



Spain striker David Villa (number 7) swivels and volleys home a superb left-footed strike to score the first goal in their Confederations Cup match against hosts South Africa at the Free State Stadium in Bloemfontein on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Spain thru' to semis

Emulate world record in process

AFP, Bloemfontein



David Villa and Fernando Llorente scored the goals that gave Spain a 2-0 win over South Africa on Saturday for a world record 15th straight victory.

Valencia's Villa broke the deadlock in the 52nd minute and substitute Llorente sealed the game with 18 minutes left to ensure the European champions finished top of their group at the Confederations Cup.

It means they play the runner-up in Group B, likely Italy or Egypt, in the semifinals next Wednesday.

Despite losing, South Africa still make the last four and a potential clash with Brazil after Iraq failed to beat New Zealand in the other group game being played simultaneously.

The win meant Spain have now posted 15 consecutive victories, surpassing the old record of 14 held by Australia, Brazil and France.

They also matched the 35-match unbeaten streak held by Brazil between 1993 and 1996, with Spain's run stretching back to November 2006 when they lost to Romania.

South Africa came into the game with expectations around the country high and the match was played in front of a sell-out and deafening crowd at the 40,000-capacity Free State Stadium.

With their semifinal berth assured before the game even started, coach Vicente del Bosque, who was now won all 13 matches since he took over, rested seven players.

He gave Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina a start and brought back Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas, but retained the formidable Fernando Torres and Villa up front.

Liverpool midfielder Albert Reira nearly got them off to a flyer with a 40-yard freekick spectacularly turned around the post by goalkeeper Itumeleng Khune in the fourth minute.

Villa, a transfer target of Real Madrid, sent a header just over the bar a minute later as Spain made their intentions clear.

They were keeping possession well and creating opportunities with South Africa on the back foot. It was not until the 18th minute that the hosts had their first sniff of goal when Teko Modise blasted a freekick over the bar.

But the tempo soon slowed and the game was in need of a spark, which Torres nearly provided, cutting neatly inside and whipping off a shot that forced a save from the goalkeeper.

Spain began pressing and Matthew Booth was forced to clear off the line before South Africa wasted a glorious chance when Everton's Steven Pienaar put Bernard Parker in the clear only for the striker to send his shot wildly wide.

It wasn't just the home side wasting opportunities with an unmarked Villa blasting his shot high after a darting run by Torres as they went to the break all square.

The fireworks began six minutes into the second half when Fabregas was brought down by South African captain Aaron Mokoena and the referee rightly pointed to the spot.

Villa stepped up but Khune saved and then dealt with the rebound from Carlos Puyol.

The crowd went crazy but they were silenced barely a minute later when Villa beautifully controlled a lob by Reira and buried the ball in the net.

Llorente made sure of three points when he met a Xavi corner to slot the ball home from the six yard line and South Africa were fortunate not to concede more.

I decided last year: C' Ron

AFP, London

Cristiano Ronaldo says he made up his mind last year to quit Manchester United for Real Madrid, whom he has agreed to join for a world record 93 million euros, the News of the World reports in Sunday's edition.

Madrid courted Ronaldo all through last summer but the 24-year-old decided to stay and try to help United defend their 2008 Champions League title, featuring in their final loss in May to Barcelona.

Although United retained their English Premier League title, Ronaldo told the paper he decided to leave after the May 2007 final win over Chelsea.

"After we won the European Cup, I thought there is no more I can achieve here," said the Portuguese.

"And when you have done all you can, you know it is time for a new challenge. I stayed one more season and it was nice to make it three titles in a row but it was my dream to play for Madrid."

Ronaldo is reportedly set to earn 13 million euros a year with Real to become the world's highest-paid footballer once the finishing touches are put to his move but he insisted: "Of course, I have not gone for the money."

"To go down as the greatest. It will take lots of work but that is my target. If you go down as the greatest at Madrid it means you are one of the greatest of all time."

Ronaldo also touched on his antics in the 2006 World Cup, when he greeted the sending off of United teammate Wayne Rooney during his country's quarterfinal win over England with a sly wink.

"Sometimes you do things because emotions are running high - but Wayne is my good friend," Ronaldo said.

"I can't regret it because I think the whole experience made me stronger."

"But looking back it was not the right thing to do and not something I would do any more."

Chelsea in for Tevez

Football

AFP, London

Manchester City and Chelsea are leading the race to snap up Carlos Tevez, the Argentinian forward's advisor said Sunday.

Tevez's two-year loan deal with Manchester United was set to expire this month. United on Saturday offered Tevez a new five-year deal but, after consultation with his advisor Kia Joorabchian, he turned it down.

Joorabchian said they had decided against a possible move to Liverpool "out of respect" for Manchester United, who are the Reds' biggest northern rivals.

He indicated that City, or Chelsea, may now be Tevez's next destination.

Joorabchian told TalkSport: "We ruled Liverpool out because of the competitive nature of Manchester United and Liverpool."

"He has a lot of respect and a lot of love for the fans of Man United and I think he would rule Liverpool out as being the biggest competitor."

"City and Chelsea probably would be the two

clubs that are on the table.

"City have obviously been in contact with us. I've spoken to (City executive chairman) Garry (Cook) and to (manager) Mark (Hughes) on several occasions."

"We haven't talked to them about a contract, we haven't talked to Chelsea either about that because we've respected the fact that Carlos is a Manchester United player."

"Without getting into the point of whether he's going to City or Chelsea or wherever, the issue is that I think Carlos wants to go to a club which has real ambition, a club which is showing intent, a club which he can help achieve great things."

"City have shown a lot of ambition with the players they've brought in in the last year or so, and Chelsea are also showing a lot of ambition - they want to win the Champions League. Both have that ambition."

"He's basically given away with the two European clubs that have come to him. He hasn't totally disregarded the option but he's put it down his pecking order and I think he'd want to stay in the Premier League."

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Xavi missing Iniesta

AFP, Bloemfontein

Barcelona star Xavi is a proud man after helping Spain set a new world mark of 15 consecutive wins, but he is missing injured teammate Andres Iniesta.

Iniesta dropped out of the Spain squad for the Confederations Cup because of a thigh injury that may sideline him for up to two months.

Xavi wishes he was with the team in South Africa.

"I am missing Iniesta in the team. I spoke to him on Friday and asked him how he is," he said of a player who is a key member of the Spain squad and helped Barcelona win the treble this season.

"I'm proud of what the team is doing and we want to maintain our form and we are aiming for next year's World Cup," he added.

Xavi too is an important member of the Spain team that has set a new win record and is on the cusp of beating Brazil's 35-match unbeaten run.

He paid tribute to coach Vicente del Bosque who has won all 13 matches since he took the job.

"Of course we are very happy with the way the team is playing and Vicente is doing a tremendous job," he said.

"He gives us a big help. Our team philosophy is working and we want to aim for other titles together."

"I am not after individual awards, only team ones," added the 29-year-old who was named man-of-the-match.

Spain play their semifinal in Bloemfontein next Wednesday against the runner-up from Group B, either Brazil, Italy or Egypt.

Iraq want to hold on to Milutinovic

AFP, Johannesburg

Iraq Football Federation president Hussein Said Mohammed has urged Bora Milutinovic to stay on as coach of the national team and lead them to the 2011 Asian Cup.

The veteran Serb's contract expired after the team was knocked out of the Confederations Cup following their 0-0 draw with New Zealand on Saturday.

Said told AFP he hoped Milutinovic would stay on.

"His contract was only for three months because it was difficult for him to come to live in or near Iraq with his family," he said.

"But I hope he will continue with us, because we have the Asian Cup in 2011. He is not only an excellent technician but also a fine psychologist and someone who is very human and understands the situation in Iraq."

Milutinovic, the only man

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Media toast Villa and company

INTERNET, undated



The Spanish media on Sunday praised the national football team for its new record of 15 consecutive victories and appeared hopeful that "La Seleccin" can go on and win the Confederations Cup. Spain established the new record by beating hosts South Africa 2-0 in Bloemfontein on Saturday, with their habitual slick possession football - and goals from David Villa and Fernando Llorente.

The authoritative win leaves "La Seleccin" top of Group 1 and in the semifinals, where they will meet the second team in Group 2, again in Bloemfontein.

The previous record of 14 straight international wins was established by Australia, between 1996 and 1997.

The latest achievement of "La Seleccin" made the front-page of most Spanish newspapers on Sunday.

"Spain: A World Record" is the headline in sports daily AS, which quotes coach Vicente del Bosque as saying that "this team will beat more records."

Rival daily Marca comments that "this is the best ever Spanish national team... and the best national team in the world right now."

Catalan paper Sport, for its part, says that "Spain should really go on to win the tournament now."

El Pais singles out Villa for special praise. The Euro 2008 top scorer is caught in the middle of an ugly transfer tug-of-war between Valencia and Real Madrid. He missed a penalty against South Africa, "but straight away showed his character by opening the scoring with another of his classy goals."

Villa is now second in the list of Spain's all-time international goalscorers with 31 goals, 13 behind top-of-the-list Raul of Real Madrid, who has not been picked since 2006.

El Mundo, for its part, comments that "winning has become a habit for this team", and that

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Iraq exit with pride

AFP, Johannesburg



Iraq take their leave of the Confederations Cup without a goal to their name but their tactical nous has left good impressions on South Africa.

Iraq's inability to break down New Zealand on Saturday scuppered their hopes of making it into the semifinals in place of the hosts.

But despite the disappointment coach Bora Milutinovic believed his Asian champions had acquitted themselves well and the canny Serb predicted a bright future for Nashat Akram and his fellow players.

"Normally I am not happy when my side doesn't go through, but what they did and the way they played makes me very happy. They are moral victors," said Milutinovic, whose own future as the national coach is uncertain.

Reflecting on Iraq's performances at the Confed Cup, a 0-0 draw with the hosts, a 1-0 loss to Spain and Saturday's stalemate, he commented: "After these three matches, I can say that in each one our players have shown that they can play a good game of football."

"They have an extraordinary tactical disci-

pline that makes me very proud and the only thing I hope is that they'll be able to play football with all freedom, enjoy life and bring a lot of joy to the people of Iraq."

While the Lions of Mesopotamia won't be around Milutinovic expressed confidence that the 2010 World Cup finals, the first to be staged in Africa, would be a winner.

"Everybody connected with the World Cup is going to have to make the utmost effort to help South Africa make a success of the World Cup because Africa deserves it."

"I'm confident with everyone's help it will be a success."

Iraq striker Younis Mahmoud said he and his teammates could leave the country proud of what they had achieved.

"It was a fantastic tournament for us with some great teams and although we're disappointed that we didn't reach the semifinals, we're still very proud."

Akram, who will be playing for Dutch side FC Twente next season, added: "I hope the people in my country understand that we really wanted to make it to the last four, but we didn't - and that's how football works sometimes."

"In the future, we want to bring them happiness."



PHOTO: AFP

Iraq midfielder Nashat Akram expresses his frustration with proceedings during their Confederations Cup match against New Zealand at Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg on Saturday.

Villa's mind off transfers

AFP, Bloemfontein

Real Madrid target David Villa says the past week has been unbearable with his future up in the air.

The striker, who scored in Spain's 2-0 win over South Africa at the Confederations Cup on Saturday, was believed to be heading to Madrid after Real president Florentino Perez declared the move was only "a matter of time."

But on Friday new Valencia chief Manuel Llorente said the club had decided not to sell the 27-year-old unless they received a "scandalously" high offer.

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Future bright for Algeria

AFP, Johannesburg



Algeria took a giant stride toward reaching the 2010 World Cup in South Africa by defeating Zambia 2-0 in Chibabombwe on Saturday.

Glasgow Rangers defender Madjid Bougherra put the 'Desert Foxes' ahead on 21 minutes and veteran midfielder Rafik Saidi from French club Lorient snatched the second with 66 minutes gone.

Victory lifted Algeria three points clear of the Zambian 'Copper Bullets' at the top of Group C midway through the final qualifying phase for the first World Cup to be staged by Africa.

Rwanda and reigning African champions Egypt, who have one point each, meet on July 5 in a Cairo fixture delayed by the 'Pharaohs' participation in the Confederations Cup in South Africa this week.

Algeria have home advantage over Zambia and Rwanda in two of their remaining three fixtures and if they continue their good form and win both it will raise their tally to 13 points.

That would leave Egypt needing to win their four fixtures - including one at home to the 'Foxes' - just to finish level on points with Algeria and see first place settled by goal difference.

Those four outings include visits to Rwanda and Zambia so a poor Egyptian World Cup record of making it to the finals only once since qualifiers were introduced in Africa 49 years ago seems set to continue.

Defeat before a sell-out crowd at Konkola Stadium in the northern mining town was a massive blow for Zambia, who had begun dreaming of a place at the South Africa finals after holding Egypt in Cairo and defeating Rwanda at home.

Bougherra struck against the run of play with a clinical finish off a free kick and a Rafik

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