at the moment," Bentley told The Sun. "I really don't want to say much more. But we'll see what happens. I'm hopeful of sorting it out as soon as possible."

Kaka defends penalty

AFP, Bloemfontein



New Real Madrid signing Kaka has defended the penalty decision that handed Brazil a controversial 4-3 win in their Confederations Cup opener against Egypt.

The former AC Milan playmaker converted the spot kick in the 91st minute to crush Egyptian hopes late Monday after they fought back from 3-1 down.

"It was definitely a penalty," said Kaka, who will link up next year at Real with the club's other big money summer signing, Cristiano Ronaldo.

"It is good for the referee to have people around him to help," he added, referring to English referee Howard Webb apparently awarding the penalty after consulting with the fourth official who Egypt claimed watched a video replay.

Referees are not allowed to use video technology.

Egypt said it would lodge an official complaint with FIFA.

"The Egyptian Football Association finds it very strange that the referee whistles for a corner and the linesman said corner and then the decision came from the fourth official," said deputy coach Shawky Gharib.

"Since when do the regulations say it is a penalty based on the monitors or on the television?"

The controversy overshadowed a thrilling encounter which saw Kaka score twice for Brazil with AS Roma's Juan and Sevilla frontman Luis Fabiano also getting on the scoresheet.

Kaka opened his account with a trademark piece of magic, exploiting hesitancy in the Egyptian defence to give Brazil the lead in the fifth minute.

Barcelona full-back Daniel Alves chipped the ball into the box and Kaka took one touch to lob it over a defender then rounded another before slotting it past goalkeeper Essam al-Hadary.

But Brazil's jubilation did not last long with Egypt back on level terms four minutes later when Mohamed Aboutrika crossed from the right and Zidane rose above Alves to send a powerful header into the net.

There was more drama to come in a breathless opening spell with Brazil taking the lead again after 12 minutes when Elano's free kick found Luis Fabiano, who cleverly directed his header into the bottom left-hand corner.

Brazil got their third eight minutes before the break when Juan climbed above the defence to plant a header past Al-Hadary from Elano's well-placed corner.

Egypt had plenty to prove here after crashing 3-1 to Algeria in World Cup qualifying last week - a result which has put their place at next year's tournament in doubt - and they showed their mettle in the second half.

After a clever build-up Sayed Moawad pulled the ball back from down the left to Mohamed Shawky, who thundered a right-footed strike past Julio Cesar in the 54th minute.

Before a dazed Brazil had time to recover, Zidane found the net barely a minute later to pull Egypt level.

The game looked destined for a draw until substitute Ahmed al-Muhamadi deliberately handled the ball on the Egyptian goal-line and was sent off, leaving Kaka to coolly convert from the spot in the 91st minute.

Brazilian coach Dunga was happy to get the win, saying his team was jetlagged after the long trip from South America.

"We had two tough (World Cup) qualifiers, 23 hours of travel and the time difference. The players have not been sleeping well so obviously we are quite happy with the win," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazil star Kaka is ecstatic after scoring the winning goal against Egypt during their Confederations Cup encounter at the Free State Stadium in Bloemfontein on Tuesday.

AFP, Rustenburg



South Africa, after a nervy opening stalemate with Iraq, face New Zealand here Wednesday in the knowledge that another lacklustre showing will all but spell the end of their Confederations Cup.

Swashbuckling Spain, having knocked the stuffing out of New Zealand, are sailing through to the semifinals, leaving Joel Santana's side in a tight scrap for the Group A runners-up berth.

A win is a must as anything less would leave Iraq in the driving seat and South Africa frustrated touchline onlookers for the remainder of this World Cup dress rehearsal on their turf.

Santana's future then depends on Bafana Bafana producing the goods against a Kiwi side that is sure to have learned invaluable lessons after their tame capitulation in the 5-0 rout to the Euro 2008 champions.

Santana can take a number of positives from Sunday's 0-0 draw at Ellis Park as despite missing a host of chances - not as many though as the 17 he wildly claimed after the match

- South Africa did put together some neat moves in the second half.

And the height of Matthew Booth, the only white member of the team, was effective in adding steel to the defence.

"New Zealand will be another tough game. We need four or five points for the semifinals and that's what we're aiming at," Santana said.

"We're going to work on a number of things including defence, perhaps make some changes. Our next rivals have some big players, they made life difficult for Italy in their friendly last week."

"We have to be less nervous."

Reflecting on his side's stuttering performance in front of a near full house at Ellis Park, including President Jacob Zuma, the Brazilian added: "It wasn't the result we expected but if you analyse the game carefully you will see that we played well."

"Sometimes you dominate the game without scoring."

Everton playmaker Steven Pienaar, who only made a brief appearance as he recovered from an ankle problem, can be expected to play a more prominent role which will add much needed

pace and guile to the midfield.

"Steven had four or five days without training so he wasn't fully fit to play the 90 minutes."

Santana knows his job depends on South Africa, who flopped at the 2007 African Nations Cup and failed to qualify for next January's edition in Angola, making it into the last four - an entire nation's fingers are crossed.

South Africa would be foolish to underestimate New Zealand who on three occasions led world champions Italy before going down to a 4-3 defeat in a Confed Cup warm-up last week.

All Whites coach Ricki Herbert is missing injured captain Ryan Nelsen and the Blackburn star's absence was sorely felt as Spain ran rings around New Zealand's defence on Sunday.

Herbert reflected: "The first 25 minutes were very tentative and on the world stage against the world's top team we got punished for a lot of things."

"I made some changes and we grew a bit in the second 45 and were more disciplined."

New Zealand have something to prove as Sunday's wipe out took their Confed Cup record to zero points from seven matches and only two goals scored.